

Experiments in Moral and Political Philosophy

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ISBN: 978-1-032-29390-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-29391-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-30142-4 (ebk)

First published 2024

Chapter 1 The Experimental Turn in Moral and Political Philosophy

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The chapter DOI: 10.4324/9781003301424-1

Funded by Universidad Carlos III de Madrid

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

1 The Experimental Turn in Moral and Political Philosophy

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Introducing This Introduction

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to provide a quick overview of the field of experimental moral and political philosophy. This chapter should be useful both for readers approaching this active area of research for the first time and for experts who want to reflect on the state of the field or simply to get a glimpse of what is currently being done. In line with this goal, in this introduction, we will combine a review of already well-established developments and findings with more controversial issues and positions, some of which are still subject to debate or negotiation within the field.

The structure of this chapter goes as follows: we begin by offering an account of the rise of experimental moral and political philosophy. According to this narrative, experimental moral and political philosophy is a hybrid enterprise, a crossroads between psychology, social sciences, and philosophy. It is at this peculiar juncture that the field's basic commitments and promises become clear. In the second section, we discuss the evolving contours of this research area, paying special attention to key methodological commitments and findings. Throughout the second section, we contextualise each chapter of the volume within the broader field.

A Complex Process of Confluence

The rise of experimental moral and political philosophy can be told in various ways. We subscribe to the view that this nascent field brings together a set of far-reaching disciplinary dynamics, including psychology, social sciences, and philosophy. In this spirit, the history of experimental moral and political philosophy is a complex process of confluence, with tensions, peculiarities, and dead ends. In this section, we sketch out this process, highlight some key steps, and assume, of course, that a proper description of its complexity would require more space and far more qualifications than we will be able to deliver here (Sytsma, 2017).

For illustrative purposes, we'll focus on three landmarks: the influence of a new behavioural framework which understood humans as situated agents with bounded ethicality, the rebirth of naturalism, and the rise of experimental philosophy.

The Importance of the Situation: Constrained Choices and Bounded Ethicality

The old debate on the nature of human behaviour explanation – going back at least as far as Hobbes and passing through the Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and classical utilitarianism – crystallised around the middle of the last century in the emergence of a very influential explanatory framework, the *Theory of Rational Action* (TRA) (Harsanyi, 1953; Simon, 1956). The TRA models behaviour based on the preferences of agents and the probabilities that they assign to certain states of affairs. By also including the preferences of other agents in strategic contexts (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944), the TRA can explain many human interactions, offering tools to understand human behaviour as the result of complex networks of preferences and expectations (Elster, 1986). The influence of the TRA is evident, for example, in John Rawls' influential proposal: Rawls went as far as claiming that “on the contract view the theory of justice is part of the theory of rational choice” (Rawls, 1971: 47). In Rawls' well-known thought experiment designed “to account for our moral judgments” (Rawls, 1971, 120), people under a veil of ignorance – without the knowledge of what position they might end up with in society – would *rationally* choose principles of justice that will maximise the welfare of those who are worse off.

Early on, *A Theory of Justice* aroused the interest of experimental social scientists who tested the maximin rule (and, therefore, the difference principle) provided by Rawls' thought experiment. In the 1980s, Norman Frohlich, Joe Oppenheimer, and Cheryl Eavey showed experimentally that, contrary to Rawls' assumption, participants in the experiments considered “not only the position of the worst-off individual, but also the expected potential benefit to the rest of society” (Frohlich et al., 1987). Overwhelmingly, the preferred distributive rule was a principle of both maximising average income and ensuring a guaranteed minimum income. This income distribution rule catered to the worst off without establishing an income range. As the economist James Konow would point out:

Empirical studies provide almost no support for egalitarianism, understood as equality of outcomes, or for Rawls's difference principle, although they do reveal a concern for the least advantaged, in line with core ideas of Marx, Rawls, and their followers.

