



Institute of Art and Ideas

Philosophy needs a Renaissance

Transcending disciplines to shape the future



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CEO of Lex Academic who recently submitted her doctoral thesis on transdisciplinary applications of Kant's moral psychology at the University of Cambridge.

Philosophy, like most academic disciplines, has become increasingly specialised. While this might have proved fruitful in the sciences, it has been holding progress in philosophy back. If philosophers are going to have a role to play in tackling some of the biggest questions of the future, they need to become Renaissance thinkers, transcending their discipline into neuroscience, technology, and beyond, argues Louise R. Chapman.

It is arguably part of the very fabric of philosophy that its precise relation to other human and natural sciences will always be contested. Indeed, we may go as far as to say that philosophy is an essentially contested concept, in the sense outlined by the twentieth-century Scottish theorist W.B. Gallie, according to whom the proper use of the very concept of philosophy inevitably involves endless disputes about its use on the part of the users. But if, as Gallie's American contemporary, Wilfrid Sellars, famously stated, 'the aim of philosophy, abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term', then philosophy and the natural sciences must at the very least be united in their desire to make sense of the world. Accordingly, progress in either domain must inevitably be of interest to the other.

While there is nothing wrong with the above way of describing things, which treats all the relevant disciplines as distinct entities, we must not let this fact prevent us from producing research that transcends disciplinary boundaries. Such transdisciplinarity goes beyond cross- or inter-disciplinarity

by emphasizing that the best approach to a certain topic (for example, the study of human nature) is often not one that merely unites insights from different disciplines but a method and approach that truly transcends them, to the point that it is impossible to separate the philosophical strands of a study from, say, its neuro-technical ones.

Given the speed with which neuroscience and technology have advanced in recent years, philosophers who wish to tackle intractable philosophical problems in a way that would actually have an impact on public discourse and policies should go beyond just philosophy and neuroscience.

Perhaps the greatest champion of transdisciplinarity in our time is the philosopher, neuroscientist, geostrategist, and futurologist Nayef Al-Rodhan. According to Al-Rodhan, the future of philosophy *must* be transdisciplinary. The ‘must’ in question is a normative one. In his most recent paper, [‘Transdisciplinarity, Neuro-techno-philosophy, and the Future of Philosophy’](#) (*Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 54, 2023), Al-Rodhan argues that the historical interplay between philosophy and science has paved the way for a neurophilosophy that harnesses neuroscientific insights to address questions that have traditionally been seen as belonging to the province of philosophy alone.

Given the speed with which neuroscience and technology have advanced in recent years, philosophers who wish to tackle intractable philosophical problems in a way that would actually have an impact on public discourse and policies should go beyond just philosophy and neuroscience; they should engage in a novel type of enquiry that Al-Rodhan terms ‘neuro-techno-philosophy’. We can define neuro-technic-philosophy as the transdisciplinary endeavor of philosophers, neuroscientists, and tech workers, to anticipate the societal implications of impending theoretical and scientific transformations.

The difference between this type of transdisciplinary philosophy and plain old neurophilosophy is that, while the latter focuses on making discoveries about the human mind and nature *as they are*, the former is primarily engaged in anticipating what they *will become*. We might then say that the future of philosophy itself involves looking into the future. To misquote Karl Marx, ‘philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways...the point, however, is to *predict* it.’ Such futurology demands a far closer collaboration between philosophers and scientists, one that requires each party to have a considerable degree of competence in the other's field. Put another way, neuro-techno-philosophy practitioners who wish to anticipate the societal implications of the impending transformations of subjects and theorizers cannot be *pure* philosophers or neuroscientists, for philosophy without neuroscience is empty, and neuroscience without philosophy is blind.

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The future is, of course, notoriously unpredictable and betting on it is a mug’s game. But we do not need to a crystal ball to agree that neuro-techno-philosophy will be indispensable to understanding and engaging with these game-changing innovations and thus play a pivotal role in the future of philosophy. While human enhancement is likely to irreversibly change what it means to be human, disruptive technologies might lead to the emergence of artificially intelligent agents and human-machine hybrids.

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the root of this is the very structure of degree programs, from teaching modules to student recruitment and faculty job descriptions. While it is easy enough for students to combine some philosophy modules with some neuroscientific ones, there are very few places in which one can get a truly transdisciplinary education. Part of the problem here lies in the old-fashioned notion that expertise at the highest level must not only be discipline-bound but sub-discipline-bound. I have known leading scholars in practical ethics who claim utter ignorance in metaethics, and vice versa.

The move to transdisciplinarity requires changes at both the individual and the institutional level. While the danger of becoming a jack of *all* trades is a perfectly real one, the exaggerated fear of this predicament has led to forms of overspecialisation that have risked putting an end to the existence of the kind of transdisciplinarity, which marked the golden age of ancient Greek philosophy, its subsequent Renaissance in Rome, and the work of early modern polymaths such as Descartes, Hildegard, and Hume. If we are to make philosophy great again, then we must embrace neuro-techno-philosophy, as a pioneering and consequential form of transdisciplinarity, both intellectually and in the public sphere.

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