



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Failures of Interdisciplinarity: First-Personal Reflections on Method, Truth, and Fascination

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ABSTRACT

The Cura Psychologia project tasked our faculty trio—Adam (psychology), Bud (theology / religious studies) and Kate (philosophy)—with producing something academic and interdisciplinary. We were given a why: to ‘humanize’ the discipline of psychology by reconnecting it with its roots in the humanities. But we soon found ourselves crashing into the question of how. How are we supposed to do that? While some of the other faculty trios from Jesuit universities may have proceeded to frame and grapple with some content-based version of the how-question—Which topic should we work on? How should we utilize our respective skills and expertise?—our group found itself with a more basic version of the question. It was both a first-stage or ground-level question and a first-personal or lived question: How do we make this work? The three of us, in particular, seemed to lack something necessary for the inter- of ‘interdisciplinary’—or, to each possess something that thwarted it. This is what crashed our interdisciplinary project from the start and sent us off on foot into reflections on what it is to work across and in between disciplinary boundaries and what it is to fail to do so. In this essay, we reflect first-personally on that failure, attributing it to methodological differences, and we identify—and demonstrate—what we succeeded in seeing in and through it, namely, the importance of telling the truth and of being fascinated.

Keywords:

interdisciplinarity; multidisciplinary; method; cura psychologia; fascination

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Introduction

The Cura Psychologia project tasked our faculty trio—Adam (psychology), Bud (theology / religious studies) and Kate (philosophy)—with producing something academic and interdisciplinary. We were given a why: to “humanize” the discipline of psychology by reconnecting it with its roots in the humanities. But we soon found ourselves crashing into the question of how. How are we supposed to do that? While some of the other faculty trios from Jesuit universities may have proceeded to frame and grapple with some content-based version of the how-question—*Which topic should we work on? How should we utilize our respective skills and expertise?*—we found ourselves with a more basic version of the question. It was both a first-stage or ground-level question and a first-personal or lived question: How do we specifically—the three of us—make this work? What might it look like for us to be interdisciplinary? What does such interdisciplinarity demand of us, and is it even possible for the three of us to belong to the same project?

There is much to be said in general about what interdisciplinary work asks of us. Coming to belong to an interdisciplinary project requires a range of moral and epistemic virtues on the parts of the participants—or, at least, a good faith effort at them. It takes courage, wisdom, and justice, and maybe even some form of temperance. It involves patience and fortitude, kindness and persistence; humility, generosity, curiosity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and more. We did not lack these—or, at least, not egregiously so. We are all decent enough folk. And it was not that we do not get along. We do. Something else was going wrong: something peculiar to us and our disciplinary situations.

The three of us seemed to lack something necessary for the “inter-” of “interdisciplinary”—or, to each possess something that thwarted it. This is what crashed our interdisciplinary project from the start and sent us off on foot into reflections on what it is to work across and in between disciplinary boundaries and what it is to fail to do so. In what follows, we reflect first-personally on that failure, attributing it to methodological differences, and we identify—and demonstrate—what we succeeded in seeing in and through it, namely, the importance of telling the truth and of being fascinated.

Different Kinds of Whys

Psychology, philosophy, and theology might have common historical roots but as they have developed they have come to utilize different methodologies. Adam frames these differences in terms of different kinds of explanation. Adam directs the Lab for Relational Cognition at Georgetown

University and is interested in understanding the role of neural processes in human creative intelligence.



Empirical science, including the psychological sciences (e.g., cognitive science and cognitive neuroscience) aims at explanation in the form of mechanism. This is a kind of why that's really more of a how. We can describe how the Earth revolves around the sun or how an apple falls from a tree and explain this using gravity as a mechanism. And we can then go on to describe with a great deal of precision how gravity works and the properties of gravitational forces. We can make truly fascinating discoveries like the relatively recent observation of gravitational waves. So we can say that gravity causes things to fall or causes less massive bodies to orbit more massive bodies. This is a kind of why, and a darn interesting one in my admittedly biased opinion. But we don't venture to offer explanations in the form of reasons. Science doesn't address why a massive body *should* attract other bodies; in other words, why is gravity a thing in the first place? Maybe mass might not attract other bodies. That's an imaginable universe. But it does. And that's the kind of why that isn't really askable in any meaningful way in empirical science.

