

# Must philosophy be constrained?

**Edouard Machery: Philosophy within its proper bounds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 217 pp, ISBN: 9780198807520, £40.00**

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In *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*, Edouard Machery argues that many traditional and contemporary philosophical issues are beyond our epistemic reach. Such issues typically require modal knowledge of what is necessary and possible. However, according to Machery the main philosophical method for identifying modal facts, the method of cases, is ill-suited for providing such knowledge. Philosophers commonly appeal to judgements made in imaginary, philosophical cases, such as the Gettier case or the trolley case. Machery criticizes the method of cases by drawing on extensive research done by experimental philosophers, purportedly showing that judgements elicited by philosophical cases are unreliable and should not be trusted. Furthermore, Machery argues that since many philosophers do not react appropriately to studies that show the diversity of such judgements across groups, the method of cases is more likely to enshrine our prejudices than to uncover modal facts of philosophical interest. On this ground, Machery defends the provocative claim that we should suspend judgement in most philosophical cases. What kind of investigation is left for philosophers, then? According to Machery, philosophers should embrace a naturalized version of conceptual analysis that aims at clarifying and assessing the contents of concepts actually possessed by people and engage in the prescriptive project of improving them.

The book consists of seven densely written chapters. In Chapter 1 Machery argues for a minimalist characterization of the method of cases, where philosophical cases induce judgements similar to judgements made in ordinary cases and where no reference is made to the notion of intuition. Machery focuses on philosophers' *formal use* of the method of cases whose goal is to understand the meaning of words (or the semantic content of concepts) and the *material use* that aims at understanding the referents of concepts. Chapter 2 provides a detailed, critical overview of the work done by experimental philosophers across various domains of philosophy. The studies show that judgements made in prominent philosophical cases tend to vary with demographic and presentational factors. The results provide an inductive basis for Machery's arguments against philosophers' use of the method of cases. The first concern for the method comes in Chapter 3, where Machery argues that judgements made in philosophical cases are fundamentally *unreliable*, because such cases typically exhibit what he calls 'disturbing characteristics' which cause concepts to be applied outside their proper domain. Machery's second concern for the method (Chapter 4) regards the way philosophers respond to the results provided by experimental studies. One reply is to treat them as instances of disagreement, another as a case of speaking past each other. The former leads, according to Machery, to philosophical dogmatism, the latter to parochialism. The arguments presented in Chapters 3 and 4 lead Machery to the same conclusion: philosophers should shelve the method of cases. In Chapter 5 Machery replies to eight defenses of the method of cases, including the prominent expertise defense, according to which the folk are not the right subjects for gathering case judgements. *Modal skepticism*, i.e. the view that, given the arguments presented in Chapter 3 and 4, we should suspend judgement in response to philosophical cases that concern modal claims about metaphysical necessity or possibility, is defended in Chapter 6. In Chapter 7 Machery makes his positive proposal and argues for a naturalized conceptual analysis that draws on methods of experimental philosophy.

The book provides a rich and concise defense of a radical restrictionist position in experimental philosophy. Machery gives an impressive, systematic overview of research done by experimental philosophers over the last fifteen years and critically discusses most of the work done within philosophical methodology. His arguments are often convincing and build into a generally consistent picture. Machery's aim, however, is a lot more ambitious than providing a critical overview of the debate and the conclusions of the book are radical. If Machery is right about the problems facing the method of cases and the resulting modal skepticism, then most of the work in analytic philosophy is misguided and the prospects for addressing many core philosophical issues are dim. In what follows we make several critical comments about selected arguments and claims defended in the book.

