

The International
JOURNAL

of

INTERDISCIPLINARY
SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 2, Number 1

Ill Disciplined (Bodies of Thought)

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THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCES
<http://www.SocialSciences-Journal.com>

First published in 2007 in Melbourne, Australia by Common Ground Publishing Pty Ltd
www.CommonGroundPublishing.com.

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ISSN: 1833-1882
Publisher Site: <http://www.SocialSciences-Journal.com>

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY SOCIAL SCIENCES is a peer refereed journal. Full papers submitted for publication are refereed by Associate Editors through anonymous referee processes.

Typeset in Common Ground Markup Language using CGCreator multichannel typesetting system
<http://www.CommonGroundSoftware.com>.

III Disciplined (Bodies of Thought)

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Abstract: Interdisciplinary studies have long provided fertile ground for solving old problems, framing new ideas, and even generating new disciplines. Yet there can be no doubting the persistence of old disciplinary boundaries, or the tendency of these bold new interdisciplinary approaches to metastasize into conventional disciplinary formations. This paper will begin with a personal story – a scenario that I am sure is familiar to most academics – of an encounter with a colleague who felt that my attempted interdisciplinarity in a conference paper was in fact an outrageous abuse of material more proper to his discipline than to mine. What I will then seek to do is explain this persistence of disciplinary boundaries and proprietary protocols using, as seems to me to be appropriate for this purpose, a blend of phenomenological and psychoanalytic theory. I will argue that the stakes in disciplinary turf wars may be more than academic reputations or even the prospect of retaining a job. At stake in protecting a body of thought may well be the academic body itself, understood within a context of the mind-body integrity of the thinker as a being capable of existing within the world. To think, I suggest, is to be bounded, so thought of a world without boundaries is to imagine a world without a body of thought.

Keywords: Discipline Formations, Interdisciplinarity, Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Mind-Body Problem

INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES HAVE long provided fertile ground for solving old problems, framing new ideas, and even generating new disciplines. Yet scholars who seek to undertake studies in an interdisciplinary framework regularly confront resistance to this imperative, which might take any number of forms: funding procedures that classify research according to traditional disciplinary formations; creation of a marginalized presence at academic conferences where the strength in numbers tends to rest with the many who represent conventional disciplines; the accreditation of courses on the basis of endorsement by professional bodies or discipline-specific associations; and the list goes on. While it may be true that there are some areas of scholarship in which interdisciplinarity is more accepted than in others, this shortlist of forms of resistance suggests that academia writ large – encompassing the institutional structures and processes that frame the everyday practices of academics and researchers – is oriented more toward the preservation of existing disciplinary formations than it is toward the propagation of new fields of inquiry. Yet this paper will attempt to re-orient our way of thinking about an ‘academia writ large’ by shifting the theoretical focus of this discussion back onto academics themselves. Beginning with an anecdote relating one such instance of encountered resistance, this paper will delve into the issue of the lived experience of academics and researchers. The languages that we will use will be multiple, drawing on phenomenology and psychoanalytic theory in particular. In this way, we shall see that the resistance suggested at the level of an academia ‘writ large’ is but a logical

extension of a much more intimate relationship between a scholar and the words with which he or she represents a body of thought. This phrase ‘body of thought’ is understood here as no simple metaphor; rather, it pertains to the deep levels of investment that academics and researchers possess in relation to the words they produce as a form of self-fashioning.

We shall begin, then, with a personal anecdote, in order to ground the discussion in the lived experience of the academic – my lived experience, to be precise. A number of years ago, I was scheduled to present a paper entitled “Thinking Beyond the Brain: The Psycho-Somatic” at the Millennium World Conference in Critical Psychology, and as preparation for this big event I delivered a preliminary version of the paper in an English Department postgraduate seminar at The University of Queensland. The paper proposed the use of a psychoanalytical model of mind-body interaction, built around the concepts of the psycho-somatic relation of the unconscious to external phenomena (as developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok) and the ‘skin ego’ (as developed by Didier Anzieu), to intercede in the mind-body debate that had long been waged within the human sciences. Not being a critical psychologist, I was not sure of the likely reception to this material at the Millennium World Conference, and so was keen to initially present the ideas in a more collegial forum. I should perhaps have been more wary of the likely reception in the postgraduate seminar, because it was there, rather than at the conference, that the paper was met with dissenting voices. Among those in attendance at the seminar were faculty members



from biological science or medicine – or perhaps both, but then on reflection the point may be that to an ‘outsider’ such a distinction is untenable. In any case, following the paper, these fellow academics responded with a series of questions aimed at establishing a simple refutation of the basis for my paper: why should an English scholar presume to find new meanings or uses for terms like ‘psychosomatic’ when the sciences have already extracted clinically and therapeutically useful definitions from psychological theory?