I don't study gravity. I study cognition and brains, and some of my work is related to the cognition of religious belief. But the kinds of answers I'm looking for—the kinds of why that I'm addressing—are different in the same way from the kinds of why that my colleagues in theology and philosophy think are interesting or meaningful. This raises the question: Do mechanisms, as opposed to reasons, mark a theoretical boundary between our disciplines? Asking questions like this is usually a rhetorical thing to do, but it's an honest question. I genuinely don't know.

Interdisciplinarity and Multidisciplinarity

The type of explanation that Kate's work engages in is very different from Adam's neurological explanations. Kate works in existential phenomenology, with a focus on the work of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. She suggests that telling the truth about our methodological divergences points us away from *interdisciplinarity* and towards *multidisciplinarity*.



Adam characterizes his work as trafficking in explanations that appeal to mechanisms. I would add: mechanisms that can be identified third-personally through empirical investigations of the sort that happen in a laboratory. This is not the sort of thing that I do. I work not in a lab but in

and through texts, and I work not with third-personal explanations that stand outside of lives and peer into their workings but with first-personal explanations that stand in the midst of life and ask after mechanisms that have to do with meanings and matterings. Are these explanations that give reasons? Sure, if what we mean by “reasons” is: explanations that are responsive to the questions and perplexities that arise in the course of living out a human life and that engage with how things are meaningful for and matter to us from within a first-personal perspective on that life. These are not the sorts of questions and perplexities that will fit into Adam’s scanner, and those are not the sorts of answers that come out of that scanner.

But I am not going to develop a claim about the methodologies of our respective disciplines. I will leave that to intellectual historians and philosophers of method. Instead, I want to develop a metaphor. I will use it to say something about different ways of finding ourselves in the midst of disciplinary differences.

Adam’s type of mechanistic explanation is great for mechanics: people who want to get under the hood of human life and see how all the bits make the machine go. But not everyone is a mechanic, and there are other ways of engaging with the machine. I don’t want to push the metaphor too far (and certainly not into a form of dualism), but it seems that I am talking about a car and that that car is human life. We are each in the driver’s seat of some human life—and thank goodness that there are mechanics who understand what is going on underneath the hood and who can tell us what to do if, as it were, the alternator fails or the engine misfires. This is not to say, of course, that the value of understanding mechanisms lies in what that understanding allows us to do. Understanding how things work is valuable in itself, especially when it allows us to see the beauty of the order and structure in things. (Aristotle thought that this is the highest, the most divine activity of which we are capable.) Yet many of our attempts to understand human life—to understand, on this metaphor, the car—are driven by difficulties and perplexities that we, as “operators” of the vehicle, encounter. And here is the point: there is a range of professionals to whom we might want and need to turn in order to address our problems and resolve our questions.

We might need a mechanic. But we might instead need someone to detail the interior of the car, giving the insides a bit of a tidy up. We might need a panelbeater—in the US, an auto-body technician—if the road of life has left us with a few too many dings and scrapes. Or we might need a driving instructor: someone who can teach us the basics of handling our lives, when to brake and when to accelerate, which sorts of turns to avoid, and maybe even a little defensive driving. Or we might from time to time

need a navigator, who can help us to get from A to B, from here to there, without too many detours and over the smoothest roads. Maybe we need someone to install the entertainment system. Or someone to curate a road trip playlist.

The metaphor keeps giving. I am not going to push it too far. My point is that there are many different professionals in the business of making sense of human life. Many (but not all) of their professions are academic disciplines or fields within academic disciplines. And we need all of them. The multiplicity is a feature, not a bug. Human life is big and complex and containing of multitudes. So, in the course of living out our lives, we run into a range of different sorts of problems and perplexities and we need a range of different tools in order to address those, including a range of different kinds of explanations.