(Konow, 2003, 1199)

Moreover, both the implications about distributive justice from Rawls' decision model and the TRA assumptions it is based on were soon challenged theoretically (Barber, 1975) and experimentally (Kahneman et al., 1982). The TRA thus became the target of some of the earliest experimental work in economics that would later influence the rise of experimental political philosophy and behavioural ethics (Plott, 1986; Hassoun, 2016; Allard & Cova, this volume).

Similarly, psychological situationism set limits to the TRA explanatory scope which has been very influential in philosophical moral psychology (Appiah, 2008). By the second half of the 20th century, some very influential studies (Ross & Nisbett, 2011) provided evidence that clearly downplayed the role of fixed psychological states in our effective behaviour. It became evident that situational factors – on many occasions highly unpredictable ones – clearly influence our behaviour without us noticing them. Some experiments dealing with the nature of inter-group conflict (Sherif, 1956; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), obedience (Milgram, 1963), and altruistic behaviour (Darley & Batson, 1973) clarified the strong influence that situations play in shaping our effective behaviour. A situationist challenge was formulated as it became clearer that the coherence and the consistency enveloping ethical and rational conduct were often missing (Doris, 2002). The targets of the situationist philosophers were general theories of ethical behaviour which posited an excessive faith in inter-situational consistency at the expense of important environmental factors. A secondary effect, however, was that these challenges also called into question the TRA (Harman, 1999).

While the situationist agenda questioned some basic commitments of the TRA regarding the explanatory centrality of fixed psychological states (Kurzban, 2011), it certainly was not the most influential criticism. Behavioural economists, starting in the late 1970s, even more radically questioned the TRA, paving the way for seminal work in experimental moral and political philosophy (Thaler, 2015). According to the TRA, the explanation of human behaviour must assume that agents are mostly rational, especially when their options are well defined and when they know their preferences. However, this general postulate began to be questioned in a series of experiments that showed that economic agents did not behave as the TRA predicted. In numerous studies using different economic games (the dictator game, the ultimatum game, trust games), researchers found that the behaviour of a significant percentage of people seemed to contradict the postulates of rational maximisation at the core of the TRA (Camerer & Thaler, 1995; Camerer, 2011). While Herbert Simon coined the term 'bounded rationality' to refer to the rise of an empirically informed alternative to the classical model of economic rationality (Simon, 1956), it soon also became clear that humans fall prey to a form of *bounded ethicality* by which they sometimes refrain from pursuing the very ethical goals which they might openly embrace (Chugh et al., 2005; Feldman, 2014).

Beyond specific topics and problems, behavioural economics also propelled three important methodological trends that helped to fuel the initial development of experimental ethics, sometimes called *behavioural ethics* in a nod to the former field (Bezerman & Tenbrunsel, 2012). First, behavioural economics offered an initial experimental framework for behavioural ethics, emphasising the importance of well-defined experimental designs to test conceptual intuitions (Jiménez-Buedo, this volume). A mature science is better developed through shared experimental paradigms (economic games, for instance) that can offer common grounds for discussion, improvement, replicability, etc. Second, behavioural economics emphasised the importance of behaviour beyond the usual appeal to verbal reports (Hertwig & Ortmann, 2001; Aguiar et al., 2014). The classical postulate of economics, according to which preferences are revealed (Wang, this volume) in behaviour, has served to relativise the enormous weight that philosophical ethics has historically given to the moral intuitions of agents (Cullen, 2010). Third, and from a more applied perspective, behavioural economics has emphasised the importance of small interventions to improve ethicality by means of choice architectures. The so-called *nudging* has become a common idea also for experimental ethicists, describing a peculiar way of understanding the reach and relevance of key findings (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). A great deal of insights and advice coming from behavioural ethics mirrors the nudging model from behavioural economics.

