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empirical evidence and philosophy

Conceptual Analysis and Empirical Data

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Testo integrale

- ¹ Suppose you want to find out whether truth is a necessary condition for knowledge. What method should you apply? According to many philosophers, it is hard to see what kind of *empirical* data you could ever rely on. The best way to proceed – they continue – is to examine hypothetical circumstances in order to test our intuitions as to the correct application of the concept of knowledge. Can you imagine a case in which a given cognitive agent knows something false? Would you say, for instance, that the agent can properly know that Hillary Clinton is the President of the United States? The intuitive answer is no. We have the strong intuition that no one can know a given proposition, like “Hillary Clinton is the President of the United States”, unless the proposition is true. It follows that the concept of knowledge cannot be correctly applied in such cases. Examining other hypothetical circumstances elicits further intuitions, thereby allowing us to find out a list of necessary conditions for knowledge. It is highly counterintuitive, for example, that one can know that Donald Trump is the President of the United States without believing it or without having some sort of epistemic justification for her belief. The analysis of hypothetical circumstances goes even further. Not only does it allow us to recover three necessary conditions for knowledge (truth, belief, and justification), but it also allows us to discover whether they are jointly sufficient. Consider the following case, proposed by Edmund Gettier (1963). From the false and justified belief that Jones owns a Ford, Smith validly infers the belief that either Jones owns a Ford or Brown is in Barcelona. This belief is not merely justified, since it is validly inferred, but also true, since, entirely unknown to Smith, Brown is indeed in Barcelona. In dealing with this imaginary case, we have the intuition that, even though Smith has a justified true belief, he fails to have knowledge. Thus, we can conclude that an agent can have a justified true belief that p without knowing that p .



2 The methodology outlined so far is generally called conceptual analysis, a methodology that it is a priori in that it is based solely on the competence of ordinary speakers in applying concepts. For decades, if not centuries, it has been taken to be the best way of deepening our understanding of philosophical concepts, like the concept of knowledge, free will, time, justice, and so on and so forth. Of course, such a methodology can be regarded as reliable only under the assumption that the hypothetical cases the speakers are told to examine always elicit the same intuitions in all of them. Still, things are not so simple. In recent years, the reliability of conceptual analysis has been questioned by the philosophical movement labelled 'Experimental Philosophy' (hereafter, Ex-Phi). In short, what Ex-Phi attacks is the idea that the intuitions of competent speakers concerning the correct application of a given concept are always universally shared. There is mounting evidence that the intuitions of two or more competent speakers, put in front of the imaginary cases just described, are sensitive to cultural and (even) social factors. The evidence is provided, for instance, by experiments concerning the verbal reactions of lay people in front of the Gettier case proposed above (Weinberg *et al.* 2001). People from Western societies tend to deny that Smith has knowledge, apparently sharing the intuitions of those who defend the reliability of conceptual analysis. In contrast, people from Eastern societies tend to attribute knowledge to Smith. This means that, contra Gettier, they are keen to deny that truth, belief, and justification are jointly insufficient for knowledge. It is interesting to note that a substantial lack of shared intuitions has been found even within groups of people from Western societies, plausibly due to contingent social differences between the tested subjects (Buckwalter, Stich 2014).

3 It should be clear that these experimental results cause problems for the received view of conceptual analysis. As mentioned, the latter aims to clarify the concepts involved in philosophical discussion, like *the* concept of knowledge. Still, if the followers of Ex-Phi are right, there is evidence against the idea that there is a definitive ordinary concept of knowledge, ordinary concept of time or ordinary concept of justice. So, what does conceptual analysis allow us to discover, precisely, in dealing with the hypothetical scenarios described so far? Should we conclude that conceptual analysis is irredeemably flawed?

4 Over the last few years, some philosophers have defended the idea that conceptual analysis can be used effectively in acquiring a priori knowledge. Granted: studying how lay people react to certain verbal stimuli casts new light on the ways concepts are ordinarily applied. But, interesting as they might be, the empirical results of Ex-Phi do not disprove the idea that the intuitions of *trained* philosophers can be effectively employed in knowing – say – a priori modal truths (see, for instance, Williamson 2007). The crucial point, then, is understanding whether the intuitions of the advocates of conceptual analysis are more reliable than those of lay people. Michael Devitt (2011), among others, seems to think that we have precise reasons to regard the former as more trustworthy than the latter, at least when it comes to testing intuitions on the reference of proper names. The debate on this and other related points is far from settled and cannot be summarised in few pages. In this special issue, entitled *Empirical Evidence and Philosophy*, we aim to make a significant contribution to the ongoing discussions on the role of empirical data in criticising or defending philosophical theses.

5 The special issue is structured as follows. In his *Metaphysics as logic*, Andrea Stollo proposes a new argument in favour of the idea that so-called 'armchair metaphysics' is a viable a priori methodology. His strategy consists in characterising armchair metaphysics as a form of logic. So understood, the methodology of metaphysics proves to be as well-founded as the methodology currently used in studying logic.

Of course, the debate on the role of experimental data in philosophy is not limited to questions about metaphysics; rather, at least in principle, it pertains to all the



fields of philosophy. Emanuele Arielli, in his *Is beauty in the folk intuition of the beholder?*, discusses the reasons why the approach of Ex-Phi, despite its recent success, has been so far scarcely applied to questions concerning aesthetics. He distinguishes between a ‘narrow’ and a ‘broad’ approach of Ex-Phi, then focusing on a further distinction between recent topics in aesthetics regarding perceptual and cognitive processes and more traditional questions on culturally-laden concepts. His aim is to show that aesthetics can be a good example of fruitful dialogue between experimental approaches and canonical armchair methodology.

7 Aesthetics is not the only field of philosophy where empirical methods play a substantive role. In his *Art, moral understanding, radical changes*, Elvio Baccarini argues that abstract reasoning cannot replace experience in refining our moral judgments. He proposes a model where different sources of information, part of which can be recovered by engaging with artworks, are revealed to be complementary in moral learning, thereby providing what he calls a version of reflective equilibrium.

8 Slobodan Perović’s *The complexity-based explanatory strategy, biological levels, and the origin of life* focuses on the philosophical debate on biological explanation, treating the fundamental debate on the origin of life as a good example of the way in which explanation is currently understood in biology.

9 Snježana Prijić Samaržija’s *Agency evidentialism* is devoted to the debate about trust and testimony, and it aims to defend a version of agency evidentialism that assumes doxastic voluntarism and virtue epistemology.

10 Petar Bojanić and Igor Cvejić’s *Fact of reason, social facts, and evidence* considers the role played by evidence in circumstances where, despite the fact that we have no explicit expression or binding argument, social acts are ascribed to plural subjects.

11 Finally, Nebojsa Zelic’s *Public reason, civic trust and conclusions of science* makes a comparison between scientific controversies and controversies of comprehensive doctrines in the light of the Rawlsian idea of public reason.¹

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