

How to vindicate the armchair^{*}

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I like to talk with the gardener, and the cow-herd's wife, and any workman who may relish a bit a bit of talk on Sundays, on their notions of how body and mind should be treated, and what they are living for, and what is wrong and right in morals. There is much amusement and instruction in hearing them lay down the law about health and duty. And then, when I meet a poet here, and a scholar there, and a Quaker or a Swedenborgian religionist somewhere else, it seems to me that I have been carried back some thousands of years, to the time when science was composed of dreaming, and when men's instincts constituted the mythology under which they lived. It is all very interesting, however, and all worthy of respect. To us, who are in search of facts, there is no dream of any intellect, no dogmatic assurance, no stirring of any instinct, which is not full of interest and instruction. But I shall be glad of your answer to my question, as guidance in using the material furnished by my neighbours. – [Martineau](#)

1 Introduction

[Strevens \(2019b\)](#)'s *Thinking Off Your Feet: How Empirical Psychology Vindicates Armchair Philosophy* promises to vindicate philosophical analysis. My comments take a narrow, critical focus. I argue Strevens doesn't deliver on this promise. Given my

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understanding of (a) what is required from a vindication of philosophical analysis, and (b) Strevens's grounds for 'optimism' about philosophical analysis, Strevens hasn't done enough to vindicate philosophical analysis. Indeed, Strevens suppose grounds for optimism about armchair philosophy in fact provide motivation for philosophical analysis to give up some ground to experimental philosophy. Although my comments are critical, my overall view of the book is not. Strevens does important and interesting work presenting and analysing various models of how armchair philosophy might work and what it might achieve. The book deserves a central place in future discussions about these issues.

2 Why is Strevens's optimistic about philosophical analysis?

For Strevens, philosophy, perhaps all inquiry, is the search for deep explanations that make sense of the world we encounter. Our ordinary beliefs, including case judgments, about categories we investigate in philosophy—knowledge, race, freewill and so on—suggest those categories have important roles to play in any deeper explanations we might discover or construct. Philosophical analysis (which others call the 'method of cases') is the process of reasoning inductively starting from the basis of such present ordinary beliefs with the explicit aim of discovering the essential natures underlying these philosophical categories. Or as Strevens puts it, philosophical analysis is a process in which,

a hypothesis as to the nature of some sort of thing is proposed, counterexamples are exhibited, the hypothesis is revised to accommodate the counterexamples, again and again, for as many cycles as the journal page count, the needs of the profession, or the dialogue form can sustain.

Maybe this explicit aim – of discovering the essential nature of things – is never/rarely achieved, but in attempting to achieve it we can obtain philosophical knowledge that

is nonetheless worth having about underlying explanatory structures and relations.¹

This ability of philosophical analysis to produce philosophical knowledge isn't dependent on the epistemic credentials of armchair judgments, e.g., their being justified, or reliable – they might all be false! Strevens's optimism swings instead on the promise that the *process* of philosophical analysis, of reasoning inductively starting from such beliefs, will tend to converge with the facts about the categories those beliefs are about. This promise is secured by a minimal dispositional account of reference (à la [Johnson and Nado 2014, 2017](#)) such that "A term refers, at a given time, to given kind just in case it is likely that, under ideal conditions, the term's users would apply the term to all and only instances of that kind" (182). The rich, complex network of explanatory relations in which philosophical concepts tend to be embedded, and the high-level, mechanism-generic kind of explanatory structures that philosophical theories are capturing, mean that day-to-day philosophical analysis can take place largely isolated from the relevance of empirical facts (276–289).

