

MUSINGS

Folk Feminist Theory: An Experimental Approach

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In their attempts to get a handle on folk concepts and folk theories, naturalistic philosophers have proceeded by looking at people's intuitions about particular cases. The basic technique is simple. The philosopher constructs a hypothetical scenario and then asks people whether, for instance, the agent in the scenario is morally responsible. By varying the details of the case and checking to see how people's intuitions are affected, one can gradually get a sense for the contours of the folk theory.

—Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe

I must admit that I was slow on the uptake, but I am now a complete convert. With experimental philosophy gaining so much attention, I have finally jumped wholeheartedly on the intuition-pumping wagon. Prior to my conversion, I had mistakenly assumed that my years of training in and teaching of philosophy, including feminist philosophy, had helped prepare me to theorize and even publish on the topic. But it turns out that this assumption was completely unscientific. I now know that the best philosophy involves conducting one's own experiments. These experiments, when successful, tap into and carefully quantify the pre-philosophic intuitions of "folks." And by "folks" I mean, of course, my first-year pre-feminist theory college students.

I started with the pre-experimental hypothesis that first-year pre-feminist theory college students hold such folk feminist theories as "In today's society,

there's no need for feminism, since women are treated just fine." Or "All feminists hate men." But what do I know about folk views from my comfortable armchair position? Are these actually the intuitions of the folk? These claims need rigorous scientific testing. Of course, even experimental philosophers (myself newly included in these ranks) acknowledge that empirical understanding of folk intuitions cannot tell us if these intuitions have theoretical merit. But as one experimental philosopher put it, this increased understanding of pre-theoretic views can help "explain away the intuitive appeal of certain arguments, situate the burden of proof, determine whether revision of our ordinary concepts or folk theories is called for, and explain psychological sources of our conflicting intuitions and hence the philosophical debates themselves" (Nahmias 2006). So, my plan was to scientifically explain the appeal of pre-feminist theoretic intuitions, place the burden of proof on feminists to refute uninformed intuitions, and place feminist theory on notice if it conflicted in significant ways with the intuitions of the folk.

As the initial step in my first foray into experimental feminist philosophy, I constructed an appropriate series of tests for my hypotheses. I quantified and qualified the intuitions of the folk by fabricating a number of scenarios and then asking the folk questions about the scenarios. The first scenario went as follows:

Imagine there is another universe similar to ours in which there is a planet, named *Wearth*, similar to ours in many ways. *Wearth* contains the same biological beings, the same social facts, and the same moral understandings. Women behave the same and are treated the same in this universe as they are treated in our universe. However, on *Wearth*, all feminists shave their legs.

Participants circled "Yes," "No," or "I don't know" in response to two experimental questions:

- (1) Are women treated just fine on *Wearth*?
- (2) Is there a need for feminism on *Wearth*?

Out of thirty-five participants, thirty-four answered "Yes" to the first question and "No" to the second question. One participant answered "I don't know" to both questions.

So what intuitions were pumped here? What can we learn from this experiment about folk feminist theory? I wasn't sure. So, I decided that what I really needed was a different and longer scenario. Perhaps this approach would help to tease out the folk's more nuanced and theoretically significant feminist intuitions.

My new and improved scenario went as follows:

Imagine there is another universe similar to ours in which there is a planet, named *Wearth*, similar to ours in many ways. *Wearth* contains the same biological beings, the same social facts, and the same moral understandings. Women behave the same and are treated the same in this universe as they are treated in our universe. However, on *Wearth*, men are women and women are men; all feminists are men who hate women; and neither women nor men shave their legs.

- (1) Do all feminists hate men on *Wearth*?
- (2) Do all men hate feminists on *Wearth*?

Out of thirty-five participants, thirty-four answered “I don’t know” to both questions. One participant answered “Yes” to both questions.

After carefully analyzing this data, I realized that I may have confused the folk. But I wasn’t sure why. Perhaps I needed to particularize my scenario by concretizing the details.

My third scenario went as follows:

Imagine there is another universe similar to ours in which there is a planet, named *Wearth*, similar to ours in many ways. *Wearth* contains the same biological beings, the same social facts, and the same moral understandings. Women behave the same and are treated the same in this universe as they are treated in our universe. However, on *Wearth*, men are women and women are men; all feminists are men who hate women; and neither women nor men shave their legs. For example, on *Wearth*, John is a feminist man who is really a woman with hairy legs that aren’t actually that hairy (more like a fine down) who hates men (who are really women) and likes to wear polka dot dresses while kayaking with Mary (who is really a man and is not a feminist).

- (1) On *Wearth*, does John (a feminist man who is really a woman) hate Mary (a woman who is really a man who is not a feminist)?
- (2) On *Wearth*, do all feminists hate men?

Out of thirty-five participants, eighteen answered “Yes” to the first question and thirty-one answered “Yes” to the second question. Now I was getting somewhere. I have shown quite conclusively, I think, that the folk’s intuition is that on *Wearth* all feminists hate men.

But now I began to worry about sample bias. After all, I had only asked thirty-five folks (students enrolled in my class taught at a religiously affiliated,

private university, most of whom were white and raised in conservative homes). I needed to balance my sample. I did this by asking my twin on Wearth to conduct philosophical experiments on her thirty-five twin students. Now we both could qualify and quantify pre-feminist theory intuitions from two distinct universes. My Wearthly twin, smart experimental philosopher that she is, thought to incorporate some ethically significant details concerning trolleys in her scenario. It goes as follows:

Imagine there is another universe similar to Wearth in which there is a planet, named Earth, similar to Wearth in many ways. Earth contains the same biological beings, the same social facts, and the same moral understandings as Wearth. Women behave the same and are treated the same in Earth's universe as they are treated in Wearth's universe. However, on Earth, men are women and women are men; all feminists are men who hate women; and neither women nor men shave their legs. On Earth, a trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path are five women who are really men who have been tied to the track by a male feminist philosopher who is really a woman. Fortunately, you can flip a switch, which will lead the trolley down a different track to safety. Unfortunately, there is a single man who is really a woman tied to that track.

- (1) Should you flip the switch?
- (2) Are you a feminist who hates men?

Of the thirty-five Wearthly participants, eighteen answered "Yes" to the first question and thirty-one answered "Yes" to the second question. I had now shown that a separate and distinct sample of folk taken from another universe had similar intuitions to the folk on earth, and had even solved the trolley problem to boot. What a bonus!

Conclusion: All of you feminist theorists out there, be you actually men or actually women, are invited to join me in reexamining your most basic assumptions. In order to do this more scientifically, I recommend that you too engage in experimental philosophy. Perhaps we should pump the folk for intuitions on whether or not feminist theory is compatible with determinism. If the folk tell us that it is, we could all become naturalized experimental compatibilist feminist theorists.¹

NOTE

1. This piece is meant to be in good fun. I actually find much of what is being done in experimental philosophy quite interesting and useful to my own work in moral psychology. To find out more, papers by Joshua Knobe can be found at <http://www.unc.edu/~knobe>, Eddy Nahmias at <http://www2.gsu.edu/~wwwphl/philosophy/faculty/nahmias>, and Shaun Nichols at <http://dingo.sbs.arizona.edu/~snichols>.

REFERENCE

Nahmias, Eddy. 2006. Re-thinking the problem of free-will: Folk intuitions about determinism and reductionism. Presented at Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, SSPP, Charleston, South Carolina, April.

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