In Chapter 1 Machery argues that philosophical cases elicit judgements that are no different from everyday judgements in that they draw on ordinary capacities for recognizing the referents of concepts (pp. 20-23). For example judgements made in the Gettier case draw on our everyday capacity to recognize knowledge. Consequently, Machery's minimalist characterization does not trade on any epistemically robust capacity or mental state. Several proposals that characterize the method in terms of drawing on conceptual competence, involving epistemic or metaphysical truths or the notion of perceptual-like states of intuition, are according to him descriptively inadequate (pp. 30-44). Machery's deflationary approach to the method of cases is premised on two assumptions: (1) philosophical judgements are just like ordinary judgements and (2) they form a uniform class (the homogeneity assumption). According to Machery we have no 'actual evidence' to expect differences across philosophical disciplines and we can investigate them together (p. 29).

However, the extensive research in experimental philosophy, as presented in Chapter 2, has not been operating on the latter assumption. Rather, the main tendency has been to investigate varieties of specific types of judgements (epistemic, moral, semantic, etc.) and to

draw conclusions with a limited scope about their reliability. On that basis, a complex pattern arises where different judgements are subject to different effects, plausibly for different reasons. For example, studies suggest that judgements about reference made in Gödel case are subject to cultural variation effects (Machery et al. 2004; Sytsma et al. 2015), while epistemic judgements in Gettier cases are not (Turri 2013; Machery et al. 2015). The specialization approach is prevalent and empirically well motivated by the idea that our abilities to apply concepts draw on different psychological mechanisms (Nado 2014; DeCruz 2015). Furthermore, the specialization is plausible not only for judgements made in philosophical cases, but also for what Machery calls ordinary judgements (Tversky and Kahnman 1974; Feigenson et al. 2004). While this is something that Machery may not be willing to deny, given his interest in cognitive psychology, his acceptance of the homogeneity assumption in the book is puzzling, since it does not square well with the ongoing empirical research on concept application and judgements.

Machery's first main concern for the method of cases comes in Chapter 3. According to the Unreliability Argument, the method of cases is an *unreliable* way of finding out about topics of philosophical interest (e.g. knowledge, free will), because judgements made in response to philosophical cases are made in circumstances where concept application is, for various reasons, unreliable, i.e., beyond its proper domain. Machery defines reliability as a dispositional property of a psychological process to produce a large proportion of true judgements (pp. 96-97). He also argues that the reliability, and respectively the unreliability, of such judgements is invariant under partitioning of the class of judgements elicited in philosophical cases (p. 99). The studies presented in Chapter 2 provide an inductive basis for the claim that judgements elicited in philosophical cases are unreliable. Given that the inductive basis allows only for conclusions about small-scale, domain-specific unreliabilities, Machery makes an inductive step and argues for what he calls *fundamental unreliability*: judgements

made in philosophical case are unreliable, because philosophical cases typically exhibit ‘disturbing characteristics’ (pp. 111-120). One such common feature is the unusual nature of situations described, which, according to Machery, leads subjects to fill in gaps differently and use ad hoc strategies or general heuristics to form a judgement (pp. 113-16). Another one is that philosophical cases tend to pull apart what goes together in everyday cases (e.g. knowledge and justification). In such situations, according to Machery, normal heuristics don’t work and one cannot rely on the memory of similar cases (pp. 116-18). Furthermore, philosophical cases are often written in a narrative, tendentious style. Because of this, the target content and the superficial features of the cases described cannot be fully disentangled. Machery argues that the above listed characteristics are the best available explanation for why judgements made in philosophical cases examined by experimental philosophers are unreliable. They are a ‘crack through which unreliability slips in’ (p. 117).

While the above proposal is certainly an interesting one, one lurking worry is that Machery’s explanation of the established effects on philosophical judgements is simply too coarse-grained to be explanatory. In particular, it is not clear how the above general hypotheses about the role of disturbing characteristics connect with the inductive basis of the argument, i.e. the established effects of demographic and presentational factors on philosophical judgements in several specific domains. If the unreliability of judgements is due to the stimuli presented, then a proper explanation would need to specify which disturbing characteristics of a case cause which factors to influence an otherwise reliable process of concept application (e.g. the unusualness of Gödel case causes group X to respond differently from group Y). Machery’s explanation is far from having this format and because of that it does not connect well with the research presented as the inductive basis for the argument. Machery could respond that his proposal is a first step towards a further empirical research where such specific

hypotheses could be investigated. But if that's the case, then the grounds for fundamental unreliability are at best speculative and the inductive step for the argument is not yet supported.