For the most part, and certainly at this big picture level, I'm sympathetic to Strevens's picture of armchair philosophy. My point of departure is just concerning how much optimism about armchair philosophy this picture warrants, and so whether it helps *vindicate* armchair philosophy. It is worth noting that what Strevens offers is just an outline of a plausible epistemology of philosophical analysis: an explanation as to how the process of philosophical analysis might produce philosophical knowledge. Many of the key components of this explanation, are, by Strevens's own account, and for the moment, presented only as hypotheses that Strevens regards as plausible in light of current evidence (see, e.g., p.17). But I won't question these hypotheses here. Instead, I'll grant Strevens the basics of the picture: armchair philosophical analysis can produce philosophical knowledge about explanatory structures and relations through inductive reasoning on the basis of ordinary beliefs; this process is bound to make progress towards facts due to the nature of reference; this process is bound to result in substantive knowledge because the categories we investigate as philosophers are

¹Strevens's account thus has a flavour of a philosophical Structural Realism. In philosophy of science, structural realists suggest we ought not accept "that the nature of the unobservable objects that cause the phenomena we observe is correctly described by our best theories" but rather "epistemically commit ourselves only to the mathematical or structural content of our theories" ([Ladyman, 2016](#)).

firmly embedded in explanatory networks by our ordinary beliefs.

3 How to vindicate a method

It's helpful to consider, at an abstract level, what vindicating a method requires. I begin with three analogies and draw out three general lessons.

3.1 Three analogies

Analogy #1 You are lost in the woods. You have a compass, but you are also better than chance when simply guessing which way is North. A case against guessing doesn't require the claim that guessing will be utterly useless as a method. Likewise, the fact guessing isn't useless isn't enough to vindicate the method of guessing.

The legitimacy of relying on guesswork turns on the merits of guessing *relative to other available methods*. Guessing is vindicated only if, all things considered, there aren't much better alternative methods available. Why 'all things considered'? Because there are many potentially relevant considerations other than accuracy. When there are costs associated with greater accuracy, these may outweigh the benefits. The extent to which greater accuracy is of greater benefit will depend on why one wants or needs information about the direction. Why '*much* better' available alternative methods? Because use of methods might be vindicated even if strictly suboptimal. Suppose there are four methods for finding my way out of the wood before dark: guesswork; examining the moss on trees; use a compass; use GPS. There's negligible cost to using either a compass or GPS and they are each much more accurate than guessing or checking moss, methods which can't be vindicated in this case as a result. Most likely, there's a difference in the all things considered merits of using a compass and using GPS, such that one is clearly optimal, but not a large enough difference to mean only one of them is a method whose use is vindicated.

Analogy #2 You and your friends are lost in the woods and, for any individual considered in isolation, the all things considered best method is to use GPS. The fact

alone doesn't vindicate the adoption of GPS as a blanket group policy. Use of GPS and a compass come with different biases and risks, suppose. GPS may fail in certain meteorological conditions. A compass sometimes gives misleading results in the close presence of GPS devices. It is possible the group would do much better if they diversified: some using GPS, some compasses.

Groups of people engaged in a joint endeavor need not have a monolithic methodological profile. Some can use one method and others others. Often, the best profile is unlikely to be monolithic. Debates about the legitimacy of people in a group using a method might take place at various levels. Would it be okay if everyone used the method? Would it be okay if anyone used the method? Would it be okay if some particular proportion used the method? The legitimacy of some particular methodological profile at the group level turns not on whether everyone in the group is using a method which would be optimal were they working in isolation, but on the merits of that particular methodological profile at the group level relative to other available methodological profiles. The policy of monolithic adoption of GPS is plausibly not vindicated for groups at risk of getting lost in woods in virtue of the fact that a group would stand a much better chance of achieving their goals (let's suppose) were 10% of them to use compasses.

Analogy #3 Suppose you are lost with your friends again. Someone proposes the group reverts to guesswork rather than compasses or GPS devices. After mulling it over, as a group you decide that, despite previously thinking of yourselves as trying to get out of the woods, in fact you'll settle for having an diverting afternoon wandering around, and convince yourselves this was the aim all along. Guesswork is taken to be vindicated, as it will make for a much more diverting afternoon than fussing with gadgets.

The vindication of a method need not be a vindication of that method as originally conceived. One might seek to vindicate a method which is under pressure by reconceptualizing the original activity around more modest goals and evaluating the method against its ability to achieve those less ambitious goals. This doesn't automatically work; there's no automatic vindication of the method of guessing the direction

to be found in downgrading ambitions from ‘making it out alive’ to ‘dying a horrible death’. But so long as the new goals seem worthy of pursuit and are sufficiently close to the original goals, use of a method might be vindicated in this way.