Their questions were, of course, strictly rhetorical in mode and manner, yet the format of the presentation dictated that a reply must be forthcoming. My reply was simply to suggest that one of the concerns of English or language studies in general is the circulation of terms within a range of discourses, and I claimed that a term like ‘psychosomatic’ might be thought of in this way as a ‘phrase in dispute’ that remains far from settled. It should be remembered here that this phrase, ‘phrase in dispute,’ is taken from the work of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, but I refrained from mentioning this name in my reply for fear that I may alienate these audience members still further. Nevertheless, the work of Lyotard had clearly informed not only the reply but also the overall perspective held by this speaker in relation to the communicative act in which these words were being spoken. Applying the lessons from Lyotard’s *Postmodern Condition* and *The Differend*, we may say that both question and reply in this forum already presupposed the condition of alienation. It was not simply the case that speaker and audience were speaking in different tongues; we were claiming proprietary rights over a term, rendering any dispute impossible. This then was a clear point of discordance: my ‘phrase in dispute’ – as Lyotard calls these pawns in language games – was already a ‘proper name’ to which a whole universe of meanings is attached and around which the lineaments of a clearly defined body of knowledge are accumulated.

What these initial observations suggest is that if anybody within this exchange could be said to have been ill-disciplined, then it was not those dissenting voices who sought to proclaim their proprietary rights over the use of one of these phrases in dispute. If anything, the scholar who had previously studied the work of Lyotard – and who should therefore have been more prepared by the lessons his work have to teach us about the language games of academia – had been lax in thinking that this postgraduate seminar would be any more or less conducive to a receptive audience than any other forum. Yet this does not mean that studies in Critical Theory, for example, lead necessarily to pessimism. It simply means that we might take as more generally relevant the opening

gambit undertaken by Derrida when he addressed the Washington School of Psychiatry on October 15, 1982 (later published as ‘My Chances’). Asked to speak on the intersection of ‘Psychoanalysis’ and ‘Literature,’ Derrida began by proposing that these two terms be taken as proper names, yet suggests that chance should still determine where his words might fall, given that he could never know precisely to whom he was speaking or writing. Derrida’s gambit reminds us that the indeterminacy of the addressee does not translate as an absence of an addressee. Just as he admits to being unable to control where or how his words fall, Derrida remains mindful that these words still obey the rules of language, its ‘calculating capacity ... its code and game, with what regulates its play and plays with its regulations’ (4). It is because of his reference to the calculated play of language that I refer to the opening of Derrida’s paper as a ‘gambit’: even as he talks of the indeterminacy of the addressee, he calculates his chances.

Derrida’s gambit, postulated according to the ‘code and game’ of language, is consistent with what Lyotard refers to as the *performativity* of language games in the postmodern condition; that is, that these games are constituted in the presentation of a proponent and an opponent, yet without an external referee or possibility of judgment. Language games are not simply games with language, between adversaries using linguistic units as playing pieces; they are *games in language*, wherein the playing field, the rules, and even the adversaries themselves are linguistically constituted. Yet Derrida takes the issue of language games one step further by considering the status of all linguistic units according to the play of signification. In ‘My Chances’ he refers to the ‘insignificance in marking’ that is shared within language by the letter, the number, and the proper name (15). He describes the paradox of the mark, which is this: a mark must be capable of being ‘re-markable’ from one context to another, hence its apparent solidity and the seeming permanence of its capacity to refer to the same thing time and again, yet this same iterability demands that the mark retain no essential tie to its origin (its first utterance, its referent, its meaning, or what you will) so that it is free to ‘emigrate in order to play elsewhere’ (16). This ‘insignificance in marking’ suggests, then, that no proper name possesses any permanence in this function and even a speech to the Washington School of Psychiatry must be calculated to account for the possibility that the proper names proper to this forum must still be re-marked as such in order for them to have a chance of functioning in this capacity.