Machery's second main concern for the method of cases is that philosophers have not taken seriously enough the “diversity of judgments” found by experimental studies with laypeople (Chapter 4). Machery's et al. (2004) pioneering study on the cross-cultural variation of intuitions about reference in the Gödel case nicely illustrates this concern, which hasn't been discussed in this form and to that extent before. Machery poses the following dilemma for the proponents of the method of cases. Either there is a genuine disagreement between philosophers and other groups of subjects (e.g. from other cultures), or philosophers and other groups of subjects don't disagree and instead refer to different (epistemic, moral, etc.) properties when making judgements in philosophical cases. In the first case, Machery argues that simply ignoring disagreements among purported epistemic peers would lead philosophers to dogmatism and result in an epistemic impasse. Thus, Machery concludes that philosophers ought to suspend the use of the method of cases. In the second case, where there is no genuine disagreement, philosophers would not be *prima facie* justified to believe that theorizing about the properties *they* refer to would allow them to achieve their philosophical goals (e.g. to find out what is morally good). Ignoring the distinct voices of others would be parochial. Machery argues that, in order to avoid parochialism, philosophers must reassess whether their philosophical goals are better achieved by investigating the properties *others* refer to when making judgements in philosophical cases. Thus, for the time being, the method of cases should be shelved.

It is worth pointing out that if judgements made in philosophical cases are unreliable, as Machery argues in Chapter 3, then the dilemma posed in Chapter 4 seems to evaporate. That is, if such judgements really are unreliable, then there is no need to take their diversity seriously either as an instance of genuine disagreement or as resulting from the reference to different

properties. Instead, the diversity of judgements can then be treated as noise in the data. In the book, Machery says nothing about this apparent tension between the arguments and ideas developed in Chapter 3 and 4. In effect, in case one were to be convinced by Machery's Unreliability Argument, his interesting discussion of whether philosophers' attitudes towards the method of cases are fair and inclusive would be superfluous with regard to the conclusion he wants to establish, namely, that the method of cases ought to be suspended.

The prominence of the method of cases in philosophy, according to Machery, is a consequence of the *modal immodesty* of major philosophical debates that aim at establishing modal claims involving *metaphysical* necessity or possibility. After having shown that the method of cases is unable to fulfill this task, Machery argues for a stringent *modal skepticism* and concludes that philosophy should replace its modally imprudent aims by more humble and tractable means (Chapter 6). Machery's modal skepticism is restricted to the “philosophical” claims, for the evaluation of which unusual, atypical, nomologically impossible cases are particularly relevant. But even so restricted, it still affects a significant class of philosophical propositions. Machery's argument for the claim is based on the lengthy examination of *one* possible route to modal knowledge, i.e. the method of cases, which is far from exhausting all the options available in modal epistemology. Machery is well aware of that and in Chapter 6 he briefly considers other epistemic routes to the knowledge of metaphysical modality, such as intuition, meaning and abduction (pp. 194-205). However, it is unclear whether all the live options currently discussed in modal epistemology fall neatly into Machery's classification. For example, Peacocke's (1999) principles-based account and Hale's (2013) essentialist account do not seem to fit in any of the classes which Machery considers. Even if one accepts Machery's case against the method of cases, it is unclear whether his modal skepticism is firmly established, given these undiscussed routes.