3.2 Three general lessons

Strevens promises a vindication of a method: philosophical analysis. We can extract general lessons from the three analogies and apply them to philosophical analysis.

Lesson #1 Philosophical analysis won’t be vindicated by demonstrating that it has some value (perhaps, e.g., that it is possible to produce philosophical knowledge using the method), but only by demonstrating that, all things considered, there aren’t much better methods available.

Lesson #2 Philosophical analysis won’t be vindicated by any line of reasoning that suggests the all things considered best methodological profile in philosophy (perhaps, e.g., that with the best long term prospects that the discipline produces philosophical knowledge) gives philosophical analysis only a very minor role in philosophy; a vindication requires a demonstration that, all things considered, there aren’t much better alternatives to the current methodological dominance of philosophical analysis (alternatives that assign a lesser role to philosophical analysis).

Lesson #3 Philosophical analysis won’t be vindicated by downsizing philosophical ambition – contenting ourselves more modest but nonetheless worthwhile goals that philosophical analysis could help us meet – unless there are no much more ambitious goals that might be achieved with similar effort. A vindication of philosophical analysis through downsizing of ambition would swing on the more modest goals being worthwhile and there being no much more ambitious goals that could be easily achieved.

4 Why does philosophical analysis needs vindicating?

Why is armchair philosophy in general, and philosophical analysis in particular, in need of vindication? As Strevens recognises, today the main pressure on philosophical analysis comes from a field which advocates a different, non-armchair methodology: experimental philosophy.² There are three broad themes to this pressure:

1. An empirically-founded concern about the susceptibility of armchair consideration of cases to irrelevant influences. This factors into a call for a reduction of the reliance on philosophical analysis in philosophy. E.g., [Machery \(2017\)](#) argues extant evidence that judgments about cases are sensitive to interpersonal (e.g., personality) and intrapersonal (e.g., framing) factors suggests philosophical analysis doesn't provide the epistemic access to metaphysical possibilities and necessities which philosophers assume.³
2. Advocacy for supplementing philosophical analysis with experimental philosophy. The thought is that a discipline in which a greater proportion of work incorporated the methods of experimental philosophy (and so less was devoted to pure armchair philosophy) would be a discipline with a better chance of achieving its goals. E.g., [Machery \(2017\)](#) advocates for the *method of cases 2.0*—“presenting cases to samples of participants and analyzing their response statistically”—alongside other empirical methods and armchair theorizing as a way to approach the traditional project of analysing concepts (albeit expunged of ‘metaphysical immodesty’) with greater chances of gaining useful insights.
3. Advocacy for greater focus on *making sense of the way people think about the world* as an intrinsically philosophically interesting project. Such a shift would favour use of empirical methods over pure philosophical analysis. E.g., [Machery \(2017\)](#) is relatively content for the *method of cases 2.0* to focus on identifying the infer-

²This may seem unfair as Strevens's book has its roots in arguments first developed in the early 1990s (p. 337). But Strevens freely acknowledges that the pressure from experimental philosophy characterised the dialectical context of his book (most clearly in a blog post about the book on the publishers website, see [Strevens 2019a](#)). And it is the context in which many (perhaps most) readers will encounter the book.

³Machery argues the method should be largely rejected. But one needn't follow him to this extreme.

ences our minds are prone to draw as a project of intrinsic interest (rather than to serve immodest aims such as identifying analytic truths).⁴

So, although experimental philosophy and philosophical analysis are not the only methods and are not thus in direct competition, advocates of experimental philosophy can be seen as pushing a less-philosophical-analysis and more-experimental-philosophy agenda.