Within the multiplicity of life-servicing disciplines, there will be proximities and distances. To return to the metaphor: we can imagine that the mechanic and the panelbeater might have things to say to each other about the chassis, and that the driving instructor and the detailer might share a word about all those candy wrappers on the floor. So too, there are parts of philosophy—such as philosophy of mind and cognitive science—that are adjacent to the more scientific parts of psychology. And there are parts of psychology, such as existential psychotherapy, that are proximate to what I do.

Where we have such proximity, and even overlap, we find the basis for building bridges of interdisciplinary dialogue and exchange. The “inter-” of “interdisciplinarity” presupposes such commonality or contiguity. But where there is distance and disparity, interdisciplinarity becomes impossible. Where bridges cannot be built, we are left with scattered multiplicity: a *multidisciplinarity*. What are we to do with *this*? What do the driving instructor and the mechanic have to collaborate on?

This is the *how* question that our group confronted—the question that we crashed into and which we only later came to identify. I will not try to establish that the work that we each do is not sufficiently proximate for *interdisciplinarity* to be possible. This is the conclusion that we reached and I am hoping that our word is sufficient. For establishing our multidisciplinaryity is a lot less interesting than thinking about what happened next. We confronted a practical problem: what do we do now? What can we *do* with our multidisciplinaryity? Can we do *anything* with it?

We could have denied it. We could have faked interdisciplinarity—there were plenty of pressures to do so. But, early on, we decided to do something else. We decided to tell the truth. I want to claim that this was the right call—not only practically, since it avoided the burdens of pretense,

but also as a matter of epistemic or (I would say) phenomenological virtue. It is a virtue to tell the truth, where “telling the truth” means seeing the situation clearly and acting in light of that clear-sighted view. We tell the truth about the relationship between our disciplines, and our specific sub-fields within them, when we acknowledge a lack of bridge-ready banks and acknowledge multifariousness, heterogeneity, and incommensurability. We tell the truth when we refrain from flattening our different approaches into artificial compatibility and when we refuse to subordinate our differences to the authority of one or the other of the disciplines over the others. We tell the truth when we recognize that we share some commitment to some form of understanding something like “the” human condition, but that we make good on that commitment differently—when we see and accept that all of our differences and divergences and points of friction reflect the weirdnesses and wildnesses and messinesses of being human, and that we wouldn’t have it any other way.

If all that is true, then telling the truth required us to fail in our interdisciplinary project. But in that failure, we learned a lot. We learned about our selves—especially our disciplinary selves—and we learned about another virtue, which I will let Bud introduce (although he will not want to use the *v*-word for it). But first: our failure also led us into a dialogue with someone who engages with the disparate multidisciplinary that I have identified in a wholly different way.

Finding a Home in Multidisciplinarity

Hemal P. Trivedi is a fifth-year doctoral student in theology and religious studies at Georgetown University, with undergraduate degrees in biology and psychology and two master’s degrees in religious studies.



On the surface, it might appear that I made a transition from the sciences to the humanities. But this fifteen-year journey is a persistent and determined effort to fuse my lifelong interests in the psychological sciences and religious studies. Motivated by questions about the self and human suffering, I am determined to have discussions about the decreased activity in the brain’s default mode network and the removal of the illusion of individuality (*avidyā*) leading to the realization of oneness between the individual self (*ātman*) and the all-pervasive cosmic self (*brahman*)—and to have all of these discussions in one room. How fascinated would students be if they were not limited to mechanisms that seemingly “reduce” and theological truths that seemingly “speculate”? Imagine if, in a single discussion, we could move from 300 BCE ascetic wanderers (*śramaṇas*) to

twenty-first-century scientists in labs, discussing topics of the self, meditation, narrative formation, cognitive processes (attention, perception, memory, etc.), emotions, and ultimately, human suffering. While pedagogically I could more easily discuss a plethora of topics in the classroom, I found that in the past, if I was to be taken seriously as a research scholar, I was expected to adhere to a single method—such as history, anthropology, or linguistics. However, soon enough it became clear that understanding the object of research can be a holistic endeavor, one that draws from multiple disciplines and calls for a collaborative effort.

