The Hermeneutics of Interdisciplinary Practice

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This workshop considers the key interdisciplinary emphases of dialogue, application, and orientation toward the problem from the perspective of hermeneutic philosophy. Particularly, it seeks to show how these emphases take on radical significance when interpreted according to the theory of hermeneutic experience developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method.* Participants will engage in re-imagining the pedagogical relevance of dialogue and application, and considering how orienting learning around a problematic engages rather than alienates the student. The goal is to develop concrete strategies that will transform interdisciplinary practice according to a hermeneutic theory of interdisciplinarity. To appreciate why this project is relevant, it is necessary to situate it with respect to the problem of interdisciplinary theory.

Interdisciplinary initiatives, owing to their success and innovation, have moved the concept of interdisciplinarity from the margins of the academy to the middle of academic discourse. Taking the modern disciplinary framework for granted, however, these initiatives proceed at the level of practice—dialogue or application, especially with respect to a given problem—with little concern for theory. Hence, despite the cachet interdisciplinarity currently enjoys, there is yet neither a generally accepted philosophy of interdisciplinarity nor a coherent interdisciplinary method. The term *interdisciplinary theory* represents only a plurality of differing approaches and perspectives. This situation does not reveal a deficiency in interdisciplinary theory, however; it indicates just how effectively the disciplinary model orders academic discourse.

The modern academy is thoroughly disciplined, and the concept of methodically verified knowledge is at its heart. Modern disciplines set to work on a twofold task of producing and organizing knowledge within fields of inquiry, and of refining and propagating methods appropriate to verifying claims to knowledge within these fields. In this way, disciplines form “the key units of social organization in higher education” and the “basic structure of academic life.” As such, it is not clear how interdisciplinarity could be anything other than a technique for compiling disciplinary perspectives, unless it were perhaps an inchoate and yet unnamed discipline. The question remains unasked whether interdisciplinarity affords something other than techniques, novel perspectives, or methods that subvert, transgress, or otherwise transcend disciplinarity, but instead proceeds from an experience of truth independent of the methodological considerations of disciplined knowledge. If so, an interdisciplinary theory

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2 The key feature of understanding the problematic hermeneutically, of course, is the recognition that it is the question that is prior in inquiry rather than a given problem. See: Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 356-371.
3 Klein, *Humanities, Culture, and Interdisciplinarity*, 3. Klein makes this point ironically: “At a time when the phrase ‘increasingly interdisciplinary’ has become commonplace, studies of interdisciplinary formations take on heightened importance.” For a critical evaluation of this trend, see: Jerry A. Jacobs. *In Defense of Disciplines: Interdisciplinarity and Specialization in the Research University* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
4 See the editors’ introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, edited by Robert Frodeman and Julie Thompson Klein (New York, Oxford University Press, 2010), 39–41.
5 This is not to say that all find such a plurality to be problematic; some see it as interdisciplinarity’s greatest strength. See, for instance: Jan C. Schmidt, “Prospects for a Philosophy of Interdisciplinarity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, edited by Robert Frodeman and Julie Klein Thompson (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), 39–41.
6 Jacobs, In Defense of Disciplines, 28ff. Jacobs captures both aspects of disciplinarity well: “A discipline is a form of social organization that generates new ideas and research findings, certifies knowledge, and in turn teaches this subject matter to interested students.”
7 Ibid, 2.
that is developed accordingly would transform the static, disciplinary concept of knowledge as product created in sectioned-off fields into a dynamic recognition of knowledge as event or application. Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutic experience provides precisely the conceptual resources to accomplish this transformation. However, it is important to note that this is neither simply a hermeneutic interpretation of interdisciplinarity nor an application of hermeneutics to the problem of interdisciplinary theory. Rather, it is the discovery that interdisciplinarity is essentially hermeneutic in character, and thus Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutic experience is the reflective philosophical articulation of precisely the experience interdisciplinarity seeks to cultivate.⁸

Transposing interdisciplinary theory from the statics of the modern disciplinary model to the dynamics of the hermeneutic situation is an undertaking in its own right, and thus lies beyond the scope of this workshop. Outlining in brief detail the direction it would take is necessary in order to situate this workshop’s re-imagining of the significance of the key interdisciplinary practices. A full development of a hermeneutic theory of interdisciplinarity—a hermeneutics of interdisciplinarity—would also address the proximity of interdisciplinarity to the non-disciplined (liberal) practice of humanities. The same insight that radicalizes interdisciplinary practice also realizes this practice of humanities as an interdisciplinary pedagogy.

A hermeneutic interpretation of interdisciplinarity radicalizes the key interdisciplinary emphases of application, focus on the problem, and dialogue. Gadamer claims that the chief task of the historically-effected consciousness is to bring about the fusion of horizons in a regulated way.⁹ Simply put, fusing horizons is act of situating oneself with respect to what confronts one—e.g., a traditionary material—such that understanding and the application of understanding are two perspectives on the same dynamic. This insight allows Gadamer to restore application, and *phronesis* the kind of moral reasoning required in application, to its rightful place in human understanding. Transposed from the sterility of a theory-praxis schema, where it is supplementary means of ensuring relevance, application becomes the event of understanding.

The interdisciplinary focus on the problem is transformed as well by the disclosure of the event-character of understanding. Importantly, there is a new understanding of the character of the problem itself. Following the indication of the rhetorical concept of *stasis*, Gadamer shows that the problem is not so much an area of potential application for theory as it is the appearance of our prior orientation to the matter at hand. In this way, the problem takes the logic form of a question. Gadamer explains that the logical priority of the question in thought is a consequence of the historical character of consciousness, what Heidegger termed its fore-structure. Following the question is a matter of effectively foregrounding one’s prejudices in order to find live questions—points of contact for fusion of horizons. Far more than guaranteeing relevance, learning to follow questions opens the only viable way to understanding. Like application, it also exposes the sterility of disciplinarity’s mono-logic of method.

Application and the priority of the question converge to disclose the basic dynamic of human understanding—the dialogue which we are. Truth is dialectic from the ground up, for Gadamer, as is all thought, all learning. A central interdisciplinary insight is that something happens when viewpoints converge. Considered from within a disciplinary model, however, this is understood merely to be the effectiveness of collaboration. Interpreted hermeneutically, however, dialogue is the fusion of horizons, the emergent practice entailed in following the

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⁹ Ibid, 306. Historically-effected consciousness is at once the consciousness that is the effect of history as well as the consciousness of being the effect of history.
question. Thus understood, the practice of dialogue extends beyond discourse among persons and disciplines, to the encounter with texts and other traditionary materials, and ultimately to the explanatory and interpretive attitudes toward understanding. Itself the basic dynamic of understanding, dialogue becomes the dynamic context both of the world’s disclosure and of the possibility of its appropriation.