As it stands, the view defended by Machery in Chapter 6 severely restricts the number of tasks that philosophers can safely engage in. These include the methodological project of identifying procedures that allow scientists to infer causal relations (e.g. Spirtes, Glymour and Scheines 2000) and the project of deciding whether psychological properties can have multiple realizers compatibly with the actual laws of nature (e.g. Shapiro 2004). This radical restriction raises two connected worries. First, one may wonder to what extent these tasks are philosophically interesting. On a flatly descriptive reading of Machery's first example, it is unclear why scientists should need *philosophers* to identify the procedures they use themselves to infer causal relations. Perhaps Machery has something more ambitious in mind then. On a more substantive, normative reading, the proposal could be to investigate whether the methods of causal inference used by scientists are well-founded, in that they accurately track *causality*. This brings us to the second worry: is the more ambitious version of the project radically different from the one that Machery wants us to abandon? In fact it is unclear whether it can be successfully conducted without appealing to the method of cases. For example, when defending the Causal Markov Condition as a necessary condition for causality, Spirtes et al. (2000, pp.32-38) critically discuss possible cases of causal processes violating the Markov Condition. This looks very much like an application of the method of cases in the material mode. How different is this use of the method from the one that is prevalent in the metaphysical programme in philosophy of causation? Machery rightly points out that the methodological project concerns only necessary conditions for causation that do not go beyond the sphere of nomological possible worlds, like the Markov Condition (p. 191). But it is fair to say that the cases that are commonly discussed in the metaphysical programme concerning, for example, causal overdetermination and failure of transitivity, do not usually go beyond the sphere of nomologically possible worlds either (Paul and Hall 2013). If the method of cases can be reliably used in one context, why couldn't it be used in the other? Thus, even when looking at

the main example offered by Machery, it is hard to form a consistent picture of the scope and resources that philosophy within its proper bounds is supposed to have.

What kind of investigation is left for philosophers? Machery's own answer is to propose a naturalized version of conceptual analysis that investigates the contents of concepts actually possessed by people, i.e. psychological entities that contain information about individuals, classes, events. Given that concepts so understood are not transparent to their users, one of the main goals of conceptual analysis is to uncover their contents. Descriptive conceptual analysis carried out with experimental methods serves that purpose. The descriptive enterprise is, according to Machery, philosophically useful, because many philosophical puzzles arise from the quirky nature of lay concepts (e.g. causation (Paul and Hall 2013), justification (Alston 1993)). The second main goal of conceptual analysis is prescriptive. Not all concepts-underwritten inferences are good inferences (e.g. race), some such inferences are unreliable or harmful. Prescriptive conceptual analysis allows us to assess inferences that concepts dispose us to draw and to modify those that are deficient. Here Machery engages in recent debates on conceptual engineering in both scientific and social contexts (e.g. Haslanger 2000).

A difficulty seems to arise for the latter type of enterprise. While a revised, experimental method of cases (2.0) is Machery's preferred tool for the descriptive conceptual analysis, the means for prescriptive conceptual analysis applied to socially relevant concepts seem on his account severely limited. For example, if we were to find with the method of cases 2.0 that the folk concept of gender underwrites invalid and harmful inferences, we ought to modify/engineer the concept to amend its deficiencies. On what grounds, however, can we decide how the concept is to be amended? Ethics and moral philosophy, where one could look for normative standards, traditionally draw on the armchair method of cases, which Machery rejects, and his own revised version of the method is not up for this task, since it serves only descriptive purposes. Perhaps Machery could appeal to general principles and values, but these

are debatable too and cases are often used to settle such disputes. Machery says very little about this potentially important prescriptive role of conceptual analysis and the fact that he has particularly scarce resources to engage in it leaves the reader worried whether this part of the project can be successful.

Overall, Machery's book, although provocative and radical in its conclusions, provides a rich and thorough discussion of all the pertinent issues in experimental philosophy. It has set a high standard and will have to be the starting point for any subsequent engagement with the challenges raised by experimental philosophers. It is a must read for anyone concerned with the current condition and the future of philosophical investigation.

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