The challenge was with disciplinary boundaries. How was I to do all this while lodged in a specific discipline? Would theologians and religious studies scholars neglect the fact that I have a science background and could explain the *how* behind religious phenomena? Would psychologists neglect that I could contextualize historical phenomena by translating key ancient, psychological texts like the Upaniṣads and Yogasūtra from Vedic and Classical Sanskrit, respectively? Academically speaking, I always wanted to find a home in a department, but as I continued to search within myself, I found that my home was truly in *interdisciplinarity*, or *multidisciplinarity*—that is, a place from which I could dialogue between the psychological sciences and religious studies. As I continued my studies, I found that it was not enough to simply place concepts such as the cognitive processes of attention and classical and operant conditioning side by side with concepts such as the practical processes of mental support (*ālambana*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and meditative absorption (*samādhi*) in Sāṅkhya-Yoga philosophy. I had to justify a method—one that allows for multidisciplinary work, collaboration that encourages the neuroscientist, philosopher, religious studies scholar, and hopefully others, to work together without talking past each other. Most importantly, if I am working as a “lone wolf” researcher, I can utilize a reliable method, one that encourages me to approach a complex question from the theories and methods of multiple disciplines.

In recent years and during the writing of my dissertation, with the guidance of my academic advisor Ariel Glucklich, I have been working on *nesting* or the *nesting method*, which I believe allows for this multidisciplinary. Nesting involves a series of epistemological reductions, starting from the physical and moving to the mental, such that each previous level is *nested* within the following more multi-faceted and mental level. The levels from the bottom-up are: neuroscientific, cognitive psychological, phenomenal, and theological. As we move from the physical to the mental, we have to address the issue of *emergence*, how seemingly disparate parts produce a whole that arguably could not be anticipated, such as neural substrates and processes producing thought, followed by consciousness

or awareness. On the other side, moving from the mental to the physical invokes the issue of *reduction*: a multi-faceted phenomenon with certain characteristics comes to appear in a simplified or clarified fashion such that the systems and mechanisms at work become salient, such as when moving from consciousness back to cognitive processes, and to neural substrates and processes. While we are applying epistemological reductions to the phenomenon under observation and connecting the nests ontologically, we are preserving the ontological status of the phenomenon. A systems thinking approach should allow us to connect the theories and methods of each level while subsuming (nesting) previous levels as sub-systems into a large system at the next level, hopefully demonstrating that the different levels of explanation, while disparate, are yet *connected*.

For instance, we can choose the South Indian mystic Sadhguru (1958–), who, in his testimony on Chamundi Hill (in Mysore, Karnataka, India), describes a life-changing experience that resembles the phenomenon of *ego dissolution*.¹ From our own disciplines—neuroscience, cognitive psychology, phenomenology, and theology—we can apply our respective theories and methods to explain the phenomena that he describes. Our neuroscientist can use neuroimaging (fMRI, EEG, PET, etc.) results to describe the deactivation of the default mode network, which involves regions of the brain associated with the maintenance and dissolution of the narrative and embodied self, respectively. Our cognitive psychologist working within the “mental world” and its cognitive processes (such as perception, attention, and memory) can draw from Patrick McNamara’s (1956–) decentering theory, which identifies key processes involved in the construction of a new, adaptive, and often, religious self.² Our phenomenologist, prioritizing first-person, subjective experience, may refer to Husserl’s (1858–1938) bracketing (*epoché*), which suspends any explanatory analyses of the experiencer’s awareness of emotions, sensations, thoughts, and the like.³ Finally, our theologian can construct Sadhguru’s theology from his experiential accounts and works. In conjunction, our religious studies scholar, using historical and linguistic tools, can contextualize Sadhguru’s experiences by examining his life and tracing the genealogy of religious language from the philosophical teachings on self (*ātman*), cosmic self (*brahman*), oneness

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- 1 Sadhguru, “Sadhguru’s Enlightenment—In His Own Words,” posted July 23, 2017, YouTube, 5:13, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p5nzZEOm2YE>.
 - 2 Patrick McNamara, *The Cognitive Neuroscience of Religious Experience: Decentering and the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 2022); *The Neuroscience of Religious Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).
 - 3 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (Martino Fine Books, 2017).

with Śiva, and so forth, from, among others, the Upaniṣads, the Advaita Vedānta, and the Kāśmīrī Śaiva traditions.

