


INTRODUCTION

Experimental philosophy of religion

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Abstract

A brief introduction to this special issue on theme of experimental philosophy of religion—the project of taking the tools and resources of the human sciences and bringing them to bear on important issues within philosophy of religion, toward philosophical ends.

Keywords: experimental philosophy of religion; experimental philosophy; religious intuitions; philosophy of religion; the empirical study of religion

This special issue is dedicated to Helen De Cruz, whose pioneering contributions to experimental philosophy of religion have profoundly shaped the field.

Experimental philosophy of religion is the project of taking the tools and resources of the human sciences – perhaps especially psychology and cognitive science – and bringing them to bear on important issues within philosophy of religion, toward philosophical ends.¹ Where do our religious intuitions come from? And do we have a reason to think the cognitive origins of such intuitions are reliable? How might culture, ethnicity, gender, religious tradition, and more shape how we engage with seminal arguments within philosophy of religion? And where intuitions diverge, do we have a principled reason to prioritize our own intuitions over the intuitions of others? These are some of the core questions at the heart of this emerging field of research.

In a sense, experimental philosophy of religion is both old and new. *Old* insofar as the kind of questions that experimental philosophers of religion are typically interested in have been a part of philosophy of religion since its very inception. Consider, for example, Xenophanes' (c. 570–c. 478 BC) famous critique of many traditional religious beliefs based on his empirical observations regarding their origins – that is, that people often seem to worship gods of their own making.

Xenophanes, a pre-Socratic philosopher, was interested in a research project that would be of interest to many experimental philosophers of religion today! But experimental philosophy of religion is also *new* insofar as experimental philosophy has really only been flourishing in the philosophical literature over the past 20 or so years, with experimental philosophy of religion being a latecomer to that literature. While the tools and resources of psychology and cognitive science were being fruitfully applied in epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and so on towards valuable philosophical ends, very little work was being done to apply those same tools to seminal debates within philosophy of religion, at least until recently.²

But thanks to the generous support of the John Templeton Foundation, which has funded projects like the “Launching Experimental Philosophy of Religion” project (Grant ID: 61886), experimental philosophy of religion has seen a flurry of activity in recent years, and is quickly emerging as a new and exciting area of scholarly research.³ And all of the scholarly articles contained in this special issue of *Religious Studies* are a result of that funding, support, and flourishing.

In the first article of this special edition, “Experimenting with Philosophy of Religion: Lessons From Two Decades of Experimental Philosophy”, Paul Rezkalla locates experimental philosophy of religion within the more recent history of experimental philosophy. Experimental philosophy has learned many valuable lessons over the past 20 years, lessons that can shape the burgeoning field of experimental philosophy of religion. Experimental philosophy is sometimes characterized as a project that’s simply aimed at mining out folk intuitions and making a big deal about the substantial diversity of said intuitions – often concluding with a shrug toward agnosticism. But Rezkalla gives a more dynamic picture of experimental philosophy; one where the lived experiences and religious intuitions of everyday people might be considered a form of expertise, expertise with deep philosophical import.

William Rowe famously noted that “If it were shown” that we all “*presuppose* [the principle of sufficient reason] to be true, then ... to be consistent we should accept [the conclusion of the] Cosmological Argument” (emphasis Rowe’s); however, Rowe also noted that “no one has succeeded in showing that PSR is an assumption that most or all of us share” (Rowe 2006, 32). Showing whether or not the principle of sufficient reason is something that most people presume or presuppose is a project for experimental philosophers of religion – it’s not something that we can know a priori. And, clearly, such a project would have significant philosophical import!

Interestingly, recent empirical research strongly suggested that the principle of sufficient reason is something most people presume or presuppose (see, for example, Partington, Alejandro Vesga, and Shaun Nichols, 2023). The principle of sufficient reason, in some form or other, is a key premise in every formulation of the cosmological argument (see, for example, Reichenbach 2022). This new empirical research suggests, then, that most people presume or presuppose that a key premise in this argument for theism is true!

That said, as we see in the second article in this special edition, “Is the Cosmological Argument Intuitive?” by Shaun Nichols and Justin Steinberg, the story seems somewhat more complicated. While people *do* seem to presume or assume that the principle of sufficient reason is true, few people seem to be intuitively attracted to the conclusion of the cosmological argument, *that there is a necessary being*. In their article, Nichols and Steinberg consider the possibility that peoples’ intuitions about the cosmological argument are pulling them in two different directions – accepting key premises while finding the conclusion unappealing.

