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## Lessons From the Park

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<P CLASS="bylineBy ROBIN WILSON

Chatting with people in a public park about a hypothetical profit-hungry executive is not the way philosophers usually gain their insights.

But it is how Joshua **Knobe**, a newly minted Ph.D. from Princeton University, has rocked the philosophical establishment and earned a place at the leading edge of the discipline in a new field called "experimental philosophy."

The field uses the empirical tools of psychology to address philosophical questions, designing experiments to test how ordinary people think. It is in stark contrast to how philosophers have typically operated -- sitting in a proverbial armchair while pondering human thought.

Not only is Mr. **Knobe** (one syllable, with a silent K) a pioneer in the experimental method, but his work has also reached conclusions that challenge philosophers' long-held views on human intuition and morality.

"He went out and designed these very clever experiments and started getting these results that put an entire part of the philosophical landscape on its ear," says Stephen Stich, a professor of philosophy and cognitive science at Rutgers University at New Brunswick. "It is hard from the outside to appreciate how startling his findings were." By Mr. Stich's estimates, they are the kind of discovery a scholar considers himself lucky to come across once every 10 years.

And Mr. **Knobe**, 31, has barely started his first tenure-track job. He will begin teaching philosophy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill this fall.

Mr. **Knobe** has already published 18 papers in edited books and peer-reviewed journals. Even more impressive, a forthcoming issue of the Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology will be entirely devoted to scholars' responses to his experiments involving human intuition and morality.

The work earned Mr. **Knobe** eight on-campus job interviews this spring, and five offers. He turned down jobs at Georgia State University, the State University of New York at Buffalo, and the Universities of Arizona and Massachusetts at Amherst.

Brian Leiter, who writes the Philosophical Gourmet Report, a popular online ranking of U.S. philosophy programs, calls Mr. **Knobe** "a phenom." The two met a few years ago when Mr. **Knobe** was deciding where to enroll in graduate school, and they are now working together on an essay about Nietzsche's moral psychology.

Says Mr. Leiter: "He sees how results in psychology bear on philosophical questions and he's found ways to test

claims about our intuitions, holding philosophers' feet to the empirical fire."

#### Socratic Inspiration

Mr. **Knobe** remembers being introduced to philosophy by a graduate student who worked with the after-school program he attended while growing up as an only child in Lexington, Mass.

"She would take me aside and say, 'There is this man Socrates and he would go up to people in the streets and try to engage them and talk about the meaning of life,'" recalls Mr. **Knobe**, who acknowledges that he was intrigued but barely understood any of what the graduate student said.

In high school, he was most interested in moral psychology. "What is the psychological reason we have these views and not others?" Mr. **Knobe** says he wanted to know. "What is it about us that makes us think, This is right?"

When Stanford University accepted Mr. **Knobe** as an undergraduate, he set off across the country on his bike. While the physical challenge was a bonus, says Mr. **Knobe**, he took the six-week trip primarily because it gave him uninterrupted time to think.

At Stanford, Mr. **Knobe** created his own major in ethics so he could study questions of morality from philosophical, religious, historical, psychological, and other perspectives. He even learned German so he could read the original work of Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.

And he became a research assistant to a Stanford graduate student doing experiments in social psychology. The work trained Mr. **Knobe** to perform the kind of philosophical experiments he began conducting during his second year in Princeton's doctoral program.

"I decided to put stuff to the test by going out and talking to people about it," he says.

He approached people in New York City's Washington Square Park, asking them to read two short paragraphs about a profit-hungry corporate leader who wants to pursue a certain business strategy. In the first example, the businessman is told that a side effect of the strategy is that it will harm the environment. But the businessman says he doesn't care, and sure enough, when he pursues the strategy, the environment is harmed.

In the second example, the businessman is told that a side effect of his strategy is that the environment will be helped. He says he doesn't care, and sure enough, when he pursues the strategy the environment is helped.

After each scenario, Mr. **Knobe** asked people: Did the corporate leader intentionally harm the environment? Did he intentionally help it?

Philosophers have reasoned that questions of whether someone did something intentionally are entirely about the actor's state of mind. When asked these hypothetical questions, conventional wisdom says most people would agree the corporate leader did not intentionally help or harm the environment.

But Mr. **Knobe** found that people's views of intentions depend on the outcome. People in the park said that the businessman did not intentionally help the environment, but that he did intentionally harm it.

#### 'Groundbreaking' Work

"Joshua went out and did these experiments, showing that at least one common-sense psychological concept -- doing something intentionally -- isn't really a descriptive concept, it's a moral concept," says Mr. Stich. "Part of people's judgments about whether you act intentionally is what they take to be the moral status of what you've done."

Since Mr. **Knobe** started his experiments, a few years ago, some psychologists and philosophers have written

articles suggesting that his findings may be false. In response, Mr. **Knobe** has altered the experiments accordingly, but has still reached the same conclusions.

Although the work and the widespread attention it has received has set Mr. **Knobe** apart from most other new Ph.D.'s, he doesn't act as if he is particularly special.

"The way lots of people were trained in philosophy is gladiatorial," says Shaun B. Nichols, a professor of philosophy at the University of Utah who has worked with Mr. **Knobe**. "You are supposed to show how smart you are by meeting all comers. Joshua doesn't have that."

Lately, Mr. **Knobe** has turned his attention to values and the way we form them. He has devised a hypothetical scenario about a young woman and premarital sex. But he won't be doing his experiments from an office or an armchair. Before he starts teaching this fall in Chapel Hill, Mr. **Knobe** has gone back to talk to people in the park.

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