Next, using systems thinking, we can conceive of the self as a complex system that can be approached from multiple perspectives. For instance, neuroscience may treat the self in terms of the central nervous system—the brain and spinal cord, including their substrates and mechanisms. Cognitive psychology may treat the self as consisting of a series of cognitive processes—such as attention, memory, and perception—in interaction with one another. Phenomenology may identify the system of the self based on how the experiencer has delineated it in first-person experience of its parts—awareness of emotions, sensations, and thoughts. Finally, theology may treat the self both based on how the experiencer consolidates their view of it in relation to the cosmos, and based on how one or more traditions treat it. Nevertheless, the system of the self, depending on the discipline, will be composed of parts, which, through the lens of a certain discipline such as neuroscience, can include sub-systems such as the default mode network and its own sub-systems: neurochemistry, neurotransmission, and so on.

Because it is still in development, nesting as a methodology comes with philosophical issues that I have yet to think through. I do not presume that multidisciplinary must work; however, from the perspective of a graduate student with many interests that often intersect, multidisciplinary is both a privilege and a dream.

Disciplinary Belonging

Hemal's approach to multidisciplinary posed a challenge for us. Why don't we undertake a project of that sort? We thought about it. (And we suspected that some of our more successful colleagues in the Cura Psychologia project may have proceeded along just these sorts of lines.) We even thought about asking Hemal to undertake such a project under our guidance or together with us. But we were once again thwarted—thwarted by the same old disciplinary differences, in a new way.

We found that we had each been shaped by different disciplinary norms surrounding authorship, collaboration, and mentorship. To some of us, co-authoring comes naturally; to others, it is foreign. We have different senses of ownership over our writing and different degrees of comfort in putting our names to work that is written by someone (or "someones") else or written collaboratively. In our different disciplines, work done by graduate students bears different sorts of relationships to work done by faculty members, and we have different norms and expectations regarding the degrees and forms of oversight, independence, and autonomy in mentoring relationships. (All this even before the fact that we have different views

about—different commitments to, and different indifferences to—the various ways in which our disciplines might be said to be related or relatable.)

We found, in short, that we are creatures of our own disciplines. We have been *created* by them, molded as if out of clay. We have been *disciplined* by them. *Domesticated*. As products of our disciplinary homes, we belong deeply—and in ways that may have surprised us—to our own disciplines, and as such we have had trouble finding a way to belong across or between them.

Surely not all academics are such disciplinary creatures. Disciplinary training does not always take. Those in whom it does not take are presumably better suited to multidisciplinary than we are (although—are they likely to still be in the academy?). Since disciplinary belonging takes root during graduate training, one might surmise that the best place to foster multidisciplinary projects is in graduate education—just as the best time to learn a second and third language is while learning one’s first.

If this is correct, then our task is to support the next generation in forming itself so as to (if desired) belong to multidisciplinary discourses and to think in multidisciplinary ways. We can each support Hemal’s project from within our own disciplinary homes, and we can foster multidisciplinary in graduate education broadly. In the meantime, we have been challenged to confront our own disciplinary belonging and multidisciplinary failure, and to think about—as Bud will put it—learning to go off-road and unbelong in our disciplines. The key is fascination.

Fascination, Interdisciplinarity, and Carrion

Bud’s first book was on chaos in William James’s style of writing; his second on the “entangled voices” of genre; and this third on “bewildered travel.” Do we see a pattern? He belongs to a department of theology and religious studies and yet doesn’t study any of the world religions. Is it any surprise that he is most fascinated by how we can thrive in being lost, how our disorientations can give us life?