5 How to vindicate philosophical analysis

5.1 My understanding vs Strevens's

Few philosophers think: (a) all philosophy should be armchair philosophy; (b) all philosophy should be experimental philosophy; (c) no philosophy should be armchair philosophy; or (d) no philosophy should be experimental philosophy. Interesting differences of opinion concern the middle ground. What proportion of philosophy might legitimately be devoted to armchair enquiry? How does that compare to the status quo? Vindicating philosophical analysis requires a defence of (a) the current methodological profile in philosophy (in which philosophical analysis enjoys a certain dominance), over (b) a proposed new profile in which less philosophy is pure philosophical analysis and more is experimental philosophy.⁵

Strevens's understanding is clearly different. Strevens claims to show only “how philosophical knowledge may be produced, when conditions are favorable, by... philosophical analysis” (2) or to answer “how could it ever, even in the most favorable cognitive environment, succeed?” (p.74). Perhaps this is, in part, because Strevens also understands the pressure from experimental philosophy differently. Here's [Strevens \(2019a\)](#) on the backdrop to his book's argument in a blog post on the publisher's website:

One particular cabal of philosophical experimentalists... have used [find-

⁴Although, Machery's clearly *most* interested for it to inform ameliorative projects by identifying ways concepts lead us astray.

⁵Of course, the ideal breakdown is likely to vary in most people's minds at least by subfield. The abstraction here is helpful to capture one basic aspect of the dialectic, however.

ings that judgments about philosophical cases are unstable and variable] to argue that philosophers must abandon the armchair. They observe that if the outcomes of scientific experiments were as unstable and variable as the outcomes of thought experiments, we would discount science as a useful method of inquiry. We should apply the same standard, they continue, to armchair philosophy. Its “thought-experimental” method is therefore unsatisfactory. We need to find a different way to philosophize.

That’s not how I characterised the pressure from experimental philosophy above. But, there’s no denying arguments for such radical methodological changes have been made. Indeed, [Machery \(2017\)](#), whom I cited, comes very close. However, even in the context of an argument that philosophical analysis should be abandoned, it would be a very concessive form of ‘vindication’ that argued simply that armchair philosophy shouldn’t be completely discounted. After all, such a ‘vindication’ would be compatible with the recommendation that philosophical analysis should be restricted to a once-a-decade indulgence. Those looking for a vindication of armchair philosophy are surely looking for something closer to a defence of the status quo.⁶

5.2 What is the dialectical context?

How much ground do proponents of experimental philosophy think armchair philosophy should concede to experimental philosophy? What about its opponents? In July 2019, I conducted an online survey of philosophers via the *philos-l* mailing list to obtain an estimate.

Participants In total, 200 participants took part. Those who indicated neither that they were employed as a philosopher, or had or were studying for a philosophy PhD were excluded, leaving 189 philosophers (146 male, 40 female, and 3 other). Around half, 53%, had a PhD in philosophy, 49% were employed as a philosopher, and 32%

⁶Stevens does appreciate this last point, he suggests at least an ambition to demonstrate that “the pursuit of philosophical analysis can go on as before...largely free of empirical demands” (18), even if it is unclear how his arguments could meet that ambition.

were studying for a PhD in philosophy. Nationalities represented in the sample at 10% or more were: USA, UK, and German. The same pattern held for country of residence. Mean age was 39.42 (SD = 12.92).

Materials Participants were asked series of questions about experimental philosophy and armchair philosophy. These questions, in full, were as follows (whole sample descriptive results in parentheses):

1. Experimental philosophy involves using empirical methods from psychology and the cognitive sciences to contribute to philosophical debates.
 - (a) How would you describe your attitude to experimental philosophy?
 - i. I am in favour of experimental philosophy (52%)
 - ii. I am against experimental philosophy (12%)
 - iii. I am neutral towards experimental philosophy (25%)
 - iv. I don't know enough about experimental philosophy to have an opinion (12%)
 - (b) Do you identify as an experimental philosopher?
 - i. Yes (15%)
 - ii. No (76%)
 - iii. Unsure (9%)
2. Armchair philosophy involves using exclusively a priori methods when engaging with philosophical debates, although might involve consideration of empirical evidence from other disciplines.
 - (a) How would you describe your attitude to armchair philosophy?
 - i. I am in favour of armchair philosophy (60%)
 - ii. I am against armchair philosophy (10%)
 - iii. I am neutral towards armchair philosophy (28%)
 - iv. I don't know enough about armchair philosophy to have an opinion (1%)
 - (b) Do you identify as an armchair philosopher?