The Rebirth of Naturalism

Experimental moral philosophy and experimental political philosophy have also drawn from the rebirth of naturalism within philosophy, broadly understood as the ambition to characterise philosophy's subject matter in continuity with the rest of the natural sciences. G. E. Moore's open question argument, formulated in Cambridge at the beginning of the 20th century, as well as other influential philosophical arguments (e.g. the 'is-ought' problem), inhibited attempts to describe the meaning of our normative terms in a naturalistic way (Joyce, 2007). But by the second half of the 20th century, these arguments against naturalism started to lose their influence, and as a result, new varieties of naturalism began to emerge in the philosophical landscape (Smith, 1995). Notable examples include the realistic program developed at Cornell (Boyd, 1988; Sturgeon, 1988) and the expressive or quasi-realistic program led by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard (Blackburn, 1998; Gibbard, 1990). In both cases, philosophical objections that prevented the articulation of a naturalistic framework for morality were overcome by endorsing more complex semantics, ontologies, and epistemologies,

which were able to accommodate the complexity and realist surface of our moral thinking and behaviour.

In all these cases, the philosophers leading the breakthrough showed a marked interest in the empirical evidence around our morality – either by attending to the social conditions that determine our normative commitments (Railton, 1986) or by exploiting concepts coming from biology and evolutionary psychology (Sterelny & Fraser, 2017). Overall, this revival of naturalism within philosophical ethics drove a greater number of moral philosophers to explore the empirical literature on morality, leading to new questions and theoretical frameworks (see Pölzler, this volume; Jacquet, this volume) and corresponding with colleagues from other disciplines who were also interested in morality (Greene, 2013). This transformation was already happening in the mid-1990s:

Too many moral philosophers and commentators on moral philosophy - we do not exempt ourselves - have been content to invent their psychology or anthropology from scratch and do their history on the strength of selective reading of texts rather than more comprehensive research into contexts. Change is underway in this regard (...) *But any real revolution in ethics stemming from the infusion of a more empirically informed understanding of psychology, anthropology, or history must hurry if it is to arrive in time*

(Darwall et al. 1992, emphasis added)

An enhanced desire to study brain activity in connection with moral judgement followed, spurred by the development and greater availability of new technologies for measuring brain activity (Greene, 2014). This shift not only forced theoreticians to take sides regarding the meaning and scope of the newly produced results (Pölzler, 2018; Díaz, 2019), but it also brought a revival of emotivist and evolutionary approaches in understanding human morality (Stich, 2006; Prinz, 2016).

The foundations of political theory could not remain impervious to the naturalistic tsunami within moral philosophy. Basic concepts in political philosophy including utility (Greene & Baron, 2001; Vlaev et al., 2011; Kameda et al, 2016), epistemic competence (Brennan, 2016), autonomy (Dubljević, 2013), and trust (Vallier & Weber, 2021) were re-examined through a naturalistic lens.

Each of the previous currents outlined lasted decades. None of them in isolation constituted the single cause of the rise of experiments in moral and political philosophy. But even if there is no single cause, experimental interest slowly but steadily began to take hold within the field, spurred on by the efforts of practitioners in various disciplines. Now we turn to the final stage of this confluence.

The Rise of Experimental Philosophy

Lastly, the rise of experimental moral and political philosophy is related to the emergence of experimental philosophy more broadly. Experimental philosophy was originally proposed as a critical program confronting traditional philosophical methodology, a methodology perceived as excessively focused on philosophers' conceptual intuitions to the exclusion of other forms of evidence. As the argument went, if we aimed at making sense of conceptual competence (what embracing a certain view or theory really means), we should attend to people's effective conceptual intuitions: what lay people really think, as well as to the psychological processes that underlie these intuitions (Knobe & Nichols, 2008). Starting from this general recommendation, experimental philosophy has explored the conceptual diversity linked to basic concepts (such as intention, permissibility, freedom, etc.) (Mallon & Nichols, 2011; Stich & Machery, 2022) and has described, in a somewhat more negative light, the incidence of biases and affective processes in areas of conceptual competence that were traditionally paired to deliberation, impartiality, or calculation (Greene, 2003).