One of my favorite stories from Jorge Luis Borges is “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” which presents a world of metaphysicians.⁴ Does that seem as dreary to you as it does to me? But in Borges’s world, it’s not how true those ideas are that matters, it’s how fascinating they are. That’s heresy among most philosophers, psychologists and theologians—just wanting to be

4 Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New Directions, 1964), 3–18.

fascinated, not convinced—but I have to admit that I love it. I think that Borges' preference for fascination over truth is shared with Jamesian pragmatism which feels that the truth of religion or philosophy or psychology doesn't matter as much as how it engages more broadly with our minds and our lives. Fascinate me, don't preach to me the truth. Puzzle me, affect me, make me notice, change me, don't lecture at me.

So when I gathered with the philosophers, psychologists, and theologians in the Cura Psychologia, I didn't see my purpose as forging together a humanized psychology, an interdisciplinary solution to a problem, returning psychology to the humanistic fold. It was looking at all of us as William James might have, as a motley collection of people living out our lives and, as much as possible, being fascinated by psychology, which is to say fascinated by the self.

That's not all that different from Kate's activity as a philosopher, for she "[works] not with third-personal explanations that stand outside of lives and peer into their workings but with first-personal explanations that stand in the midst of life and ask after mechanisms that have to do with meanings and matterings". I wonder, too, if I can suggest that Kate is *fascinated* by the first-personal, even if she's not limited to it, her own first-personalness as well as others'. And, therefore, Kate wants us to pursue our interdisciplinary project with the goal of a radical multidisciplinary. Rather than building bridges, Kate holds, we promote difference, complexity, and disparateness as we're "making sense of human life . . . first-personally rather than third-personally." Adam, too. Isn't he simply fascinated by those third-person mechanisms? I find myself interested in Hemal's desire to preserve difference within multidisciplinary but much more affected by his "*fifteen-year journey* [in] a persistent and determined effort to fuse my lifelong interests in the psychological sciences and religious studies" (my italics). His language is very abstract and intellectual but his motivation is *suffering*. Here's what I want: tell me more about the suffering, about feeling like a "lone wolf," and about how nesting (of all metaphors!) will help with those.

So I think Kate and I agree. I'm not sure she would prioritize fascination, as I do, but I believe we both see the value of "difference, complexity, and disparateness" as we look at psychology and the self. I'm going to discuss fascination and first-personness a bit more by borrowing from a number of writers who fascinate me, from William James, a person I really like, and from a psychoanalyst I've been reading recently, Gohar Homayounpour, as well as from Nietzsche and Borges. It's a motley crew, and I'm glad of that.

William James had one foot in physiological psychology, as developed by the Germans in the later nineteenth century and one foot in introspec-

tive psychology. As David Goodman points out, psychology generally took the quantitative and often physiological/neurological path but many of us in the *Cura Psychologia* didn't, as James didn't. But, unlike us, the American psychologist was there at the start, seriously considering one path and taking the other. I wonder what we can learn from him. I think it's what he shared with Borges—the preference for fascination over truth.

A really quick tutorial on Jamesian pragmatism: he says in *Pragmatism* that we need to put each word “at work in the stream of [our] experiencing” and see if it “works.”⁵ We need to consider words and sentences and not simply assess them. Words and sentences will work in the stream of our experiencing, James says, if they have some mixture of three characteristics: first, if they have “luminousness,” if we just *like* them, if they glow; second, if they fit with most of what we've already accepted (then they will be “reasonable”); and, finally, if they promise to be helpful in sculpting a better future for us, if they give us life. It's not a very exact test of whether something works for us, but that's fine with James and with me for we really just muddle through with our words and sentences.

What increases the pragmatic muddle is that sometimes one of the tests overwhelms the other two. The three aren't equally weighted. Most commonly it's the second that dominates, and it's very conservative: what works for us is too often only the reasonable and sensible. We're only preserving what's already familiar. As Emerson says, “Everything good is on the highway,”⁶ even though there may be little glow and very little life on that blacktop.