- i. Yes (47%)
 - ii. No (35%)
 - iii. Unsure (18%)
3. What percentage of the philosophy journal articles that were published in 2018 do you think used the methods of experimental philosophy? We are interested in your best rough guess/estimate. Enter as a whole number from 0-100. (median = 5%, mean = 11.14%, sd = 13.65)
 4. You said that you think XXX% of the philosophy journal articles that were published in 2018 used the methods of experimental philosophy. Do you think that ideally the proportion of philosophy journal articles using the methods of experimental philosophy would be higher or lower than XXX%? ('XXX' was populated with the participant's previous answer.)
 - (a) Higher (52%)
 - (b) About the same (36%)
 - (c) Lower (11%)
 5. Ideally, if philosophy were to have the best chances of making philosophical progress, what percentage of philosophy journal articles would use the methods of experimental philosophy? We are interested in your best rough guess/estimate. Enter as a whole number from 0-100. (median = 15%, mean = 22.34%, sd = 21.66)

Results Mixed 2x2 ANOVAs were used to assess the main and interaction effects on estimated proportion of Actual-Ideal (within) and each of the following (between): (a) position on experimental philosophy (for/against); (b) identity as experimental philosopher (yes/no); (c) position on armchair philosophy (for/against); (d) identity as armchair philosopher (yes/no).⁷ There was no significant interaction with Actual-Ideal for position on armchair philosophy ($p = .174, \eta_p^2 = .014$) or identity as armchair philosopher ($p = .084, \eta_p^2 = .019$). But there was a significant interaction for both position on experimental philosophy ($F(1, 118) = 120.76, p < .0005, \eta_p^2 = .506$) and,

⁷The data were log-transformed as the assumption of normality was not met.

albeit a smaller one, identity as an experimental philosopher ($F(1, 171) = 9.35, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .052$). We can break those interactions down. Those in favor of experimental philosophy gave significantly higher estimations for the ideal proportion than those against it ($t(118) = 8.33, p < .0005, d = 1.84$) but not of the actual proportion ($p = .611, d = .12$). Experimental philosophers gave significantly higher estimations for the ideal proportion than non-experimental philosophers ($t(171) = 3.71, p < .0005, d = .77$) but not of the actual proportion ($p = .233, d = .23$).

We can begin to get a better sense of these dynamics by considering the median estimates of the actual and ideal proportions broken down by subgroup.⁸ Estimates of the *actual* proportion of philosophy journal articles using experimental philosophy were similar regardless of philosophers identities or attitudes (group medians 5–10%).⁹ However, estimates of the *ideal* proportion varied between subgroups. Groups giving relatively low estimates of the ideal proportion included those in favour of armchair philosophy (10%), armchair philosophers (10%), those against experimental philosophy (3.5%), non experimental philosophers (10%). Groups giving relatively high estimates of the ideal proportion included those against armchair philosophy (29%), non-armchair philosophers (30%), those in favour of experimental philosophy (25%), and non experimental philosophers (30%).

To give a sense of scale of the within-subject difference between actual and ideal estimates we can look at the median percentage point difference between the two answers. Across the whole sample, the median percentage point difference between estimates of the actual and ideal proportions was *positive* (+5). This pattern was the same in all but one subgroup. The following groups also had a positive median percentage point difference: those in favour of experimental philosophy (+15), experimental philosophers (+15.5), those against armchair philosophy (+18), non armchair

⁸Groups also varied on whether they thought that ideally the proportion of philosophy journal articles using experimental philosophy's methods would be higher than their estimate of the actual proportion. No respondents who identified as being against experimental philosophy thought the ideal proportion would be higher (0%). A relatively high proportion of respondents thought the ideal proportion would be higher in the following groups: those in favour of experimental philosophy (78%) and experimental philosophers (79%). But most subgroups were more evenly split: non experimental philosophers (47%), those in favour of armchair philosophy (52%), those against armchair philosophy (65%), armchair philosophers (48%), non armchair philosophers (66%).

⁹For context, a JSTOR search returns 74,504 articles in philosophy between 2001 and 2019, and 6,342 (11.92%) mention 'experimental philosophy' (searches 30/7/19).

philosophers (+15), those in favour of armchair philosophy (+5), non experimental philosophers (+4), and armchair philosophers (+4). The only subgroup with a negative median difference was those against experimental philosophy (-3).

