**Opinionator**
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# Experiments in Field Philosophy

*By ROBERT FRODEMAN*

The Stone is a forum for contemporary philosophers on issues both timely and timeless.

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Back in September, Joshua Knobe of Yale University, writing here at The Stone, outlined a new experimental approach to doing philosophy in his post, "Experiments in Philosophy." Philosophers, he argued, have spent enough time cogitating in their armchairs. Knobe described how he and a group of like-minded colleagues in the discipline have undertaken a more engaged approach, working with cognitive scientists and designing experiments that will "test" people's intuitions about traditional philosophic puzzlers such as the existence of God, the objectivity of ethics and the possibility of free will. The result: new, empirically-grounded insights available to philosophers and psychologists.

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The experimental philosophy movement deserves praise. Anything that takes philosophy out of the study and into the world is good news. And philosophy will only be strengthened by becoming more empirically-oriented. But I wonder whether experimental philosophy really satisfies the Socratic imperative to philosophize out in the world. For the results gained are directed back to debates within the philosophic community rather than toward helping people with real life problems.

Another group of philosophers, myself included, is experimenting with an approach we call "field philosophy." Field philosophy plays on the difference between lab science and field science. Field scientists, such as geologists and anthropologists, cannot control conditions as a chemist or physicist can in the lab. Each rock outcrop or social group is radically individual in nature. Instead of making law-like generalizations, field scientists draw analogies from one site to another, with the aim of telling the geological history of a particular location or the story of a particular people.

"Getting out into the field" means leaving the book-lined study to work with scientists, engineers and decision makers on specific social challenges. Rather than going into the public square in order to collect data for understanding traditional philosophic problems like the old chestnut of "free will," as experimental philosophers do, field philosophers start out in the world. Rather than seeking to identify general philosophic principles, they begin with the problems of non-philosophers, drawing out specific, underappreciated, philosophic dimensions of societal problems.

Growing numbers of philosophers are interested in this kind of philosophic practice. Some of this field work in philosophy has been going on for years, for instance within the ethics boards of hospitals. But today this approach is increasingly visible across a number of fields like environmental science and nanotechnology. Paul Thompson of Michigan State has worked with and challenged the food industry on the application of recombinant DNA techniques to agricultural crops and food animals. Rachelle Hollander, now at the National Academy of Engineering, worked for years at the National Science Foundation to integrate ethics and values concerns with the ongoing work of scientists and engineers. And at my own institution, the University of North Texas, we have worked with the U.S. Geological Survey and the small community of Silverton, Colo., on problems of water quality, the legacy of 19th- and 20th-century gold mines; helped the Great Lakes Fisheries Commission develop a management plan for the Great Lakes; and assisted the Chilean government in creating a UNESCO biosphere reserve in Cape Horn.

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Note further that "field" areas also include government offices in places such as Washington, DC and Brussels. So, for instance, my research group is in the midst of a three-year study funded by the National Science Foundation that is examining the process of peer review for grant proposals. Science agencies around the world are struggling to bring assessments of the larger societal impact of proposed research into the peer review process. In this study we meet regularly with the users of this research — the federal agencies themselves — to make sure that our research helps agencies better address societal needs. The "field" can even include the lab, as when Erik Fisher of Arizona State speaks of "embedded philosophers" who, like embedded journalists of recent wars, work daily alongside lab scientists and engineers.

Field philosophy has two roles to play in such cases. First, it can provide an account of the generally philosophical (ethical, aesthetic, epistemological, ontological, metaphysical and theological) aspects of societal problems. Second, it can offer an overall narrative of the relations between the various disciplines (e.g.,

chemistry, geology, anthropology, public policy, economics) that offer insight into our problems. Such narratives can provide us with something that is sorely lacking today: a sense of the whole.

Field philosophy, then, moves in a different direction than either traditional applied philosophy or the new experimental philosophy. Whereas these approaches are top-down in orientation, beginning in theory and hoping to apply a theoretical construct to a problem, field philosophy is bottom-up, beginning with the needs of stakeholders and drawing out philosophical insights after the work is completed.

Being a field philosopher does have its epistemological consequences. For instance, we take seriously the temporal and financial constraints of our users. Working with government or industry means that we must often seek to provide "good-enough" philosophizing — it often lacks some footnotes, but attempts to provide much needed insights in a timely manner.

The willingness to take these constraints seriously has meant that our work is sometimes dismissed by other philosophers. Across the 20th century, philosophy has embraced rigor as an absolute value. Other important values such as timeliness, relevance and cost have been sacrificed to disciplinary notions of expertise. In contrast, we see "rigor" as involving a delicate balance among these often competing values. To put it practically, field philosophers need to learn how to edit themselves: sometimes what is needed is not the 7000-word scholarly article but rather a three-minute brief or a one-page memo.

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Make no mistake: field philosophy does not reject traditional standards of philosophic excellence. Yet in a world crying out for help on a wide range of ethical and philosophical questions, philosophers need to develop additional skills. They need to master the political arts of working on an interdisciplinary team. Graduate students need to be trained not only in the traditional skills of rigorous philosophical analysis but also in the field rigor of writing grants and framing insights for scientists, engineers and decision makers at the project level.

Finally, a field approach to philosophy may also help with the challenge facing the entire academic community today. Underlying the growing popular distrust of all societal institutions lies a social demand for greater accountability for all those who work in the industry of knowledge production. This is most obvious among scientists who face increasing demands for scientific research to be socially relevant. But with budgets tightening, similar demands will soon be made on philosophy and on all the humanities — to justify our existence in terms of its positive and direct impacts on society. Field philosophy, then, serves as an example of how academics can better serve the community — which after all is said and done, pays the bills.

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