But I can toss out the reasonable and sensible if something is extremely appealing, if it's very “luminous.” I can get off-road. There can be a road-to-Damascus moment, for instance, where we fall off the horse. This is where we find the power of the fascinating. Wendell Berry writes, “The mind that is not baffled is not employed / The impeded stream is the one that sings.”⁷ No one wants to be baffled or impeded; they're just not reasonable or sensible. We spend much of our professional and personal lives minimizing confusion or obstacles. But when we're baffled or impeded, when something goes wrong, Berry claims, that's when neglected parts of our minds sing. Those of us who are teachers have had the experience daily. We confidently present something we know pretty damn well. And while most students are studiously writing down exactly what we said in a most gratifying way, some student asks a baffling question, a question that forces

5 William James, *Pragmatism* (Harvard University Press, 1975), 31–33.

6 Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Experience,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays, Second Series*, vol. 3 (Houghton Mifflin, 1904), 62.

7 Wendell Berry, *Standing by Words* (Counterpoint, 1983), 87.

us off the road. Or introduces something they'd been thinking and we just can't absorb it into our professorial patter. A few months ago, a student said "Professor, when you're old and facing death do you feel like you need to completely revamp your sense of what's true?" I saw students suddenly look up. I swear that there was a soft gasp or two. I so wanted to tell her that her question was frankly disrespectful and irrelevant; I so wanted to stay on the road. But I had to abandon my practiced and polished explanation. I was stopped. Fascination isn't just delight. Road-kill can be fascinating, even when we're the road-kill under consideration.

I find Berry's words luminous, although they demand that I surrender my comfortable sense of "baffled" and "impeded" as situations to be avoided. What's more, Berry's words can be "life-giving" too (James's third pragmatic test), for the fascinating isn't just a bright and shiny object. It's when the reasonable and sensible is impeded that we break into something as fascinating and life-giving as song. Even when we don't sing well. Even when we sing really poorly. And when we're uncomfortable and border-line embarrassed. Especially when we're uncomfortable and embarrassed.

That student's comment fascinated me more than I had been in months, but in one way or another, it happens daily.

Nietzsche says that "[W]isdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little scent of carrion."⁸ What's so good about Nietzsche is what's so good about Berry. We lose the sensible and reasonable and we're fascinated. Wisdom—the wisdom to be fascinated—is when we're raven-like and spy some carrion, something dead that causes us to salivate and create.

So here's what James's pragmatism tells us about the fascinating (with the help of Berry and Nietzsche): we're fascinated when we eye a life-giving piece of carrion that tempts us to ignore the quite sensible advice not to eat road-kill. As a student of psychology, which is to say, of the self, that's what I find myself being quite often.

Let's go back to Kate's claim that the situation we find ourselves in as we look at the humanizing of psychology is one in which we recognize multiple, valuable, irreconcilable approaches to understanding human life and not a common approach. She sees the goal as a radical *multidisciplinarity*. Rather than building bridges, she wants to promote difference, complexity, and disparateness. I think the pursuit of what fascinates us is just that kind of multidisciplinarity. But is it a method at all? Isn't it just a mess? A lot of ravens hopping after a lots of bits of carrion? A lot of impeded streams?

8 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with a Hammer," in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 162.

Compared with agreement, it is a mess. But it's the mess of being a person, even a person who studies and thinks and writes.

James says that what he most treasures in his philosophical reading is his "sense of an essential personal flavor in each [book]." What any work shows "is the revelation of how intensely odd the personal flavor of some fellow creature is."⁹ That's not only why James read; it's why I read. It's why I listen to Kate and David and Adam and everyone else in the *Cura Psychologia*. For how intensely personal their talking and their study are. There's something so human, so desirable, so fascinating about the quirky, the idiosyncratic, the unreliable. I look at Adam, at Kate, at David as quirky. I hope that's not condescending. I look at humans as endearingly quirky. Okay, humans are much else, too, but they're also endearingly odd. There's often a problem when they're not odd; when they're too even. What James wanted and what I want is to be fascinated by people who are themselves fascinated.