Brief discussion What should we take from the above with respect to the dialectical context? At a very rough estimate, opponents of armchair philosophy think it should concede around 30% of space in philosophy journals to experimental philosophy, its advocates think this figure would only be around 10%. What seems to need vindicating is a model of philosophy in which armchair philosophy is dominant and in which only around 10% is experimental rather than around 30%.¹⁰

6 The case against the vindication of analysis

Has Strevens's provided a successful vindication of armchair philosophy? The test suggested by discussion in §3.2 is that the attempt must at least pass the following:

1. All things considered, there mustn't be much better methods available than philosophical analysis.
2. All things considered, there mustn't much better alternatives to the current methodological profile in which philosophical analysis dominates.
3. If the vindication is supposed to work by downsizing of ambition, the new more modest goals for philosophical analysis must be worthwhile and there must be no much more ambitious goals that could be easily achieved.

In each case, the most salient alternatives in today's context concern experimental philosophy. So the relevant questions to ask are as follows. Does experimental philosophy represent an all things considered better methodology? Does a methodological profile in which pure armchair philosophy gives up about 30% of journal space to experimental philosophy represent an all things considered better profile than one in which

¹⁰Even including outliers, this only rises to around 30%.

this figure is only around 10%? Does experimental philosophy represent an easy way to achieve much more ambitious goals than those philosophical analysis can achieve?

I won't emphasise the third test. I think there are better methods available than philosophical analysis, and better methodological profiles than ones in which analysis dominates, but not because I think philosophers can easily do something more ambitious than making sense of our world by gaining knowledge of underlying explanatory structures and relations (or because I think such modest goals are not worthwhile). It is true that Strevens's optimism concerns a more modest project, in one sense, than is often assumed for philosophical analysis, because it is content without discovering the essential natures of things. But that's likely for the best. For different reasons, I won't focus on the first test. Maybe, all things considered, for an individual working alone there just aren't (much) better methods available for producing philosophical knowledge than philosophical analysis. Philosophical analysis is cheap and easy. An individual would likely be wasting resources to invest heavily, for example, in experimental projects which can be very expensive in terms of time, effort, and money. So plausibly, even if, in the long run, an individual would stand a better chance of producing philosophical knowledge by focusing on empirical investigation rather than philosophical analysis, the necessary expense would not have been worthwhile.

So, instead, I focus on the second test. A vindication worth having would have established that there aren't much better alternatives to the current methodological dominance of philosophical analysis within philosophy. So, does Strevens give us reasons to think a methodological profile in which pure armchair philosophy gives up about 30% of journal space to experimental philosophy represents an all things considered better profile than one in which this figure is only around 10%? I don't think Strevens gives the defender of the status quo in which philosophical analysis dominates much to work with. Indeed, we might even build a case in favour of the more-experimental-philosophy and less-philosophical-analysis agenda on the basis of his ideas.

Here's a minimal case for a certain kind of experimental philosophy based on Strevens's framework: if (as Strevens argues) one can make philosophical progress by

inductively reasoning on the basis of one's own ordinary beliefs about philosophical categories, one can make (maybe better) progress by enriching one's starting point to include other people's ordinary beliefs; experimental philosophy's methods are well-suited to establishing the contours of ordinary belief about philosophical categories.

Sometimes, Strevens seems open to this thought. In explaining how armchair inquiry in many philosophical subdomains seems to be (appropriately) insensitive to empirical facts, Strevens makes an important qualification (explicitly addressed to the case of moral philosophy, but it seems to generalize).

[T]he human sciences... provide a kind of information that many philosophers have thought to bear directly on the content of the moral principles, namely the moral views of the world at large. Aristotle, for example, proposed that ethical inquiry must attend to the *endoxa*, usually translated as "currently accepted opinions."