The problem of evil is another ideal topic for experimental philosophy. Suffering – which is at the heart of most prominent formulations of the problem of evil – is a universal human experience and has been the topic of careful reflection for millennia. However, interpretations of suffering and how it bears on the existence of God are tremendously diverse and nuanced. The third article in this special edition, “Experimental Philosophy and the Problem of Evil” by Ian Church, Blake McAllister, and James Spiegel, considers recent work on the problem of evil. Based on their survey, some formulations of the problem of evil don’t seem to resonate with folk intuitions, while other formulations enjoy comparatively broad intuitive support. Church et al. then go on to highlight some broader developments in the literature surrounding the problem of evil, and then highlight a few areas where further empirical research is still needed.

Philosophers have a long history of championing careful reflection (see Byrd 2021). Indeed, careful reflection is sometimes seen as a necessary condition on human flourishing – consider Socrates’s famous quip in Plato’s *Apology*, “The unexamined life is not worth living” (38a).⁴ It would be disturbing then, at least for theists, if it could be empirically shown that reflective thinking negatively correlates with religiosity. Interestingly, that seems to be precisely what Nick Byrd, Stephen Stich, and Justin Sytsma have shown in their article, “Analytic Atheism and Analytic Apostasy Across Cultures.” Such a finding raises important questions about the mechanisms that underwrite religious belief and the veracity of religious beliefs, and it could have a significant impact on debates within religious epistemology.

Now, as we might expect, some of the most reflective people in society are natural scientists. And while such scientists are indeed far less likely to hold traditional religious beliefs (as Byrd et al.’s research would suggest), that doesn’t mean that natural scientists don’t have what might be seen as a spiritual dimension to their lives and work. In their article, “The Restaurant at the Beginning of the Universe: Natural Scientists on Ultimate Reality, Science, and Religion”, Johan de Smedt and Helen De Cruz showcase their qualitative research exploring some of the spiritual beliefs and practices of natural scientists, especially beliefs regarding oneness and a sense of belonging within and a unity with the universe itself.

A central motivation for experimental philosophy of religion is that it might also push the fields of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology towards greater pluralism. A lot of work that is done in those fields is done from the perspective of Western academia, along with Western academic intuitions. The problem, however, is that academic Western intuitions are often assumed to be *everyone’s* intuitions, and this is particularly problematic when arguments are being made that aim to apply far beyond Western academia, across religions and across cultures. It’s not at all obvious that philosophers and theologians should prioritize the intuitions of Western academics when it comes to many central debates (like the debates surrounding the problem of evil, free will, purpose, etc.). As such, one hope for experimental philosophy of religion is that it will expand the religious and cultural insights that are relevant to the contemporary debates, breaking down cultural barriers, and better revealing (and perhaps allowing us to honestly own) the presuppositions that shape our view of ourselves, the divine, and the world around us.

Here (i) “Does God Know Our Future Sins?” by Ameni Mehrez and Edouard Machery and (ii) “The Presumption of Compatibilism” by Daniel Lim and Ryan Nichols make especially important contributions. In the former, Mehrez and Machery highlight important differences between and within both Christianity and Islam regarding how to best reconcile divine omnipotence and human freedom. And R. Nichols and Lim explore in their article the intuitions that surround omnipotence and free will across a range of cultural contexts, including within the United States, India, South Korea, and more. While important variation in intuitions are highlighted in both papers, a striking continuity of intuitions can often be found as well. Indeed, R. Nichols and Lim’s piece explicitly suggests that their research seems to highlight a widespread “common sense” compatibilism amongst folk intuitions. Such findings could force philosophers of religion to reconsider what they take to be the “default” position when it comes to perennial debates surrounding divine omnipotence and human freedom.

Debates surrounding free will and divine omnipotence, the cosmological argument, the problem of evil, our place in the wider universe, and the epistemic status of religious beliefs are some of the most central debates within philosophy of religion. And this new field (with ancient roots) of experimental philosophy of religion is making key contributions to

these areas! This special edition showcases and celebrates some of these recent and important contributions, and it's my hope that they will inspire new research and make lasting contributions to the field of philosophy of religion.

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Notes

1. This taxonomy is, of course, only a rough approximation.
2. The work of Helen De Cruz is a notable exception. See, for example, De Cruz (2017); De Cruz (2014); De Cruz and De Smedt (2015).
3. See "Data Over Dogma: A Brief Introduction to Experimental Philosophy of Religion" by Ian Church (2024).
4. See Plato (2002), 41.

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