From the start, experimental philosophy faced serious methodological scepticism, both from within philosophy (Kauppinen, 2007) and from outside of it (Carmel, 2011). Perhaps the first challenge had to do with how to accommodate our conceptual competence – for instance, our understanding and use of relevant moral concepts – in the most faithfully possible way. Experimental philosophers soon became aware of the difficulties involved in the accurate description of conceptual competence. More recently, the limitations of vignettes and surveys have increased the interest in new methods that allow us to more reliably measure people's conceptual intuitions (Fischer & Curtis, 2019). These designs sometimes exploit methodologies from other disciplines (e.g. economics' emphasis on behaviour, [Aguiar et al. 2014] or psychology's attempts to capture implicit associations [Fischer & Engelhardt, 2020; Wagner et al., 2023; Zijlstra, 2023]), and other times they even call for more qualitative approaches, in which participants provide more detailed and open information about their conceptual commitments (Andow, 2016; Moss, 2017). This methodological richness has already had an important effect on the development of experimental philosophy and how to capture folk concepts. But in a sense, the impact of methodological sophistication also goes the other way around: whenever an empirical scientist wants to capture in an ecologically meaningful way psychological concepts relevant to traditional philosophical debates – such as the concepts of 'knowledge', 'relativism', 'disagreement', or 'responsibility' – they should pay special attention to the relevant philosophical criteria, for these criteria could capture ecologically meaningful conceptual competence and conceptual commitments in its full diversity (Pözlner, 2018; Rosas et al., 2019).

Another methodological worry was linked to the ghost of replicability, a spectre that was haunting several disciplines at the time that experimental philosophy came of age (Knobe, 2015). In a positive sense, appeals to replicability ensure that the results are controlled by a community, providing reliability to the findings that are based on it (Romero, 2019). In a more negative sense, a lack of replicability can shed doubt on findings that are good candidates in shaping the field. In any case, factors such as sample size, respect for experimental protocols, and the need to pre-register studies became common in the methodological debates on experimental philosophy. And, in fact, experimental philosophy as a discipline fares rather well in the general replicability of the domain (Stuart et al, 2019; Cova et al., 2019). From this generally optimistic outlook, one should not conclude, however, that the field is devoid of methodological pitfalls (Colombo et al., 2018).

Although some of the pioneering findings in experimental philosophy were good candidates for relevant work for ethics (Nichols & Folds-Bennet, 2003; Knobe, 2003), it could be argued that a substantial fraction of early work in this area tended to focus more on questions regarding the nature of knowledge, lay views surrounding our mental states (e.g. intentionality), and metaphysics (e.g. causality) (Li & Zhu, 2023). The reasons for this initial bias against practical philosophy are varied, but to the usual random factors, we must add some general features of core philosophical domains – philosophy of mind and action, epistemology, metaphysics – that made them especially well suited for the experimental turn at the time. For example, much of the philosophy of mind had been taking place within a markedly naturalistic theoretical framework for decades (Dennett, 1991). And in the case of epistemology, some older debates were articulated around ‘experimental paradigms’, in this case a tradition of well-depicted *thought experiments* with a well-defined map of conceptual commitments to be gleaned from them (Gerken, 2017).

The emergence of experimental philosophy was an important addition to the two currents that we previously reviewed, giving to the tentative field of experimental moral and political philosophy a much-needed reference point, as well as a template to tackle far-reaching debates. The integration has been progressive, and some parts of moral philosophy went experimental before others. Foundational issues and core normative theories, for instance, were initially approached through the lens of experimental philosophy (Greene, 2003; Stich & Doris, 2005). As we’ll see later, the progressive addition of more applied topics has increased the visibility of this area within experimental philosophy, and some of the most cited articles in experimental philosophy now fall squarely within this field (Bonfon et al., 2016).

Ultimately, if the field wants to be relevant for the public, its results must connect to society by offering actionable advice and practical applications

(Rosenthal, 2014; Aguiar et al., 2020). As we pointed out above, the advice to date is limited to certain attitudes (mostly beliefs) and relevant in only certain contexts (Goodwin & Darley, 2010). Although these effects could be integrated into the design of real institutional contexts, the shift from experimental results to institutional implementations is not automatic, nor warranted, and requires a detailed and careful discussion of potential ecological or external effects, as well as of rich circumstantial factors applicable to each context (Molina et al., 2022).