Now, of course, we share a lot. What David has said of the adultification of psychology has resonated with most of us, I suspect. We share vocabularies and many concerns and quite a few values and, of course, faculty positions in Jesuit institutions. Our usual procedure is to seek even more agreement; our usual procedure is to prioritize construction. But it's here that I'd like to listen to Gohar Homayounpour, a psychoanalyst. She says, "Maybe it is not belonging for which we should search, but Un-belonging."¹⁰ "Un-belonging" is as nicely awkward as Kate's adverb, "first-personally." It's a quirky, odd term. Psychoanalysts see on their couches too much belonging, too much repetition, too much repression in order to belong, too much being frozen distressingly by trauma. "Sameness," Homayounpour says, "is the death of the subject."¹¹ We can see that unbelonging is important in psychoanalysis in Philip Larkin's famous poem "This Be the Verse," where he insists rudely and profanely that your dear parents mess you up¹²: Gotta unbelong to that. But I wonder if unbelonging is also important in philosophy or psychology or theology. Maybe they don't "eff you up, your Kant and Aquinas" but the pressure and the desire, the *need* to belong can be quite strong. It can seem unreasonable not to be faithful to our disciplines and to our sub-disciplines and to our inspirational major figures. Kate says that "we are creatures of our own disciplines. We have been *cre-*

9 James, *Pragmatism*, 24.

10 Gohar Homayounpour, *Persian Blues, Psychoanalysis and Mourning* (Routledge, 2023), 9.

11 Homayounpour, interview by Matthew Pieknik and Christopher Russell, *New Books in Psychoanalysis* (podcast), April 21, 2025, 10:24.

12 Philip Larkin, *High Windows* (Faber and Faber, 2015).

ated by them, molded as if out of clay. We have been *disciplined* by them. *Domesticated.*” And I wonder if that domestication is really so desirable. I wonder if it means the loss of fascination, the loss of James’s “luminousness;” if domestication means too much of the “reasonable.” If it’s the loss of an “essential personal flavor.” If it’s too little fascination.

And Homayounpour gives us more to think about. Separation, she says, “is the seed of developing a mind.”¹³ It’s not just that we need to separate from Mum and Dad, to unbelong to them; we need to separate from all that we love: from our disciplines, from our departments, from our methodologies, from our intellectual heroes, from our Jameses and Heideggers and Nietzsches and Tillichs. We need to unbelong to what we’ve professionally come to love.

How do we unbelong, aside from lying on Homayounpour’s psychoanalytic couch? How do I, personally, increase “multifariousness, multitudinousness, and heterogeneity” within my discipline and my methodology? Increase it within my own work, in fact? How do I unbelong to me?

Can I return to Nietzsche’s raven? Nietzsche urges us to be ravens, to seek inspiration in a little piece of carrion. I think we have a tendency to see what we study as cuisine, as something beautifully plated, and locally sourced for freshness, prepared with love. Yes, we’re critical; we’re not blindly taken in. But I think, with Homayounpour and Nietzsche, that we still belong too much, that we still sacrifice fascination to what’s reasonable, that we’re overly domesticated. Maybe we experience our “essential personal flavor,” maybe we “develop a mind,” if we let our sense of and taste for nutrition leave the sensible and the reasonable and feel fascination with the rotten and the alive; with what sizzles on our tongue.

Conclusion

After the penultimate *Cura Psychologia* meeting, held at Loyola Marymount University, our faculty trio—Bud, Adam, and Kate—rented a Jeep. Removing the roof required some serious teamwork, but our collaboration finally succeeded. To give voice to our success—of which we are oddly quite proud—Adam has the last word:



We drove up the Pacific Coast Highway to Malibu, watching in friendship each other’s ways of bringing in and letting out the same sun and sea (much like the fascination that Bud talks about), and also each other’s way of cruising in a car with buddies, which is also seeing each other’s familiar

13 Homayounpour, interview 31:34–37.

relationship with our respective abiding kid-nesses. There's something to be learned from that experience about joy and admiration in taking the (metaphorical) car for a spin in the sun together, which is the one genuine success of our being collocated by the center-pulling windswirl around the place that interdisciplinarity is imagined to be.