

## Comment: Interdiscipline

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### Abstract

*The Meaning of Disgust* (McGinn, 2011) is a vivid example of how interdisciplinary research can go horribly wrong. Strohminger's (2014) criticisms serve as a good starting point to discuss some of the issues that need to be addressed by the growing number of researchers who choose to conduct interdisciplinary research in philosophy and psychology. I argue that McGinn's approach to science in *The Meaning of Disgust* serves as a useful contrast to the ideal, and that it illustrates the most important virtue necessary for being a good interdisciplinarian: intellectual humility.

### Keywords

disgust, interdisciplinary, McGinn

There are two points I wish to make about Strohminger's (2014) critique of *The Meaning of Disgust* (McGinn, 2011) which I think are completely obvious: it is hilarious, and it is right. While reasonable people may disagree about the first point, the second point seems pretty uncontroversial. I do not mean that Strohminger is obviously right about the empirical facts of disgust. Even though I agree with her, the science has by no means been fully worked out. What I mean is that it is obviously right to focus the critique on the most problematic aspect of McGinn's book: the glaring lack of empirical evidence in a book that purports to tackle an empirical question. In an era where a 2-second online search (especially on a topic as popular as disgust) can provide any mildly curious person with access to hundreds of full-text, peer-reviewed scientific articles, it seems unlikely that McGinn's omission of this body of research could have been unintentional. What goal would it serve to purposely ignore so much relevant research?

A hint can be found in McGinn's recent piece in the *New York Times* ("Philosophy by Another Name"; McGinn, 2012). Here McGinn laments that philosophy has suffered in the public eye, and is far less popular with the media than the scientific disciplines. But the strategy he suggests for improving this state of affairs is not what one might expect, such as pointing out various good aspects of philosophy (e.g., the benefits of

rigorous thinking that comes with philosophical training, or the virtue of living a more reflective life). Rather, his proposed solution is to convince others that philosophy actually *is* a science, and that it has been so all along. If successful, the result would be that "we [philosophers] can expect to be treated like scientists" (2012).

How does McGinn justify counting philosophy among the scientific disciplines? Aside from a defense that philosophy meets the dictionary definition of science, he concocts a list of features that seem common to most scientific disciplines, and argues that philosophy clearly fits the bill as it also contains most of these features. The features he points to are: "That the subject is systematic, rigorous, replete with technical vocabulary, often in conflict with common sense, capable of refutation, produces hypotheses, uses symbolic notation, is about the natural world, is institutionalized, peer-reviewed, tenure-granting, etc." (2012).

The most glaring omission from this list is what many would consider to be the single most important feature of a science—that of empirical observation. McGinn does not find this too problematic, and assures us that philosophy is a science "even if not one that makes empirical observations or uses much mathematics" (2012). No need for those pesky data. Real science is speaking in jargon, working for tenure, and using funny symbols when you write (there is no mention of lab coats, but I am sure that they are included in the "etc.>"). Compare McGinn's characterization of science to the definition offered by the physicist Richard Feynman (from his series of Cornell University Messenger Lectures delivered in 1962; <http://research.microsoft.com/apps/tools/tuva/#>). Science, for Feynman, requires you to:

Compare [your hypothesis] directly with observation to see if it works. If it disagrees with experiment, *it's wrong*. In that simple statement is the key to science. It doesn't make a difference how beautiful your guess is, it doesn't make a difference how smart you are if you made the guess, or what his name is ... *If it disagrees with experiment, it's wrong*. That's all there is to it.

The conspicuous absence of data in *The Meaning of Disgust* suggests to me that McGinn may have viewed this book

project as the perfect opportunity to test his novel, data-free method of doing science; to demonstrate that even when armed only with a sharp mind and a comfortable armchair, philosophers are capable of making bona fide scientific contributions. But while McGinn is a smart author who makes some beautiful guesses, as Strohminger (2014) points out, the data often get in his way.

Why bother with what McGinn thinks about science in the first place? There are better ways for researchers to spend their time than to complain about a philosopher for showing insensitivity to empirical data, no matter how annoying it might be. But the problem is not limited to *The Meaning of Disgust*, or to McGinn. Nor is it limited to philosophers who write about science. There are plenty of examples of psychologists who are guilty of a similar infraction: addressing a traditional philosophical question with empirical methods that are ill-suited to the task, ignoring dozens, if not hundreds of papers in the philosophical literature on the topic, and making broad, erroneous claims about the contribution of empirical data to the philosophical question at hand.

The value in the exchange between Strohminger (2014) and McGinn (2011), I believe, is that it provides a good opportunity to discuss the nature of the relationship between philosophy and psychology, and to highlight some of the deep problems with engaging in interdisciplinary work. More than ever, psychologists have become actively interested and engaged in philosophical topics (such as free will, consciousness, identity, and moral responsibility). Likewise, philosophers have started to borrow the tools and methods of the behavioral sciences to investigate philosophical intuitions, and a growing number of them regularly design studies and collect experimental data. This cross-pollination of ideas can be a very good thing, and it has yielded a great deal of interesting work.

But in practice, things can get messy and embarrassing. Philosophers interested in empirical questions about the mind, but who have not themselves been trained in experimental methods or statistical analyses, are more likely to ignore or

misinterpret data, to selectively report results that support their argument, and when collecting data themselves to make basic errors in experimental design, implementation, and analysis. The philosophical community may not notice this sort of sloppiness nearly as quickly as they would notice errors in conceptual analysis. Likewise, psychologists who choose to investigate philosophical topics using empirical methods seem more likely to make sloppy, basic conceptual errors, such as failing to identify relevant distinctions among related concepts. Many psychologists do not even understand that a large chunk of questions in philosophy are not empirical ones to begin with, and that even the cleverest of methodologies or unlimited statistical power cannot address them properly.

The immediate upshot of an increase in interdisciplinarity is that there seem to be more cases of bad psychology being done by philosophers and bad philosophy being done by psychologists. The only solution, I think, is to adopt intellectual humility and actively encourage it in our colleagues and students. The people whom I believe are doing the best work at the intersection of philosophy and psychology are those who have taken steps that required them to swallow their pride and admit to their ignorance about matters beyond their own field, such as getting formal outside training, actively seeking feedback and criticism from colleagues in the other discipline, and forming collaborations with researchers who know more than they do about the topic. Adopting these sorts of strategies would, I believe, put pressure on scholars to be a bit more responsible in their attempts at interdisciplinary work.

## References

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