A Pluralistic Field and Its Increasing Social Relevance

Another key feature of current developments in the field is its thematic pluralism. Although the area initially crystallised around some very influential experimental studies (Knobe, 2003), experimental work in recent years has widened the field to include topics that had been previously ignored (Alfano et al., 2022; Chan et al. this volume).

This innovative work in experimental ethics and political philosophy has broadened the field by incorporating new themes and has deepened the field by exploring some of the topics listed above in greater detail (the new debate around sacrificial dilemmas and consequentialism is a good example of this latter point – see McKenzie et al., this volume; Kahane et al., 2015). Among the new topics, for instance, we can identify a renewed surge of interest in folk meta-ethics (Zijlstra, this volume; Gaitán & Vicianá, 2018; Pözlner, 2022; Wright, 2022), a topic that began to articulate a clear domain with connections to applied issues of social and political relevance (Goodwin & Darley, 2010; Skitka et al., 2021; Vicianá et al. 2019, 2021).

A new current of both reflective and empirical work on moral exemplars (Brethel-Haurwitz et al., 2018), experts and moral judgement (Horvath & Wiegmann, 2022), and the effective conduct of moral philosophers has also emerged in the past decade (Schönegger & Wagner, 2019; Schwitzgebel et al., 2020). By paying special attention to the conditions under which instructing or informing about a specific form of ethics could have an effective and measurable impact in a group or organisation, this topic reinforced the existing link between experimental ethics and other related disciplines such as business ethics or organisational ethics (Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2012; Feldman, 2014).

Recently, there has been new and exciting work on experimental political philosophy (see Allard & Cova, this volume). Experimental political philosophy has further refined our insights into distributive justice outlined in some of the pioneering works cited above (Miller, 1999; Hassoun, 2009; Aguiar et al., 2013) and has explored commitments to retributive justice (Nadelhoffer et al., 2013; Bauer & Poama, 2020; Nadelhoffer & Monroe, 2022).

Work in experimental political philosophy, in the comprehensive and inclusive sense that we are here using, has also begun to explore, in conjunction with economists and anthropologists, a set of socio-economic and institutional factors that could affect some intuitions related to retribution, such as ‘freedom’, ‘responsibility’, or ‘merit’ (Freiman & Nichols, 2011; Shariff et al., 2014; Caruso, 2021). Many of these intuitions on responsibility and the normative theories built upon them have been challenged over the past few years in the light of new experimental findings (Husak, this volume). These intuitions and theories have also led to new proposals for criminal law and punishment theories (Dancig-Rosenberg & Feldman, this volume).

Although philosophical theorising on the foundations of political order has always accepted the relevance of empirical findings on human nature and psychology, it is only recently that successful normative concepts such as the Rawlsian ideal devices of ‘*reflective equilibrium*’ (Schoenegger & Grodeck, this volume) or ‘*the veil of ignorance*’ (Zenkyo et al., 2021) have been studied in the lab for a better grasp of their inner workings and their effective reach. In this fashion, an important feature of recent experimental political philosophy has been its focus on what Nicole Hassoun has called ‘mid-level theories’, i.e. theories in the interplay between high-level philosophical argument and empirical and institutional feasibility (Hassoun, 2016). A relevant example is the surge of interest in the specifics, both institutional and psychological, of ‘effective altruism’ proposals (Schubert & Caviola, this volume; Berkey, 2018; Caviola et al., 2021; Reese, 2020).

Furthermore, a set of new topics have been added to the canon of experimental work in moral and political philosophy. Recent years have witnessed the consolidation, for instance, of experimental jurisprudence (see Hannikainen et al., this volume), certifying the emergence of a new field of collaboration between philosophy and social science (Prochownik, 2021; Sommers, 2021). Experimental jurisprudence offers an excellent test of the maturity of experimental philosophy in general, beyond its valuable findings on the shape (Donelson & Hannikainen, 2020; Tobia, 2020) and cultural variability (Hannikainen et al., 2021) of folk legal concepts. Due to its novelty, we expect that this new field will be able to incorporate some well-established methodological findings and will avoid unprofitable debates on the nature of experimental philosophy. And due to the highly specialised nature of its subject matter, experimental jurisprudence is expected to increase collaborative work and applied concerns (Sommers, 2020).

