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Discipline beyond disciplines

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I'm a firm believer in approaching one's work with discipline, but I have never cared for particular disciplines. My academic history is proof of that: after graduating in communication studies, I earned a PhD in cognitive science — both areas are interdisciplinary. I majored in philosophy and psychology, with some computer science, economics and primatology added to the mix. Now I study economic decisions by means of behavioural experiments on human and non-human primates, using computer-based simulations to probe how these behaviours evolved, and philosophical analysis to understand their implications for self-control.

Given these credentials, it might seem that I have never found my true calling in life. Then again, perhaps I am a prototype for a new generation of researchers. 'Interdisciplinarity' is praised in scientific institutions, is a desideratum for grant applications, and thrives in promising sub-fields from neuroeconomics to biomimetic materials. After years of smuggling my scientific results across many disciplines, this is a welcome new trend — or so it would seem.

In spite of the hype, crossing disciplinary boundaries is risky. True interdisciplinary work requires expertise in several fields, which is difficult to achieve and accrue. So it is easy to be dismissed as a jack of all trades and master of none, especially as a postdoc. Plus, positions are mostly assigned within disciplines: interdisciplinary work may look good on a CV, but it might not actually help the scientist to get a job.

So, why flirt with the dangers of interdisciplinarity, and forgo being a well respected specialist in a single field? There is one major reason: nature is not carved at the joints of disciplines, to paraphrase David Hume. True, to master disciplines requires practice, and dilettantism is a sin. But to understand natural phenomena, we have to regard disciplines simply as useful tools for framing investigations. They should be abandoned, combined or modified whenever needed. This, I believe, is how you should discipline yourself, before venturing beyond disciplinary boundaries.

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