

Experimental philosophy movement explores real-life dilemmas

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Imagine a business executive who thinks: "I know that this new policy will harm the environment, but I don't care at all about that – I just want to increase profits." Is the business executive harming the environment intentionally? Faced with this question from a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill philosopher, 82 percent of people polled said yes.

But then UNC scholar Joshua Knobe changed the word "harm" to "help." This time, the executive thinks: "I know that this new policy will help the environment, but I don't care at all about that – I just want to increase profits." Is the business executive helping the environment intentionally? This time, only 33 percent of respondents said yes.

These are the sorts of questions posed in a new movement called experimental philosophy, where scholars leave their armchairs to talk to people directly about how they form their opinions and values. A new book by Knobe and University of Arizona philosopher Shaun Nichols being published this month is the first volume to discuss the controversial approach that is challenging conventional notions about the discipline.

"Experimental Philosophy" (Oxford University Press), edited by Knobe and Nichols, brings together seven "greatest hits," considered the most influential papers in experimental philosophy. It also includes several provocative new papers, including an introductory chapter by Knobe and Nichols, "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto."

Although the experimental philosophy movement is only a few years old, it has already led to a surge of new research – including experimental studies that explore people's ordinary understanding of morality, free will, happiness and other key philosophical issues. The aim is to dive right into the messy real world and to use psychological experimentation to get at the roots of philosophical problems.

"If you look back through the history of philosophy – all the way from the ancient Greeks to the 19th century Germans – you find in-depth discussions of how ordinary people actually think and feel," said Knobe, an assistant professor of philosophy in UNC's College of Arts and Sciences. "The aim of experimental philosophy is to return the discipline to this more traditional approach. The only difference is that contemporary experimental philosophers address their questions by actually going out and running experiments."

Studies like the one involving the business executive and the environment can help get at the roots of philosophical debates, Knobe said. "Experiments like these are beginning to suggest that people's ordinary way of understanding the world is suffused through and through with moral considerations."

"This sort of research is important not only for its philosophical implications but also for what it tells us about how people ordinarily think," Knobe added. "The more we know about how people make moral judgments, the more we will be able to understand how people come to blame each other and enter into conflict."

Nichols added that one of the most exciting prospects of experimental philosophy is that it can help assess whether certain cherished philosophical beliefs are well grounded. "By figuring out the psychological sources of our philosophical beliefs, we are in a better position to evaluate whether we are justified in having those beliefs," he

said.

Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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