Experimental bioethics has also established itself as a specific approach within bioethics (see Rodríguez, this volume; Earp et al., 2020). Beyond employing empirical evidence as a general constraint for philosophical theorising (Borry et al., 2005), experimental bioethics has recently highlighted the importance of getting precise evidence (relying primarily on

controlled experiments) to test well-defined hypotheses, mostly about the shape of folk intuitions in institutional settings and the psychological and cultural factors underlying such intuitions (Mihailov et al., 2021). Several classical topics are being reinvigorated using experimental bioethics approaches such as the question of personal identity in complex medical contexts (Strohmingner & Nichols, 2015; Earp et al., 2022). In addition, new descriptive approaches to core moral concepts (such as ‘killing’ vs ‘letting die’) in medical contexts (Rodríguez-Arias et al., 2020) are being investigated, and contemporary debates such as those about pharmacological moral enhancement or cognitive enhancement (Faber et al., 2015) are being animated by relevant experimental evidence.

In a curious intersection of technological innovation and experimental philosophy, some recent and very influential studies on folk intuitions about harm and responsibility in situations involving autonomous cars (Paulo et al., this volume) have unveiled how the evolution of technology might be ripe with difficult social dilemmas to be implemented from their very design and inception (Bonneton et al., 2016). In the so-called moral machine experiment (Awad et al., 2018) and similar cross-cultural studies, researchers have documented universal invariances and cultural diversity regarding citizens’ preferences for ethical programming of autonomous machines. These developments suggest that a golden age of experimental machine ethics might be on its way (Nyholm, 2018; Hidalgo et al., 2021; Aguiar et al., 2022).

Finally, new methods and issues have recently attracted interest and attention and might lead to future debates or research topics. Examples include studies focusing on attitudes about moral progress (Pözlzer et al., 2022); the obligations we have towards future generations (Schubert et al., 2019; Caviola et al., 2022; Martínez & Winter, 2023); the interplay between adaptive preferences, feminism, and culture (Chakrabarty et al. this volume); and the importance of lay intuitions about semantics to better understand offensive and hateful speech (Almagro et al., 2022). Computational social science also presents a new avenue of study for classical corpora in moral philosophy (Alfano, 2019) and, due to its emphasis on informational network, also promises to advance ongoing debates such as the dynamics underlying our meta-ethical attitudes or the forces and processes animating protest and instances of moral disagreement (Sytsma et al., 2021).

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Experimental moral and political philosophy is a plural and diverse field, a crossroads both theoretically and methodologically. Assuming this general feature, the most that a volume that purports to offer a current overview of this field can hope for is to offer a partial sample, a sample surely subject to biases and omissions. The general purpose animating this book is thus to

offer a window that allows the reader to attend to some influential topics and methodological advances in current experimental ethics.

We have divided the chapters into three blocks that reflect a distinction familiar in many volumes of ethics and moral philosophy. In the first block (*Methods and Foundations*), the reader will find a set of chapters dealing with the core elements of the field to meta-methodological questions in a broad sense, ranging from topics in philosophy of social sciences to variations in well-known meta-ethical debates. In the second block (*Normative, Legal and Political issues*), chapters are grouped around a clear normative focus, one to be interpreted again with some openness. Here the reader will find debates on utilitarianism, criminal justice, and moral responsibility, but also will enjoy an up-to-date survey on the prospects of experimental political philosophy. Finally, the last block attends to some proposals of potentially high societal impact, which, in its spirit, can be considered as applied experimental philosophy though also not devoid of important appeals to the theoretical foundations of the domain. There are other themes and approaches, no doubt, but those appearing in these pages offer by themselves a broad panorama of what issues, problems, and opportunities give life to experimental moral and political philosophy today.

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