Strevens is fine with this because he seeks to "explain the empirical indifference of ...any kind of philosophy, only insofar as it is empirically indifferent," but adds that

endoxa are a special kind of empirical information: they are information about the end products of other people's armchair reflection. Consulting the *endoxa* therefore does not...make moral philosophy any less of an armchair pursuit. (p.275)

This is strangely concessive, given that Strevens is in the business of vindicating the armchair, in the context of pressure from experimental philosophy. Strevens could be read as being open to (indeed supportive of) an 'armchair philosophy' that could be largely experimental.

Usually, however, Strevens is clear that the target of his vindication is armchair philosophy, traditionally construed: done by philosophers starting from just their own beliefs. Indeed, Strevens offers some brief comments in favour of starting with a philosophers' rather than ordinary folks' beliefs. He offers the argument that (a) categorization judgments involve an inductive inference (in the form of inference to the best explanation) taking into account all one's ordinary beliefs about the category

(which according to Strevens's hypothesis comprise the concept), and (b) inductive reasoning is hard and experts in argumentation (i.e., philosophers) should be expected to do it better (p.210) if only because they apply 'more intelligence and more patience than most reasoners to challenging inductive problems' but perhaps also because they turn on tricky questions of explanatory relevance (p.287).

But these comments aren't compelling. These considerations do speak in favour of the claim that philosophers rather than ordinary people should do the *deliberative* part of philosophical analysis: the complex, explicit, deliberate inductive reasoning process (that starts from ordinary beliefs about a category). But why should those philosophers deny themselves the rich inductive starting point that is the ordinary beliefs of the wider population?¹¹ Strevens's thought seems to be that a philosopher's categorization judgments will be less noisy (presumably on average) than a non-philosopher's. But, that line of reasoning misses the key point in favor of expanding the initial dataset: when increasing sample size (from one to sample sizes involved in well-powered experimental philosophy studies) the fact that each individual in the expanded sample has more noisy tendencies in categorizing cases than the philosopher in the armchair is more than compensated for by the fact there are so many individuals in the expanded sample.

Strevens's thought could, instead, be that ordinary folks' beliefs will be more susceptible to *systematic bias* (rather than random noise). But, that would be an odd reason – for Strevens in particular – to prefer that philosophers restrict their starting evidence to their own intuitive judgments. Strevens's defence of philosophical analysis's ability to produce philosophical knowledge depends on the fact that philosophical analysis has resources to detect and correct for severe problems with the starting data. Strevens claims that philosophical analysis works by taking ordinary beliefs as a starting point "for finding the truth about the categor[ies] to which they refer" and that they can play this role "even if they are entirely incorrect" (163). The philosophical analyst starts with their own ordinary beliefs, and Strevens thinks philosophical analysis has the resources to avoid inheriting the errors and biases present in those ordinary beliefs.

¹¹As Harriet Martineau (quoted in the epigraph to this paper) puts it: "To us, who are in search of facts, there is no dream of any intellect, no dogmatic assurance, no stirring of any instinct, which is not full of interest and instruction."

Likewise, it seems Strevens should accept, the philosopher who starts with the ordinary beliefs of a larger sample, shouldn't fear that their theorising is bound to inherit the errors and biases of the beliefs of that larger sample – the philosopher supposedly has the resources to avoid this.

So, it seems we might accept Strevens's picture of how philosophical analysis works and even share in his optimism about the prospects of generating philosophical knowledge through philosophical analysis, while still endorsing the idea that less philosophical research should be done that relies on pure armchair analysis and that more philosophical research should be done that makes use of other methods (in particular of empirical tools such as experimental philosophy's). Moreover, given Strevens's defence of the ability of philosophy to make philosophical progress by reasoning inductively from ordinary beliefs about philosophical categories, I can see no excuse for devoting as much of philosophy's time and resources as are currently devoted to the kind of pure armchair philosophical analysis that Strevens purports to be vindicating which imposes austere restrictions on which ordinary beliefs serve as the starting point of inquiry.

