Title—Cognitive science can help burn an armchair, but can it help separate wheat from chaff? On the ‘experimental philosophy’ challenge to traditional philosophical methodology.

Abstract: An important methodology in philosophy, in recent decades but also going back to Socrates, has been the armchair method of cases: we consult our armchair judgments about what hypothetical cases are or are not instances of philosophically interesting categories. If you want to know about the nature of knowledge, consider what pre-theoretically seem to count as excellent cases of knowledge, and excellent cases of non-knowledge, and try to systematize. Likewise for, say, moral goodness, or human agency, and so on. This methodology has come under fire in recent years from ‘experimental philosophers’, deploying both existing results and empirical research tools from the social sciences to argue that armchair judgments about these cases may be susceptible to all sorts of noise: order effects, framing effects, demographic variation, and so on. More recent results indicate that philosophical training and experience does little to dampen the influence of such noise. I will discuss this body of work, and then ask the audience for help with what seems to me one of the most pressing questions: if we cannot trust the armchair to help us determine the nature of philosophical categories, can we find ways for scientific tools and methods to help us do better?