So, what ultimately does Strevens offers to the defender of armchair philosophy, specifically that they can use in response to – the most salient challenge to philosophical analysis – pressure from experimental philosophy? In §4, I presented that pressure as having three broad themes, I'll take them one-by-one. The first theme was an empirically-founded concern about irrelevant influences on categorisation judgments, a concern that factors into a call for a reduction of the reliance on philosophical analysis. Here Strevens offers a new perspective on the relevance of irrelevant influences. As he makes clear, optimism about the prospects of philosophical analysis to make progress, doesn't have to depend on optimism about the levels of susceptibility of ordinary beliefs and case judgments to error and bias. However, that line of reasoning should extend to an experimental version of philosophical analysis too: one which reasons inductively from data concerning a wider population's ordinary beliefs and case judgments. Moreover, a larger sample size, and a greater ability to carefully investigate and potentially control for interpersonal and intrapersonal influences, means that, if anything, greater optimism would warranted for such an experimental version

of analysis. So Strevens doesn't offer much for resisting this aspect of the pressure. The second theme was advocacy for supplementing armchair philosophical analysis with the methods of experimental philosophy, and Strevens provides armchair philosophy no reason to resist such supplementation, as his focus is really just on defending the idea that armchair philosophical analysis doesn't deserve jettisoning completely. The third theme was advocacy for a greater focus on simply making sense of the way people think about the world as a philosophically interesting project in its own right (a shift which naturally favours use of empirical methods including experimental philosophy over non-empirical methods such as philosophical analysis). Strevens's position is surely compatible with thinking such projects are valuable in their own right. I should reiterate that Strevens is optimistic about a philosophy that adopts rather less modest goals than this. Strevens does outline a new way of being optimistic about a more ambitious project: optimism that starting with making sense of the way we think about the world we might come to have substantive metaphysical knowledge about the underlying explanatory structures of our world (because of the nature of reference, the relevant concepts, and the tendency of a process of inductive reasoning based on ordinary beliefs to converge on the truth). But, again, note that any such optimism should extend to an experimental analogue of philosophical analysis with similarly less modest goals (and would be better founded in that case due to the comparative richness of the inductive base to which experimental philosophy provides access, not to mention the ability of empirical tools to provide additional information about case judgments and the cognitive mechanisms that produce them: information that can inform the inductive process).

In sum, perhaps even by Strevens's own lights, it is the less-philosophical-analysis and more-experimental-philosophy agenda that is vindicated by Strevens's book. Strevens should not be interpreted as offering a vindication of philosophical analysis because, perhaps even by Strevens's own lights, there is a much better all things considered alternative to the current methodological dominance of philosophical analysis: an alternative in which philosophical analysis gives up some ground to experimental philosophy (perhaps to the extent, for example, that around 30% of journal space is devoted

to experimental philosophy).¹²

7 Conclusion

Strevens offers a lot to philosophers and metaphilosophers alike. The picture he paints of how armchair analysis can produce valuable metaphysical insights is illuminating. The defence he offers, of the value of philosophical analysis, is a defence that promises to work even when the explicit ambition to discover the essential natures of things is fruitless and even when the ordinary beliefs and categorization judgments that the process starts with are apparently hopelessly error-ridden and prone to irrelevant influences. The model of armchair philosophical inquiry presented by Strevens is inspiring and ingenuous, and deserves to be right at the centre of future work in the area. Nonetheless, in a very narrow and ‘big picture’ respect, Strevens’s project doesn’t achieve what it claims to achieve. Strevens claims to vindicate the use of armchair philosophical analysis. I have argued that to succeed one would have to do more than show that armchair philosophical analysis could produce philosophical knowledge. One would have to provide a defence of the disciplinary model in which philosophical analysis dominates over an alternative model in which philosophical analysis gives some ground to other methods (particularly experimental philosophy). And Strevens doesn’t provide that. Moreover, his reasons for being optimistic about armchair philosophy seem to extend to certain kinds of experimental philosophy. So, those looking for a vindication of armchair philosophy, to my mind, won’t find it in Strevens’s book.

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¹²There are costs I haven’t mentioned which a defender of the status quo might think should be explicitly factored into an ‘all things considered’ judgment. Training graduate students in empirical and statistical methods is expensive. Running empirical studies can be expensive. One strategy, to vindicate philosophical analysis, might be to argue that these costs outweigh the benefit to be gained. I’m not optimistic about the chances of such a vindication, but I’d be interested to see an attempt.

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