Whatever lessons we might learn from Lyotard regarding performativity in language games should also be informed by Derrida’s comments regarding the ‘insignificance in marking’ of the units of lan-

guage. Accordingly, we could imagine that any thought of the boundaries that inhere between disciplinary formations, as if they possessed any kind of permanence beyond their instantiation in a moment of language use, is absurd: proprietary rights and any other disciplinary markers are asserted at the moment they are articulated, which is the re-marking to which Derrida refers, and this indicates a slippage or ‘insignificance’ of any sense of true territorial limits. Yet the ‘as if’ in this previous sentence is precisely the effect of disciplinary language games, since these games seem perfectly well to enable proponents of a discourse to delimit their words, their practices – indeed, themselves or, better, their selves *per se* – from others. Perhaps we already reach a point at which we might therefore mitigate any charge on my part of being ill-disciplined in my preparation for the postgraduate seminar forum. With a background in Critical Theory, fashioned after the likes of Lyotard and Derrida, my capacity to calculate my chances in entering the mind-body debate might have been hampered to some extent by the fact that the terms of this debate have for decades – or for far longer, if we trace the mind-body debate to its origins in the Western philosophical tradition – been established by a number of disciplines within the human sciences as one of the bases for differentiating themselves from each other. I use the word ‘established’ deliberately here, since there is in these language games a clear sense among the protagonists that what ‘regulates its play’ is a fixed set of rules. Put quite simply, this set of rules is nothing less than the discipline itself.

To put this another way, it is one thing to argue on the basis of generalized phenomena – the language games of which Lyotard writes, or the fundamental properties of units of language, according to Derrida – that discipline-based discourses are in reality more intractable than they seem, but this does not adequately explain why these discourses should in fact seem so established, nor does it account for the fact that when one ‘plays’ these games or ‘remarks’ a unit of language as if it possessed the hallmarks of a proper name, one does so from within a disciplinary formation. The difficulties that we are dealing with here arise, I suggest, because the brand of Critical Theory developed by Lyotard and Derrida is phenomenological in its principal disciplinary orientation. Even as they develop a critique of disciplinary formations, they do so on the basis that their own sense of methodology, of proper names, and of a true object of analysis, has been shaped or at least influenced by their own training in a particular disciplinary formation. Both Lyotard and Derrida had studied the great phenomenologists – Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, and others – before they embarked on critiques of the Western

philosophical tradition, and this training reveals itself in a tendency to extract a general account of phenomena from a specific experience. In the words of Gayle Ormiston, in a foreword to Lyotard’s first book, *Phenomenology*, phenomenological projects hinge on ‘the intentional analysis of the *lifeworld* (*Lebenswelt*), the intricate weaving of the “subjective” (transcendental or otherwise) and the “intersubjective”’ (2). In this sense, then, Lyotard’s work finds in phenomenology the reflexive strategy for opening out philosophy as such to intentional analysis, and I would argue the same could be said of Derrida’s critique of the Western metaphysical tradition.

The difficulties that we are dealing with here arise, then, because both Lyotard and Derrida proceed outward from a specific philosophical expression or practice to that which can be said to be true of the whole history of philosophy. The risk in assuming that the phenomenological critique of philosophy could prepare a young postgraduate in calculating his chances ahead of a presentation in an academic forum is that it assumes that the phenomenological project can be reverse engineered; that is, that what is said to be true of the whole history of philosophy could translate into salient lessons on how to manufacture a specific expression or practice, fit to the context of its instantiation. In short, a critique of a discourse will always inform a meta-discursive explanation, but a meta-discourse does not translate as lessons on how to speak or write within the limits of the given discourse from which it has been extrapolated. Where does this leave the struggling postgraduate? I suggest that if my preparations for the postgraduate seminar could be said to be ill-disciplined, then, it was not simply because I presumed to think that the lessons learned from a background in Critical Theory could be used to dismiss attacks on my apparent disciplinary *faux pas*. A more damning feature of my response was that it was indeed based on lessons learned long ago rather than on the material content of the immediate presentation. Rather than revert to some fallback position informed by Lyotard’s critique of philosophy, could I have more gainfully responded by using the very terms that my detractors sought to question my right to use?

Before answering this question in the final part of this paper, I should point out that after the postgraduate seminar, in preparing to present the same material at the Millennium World Conference, I substantially revised the paper. We shall see that these revisions transformed a paper designed to intervene in the mind-body debate into a paper on disciplinary turf claims revolving around this debate. My goal here, in the present paper, is to some extent to reflect more directly on the conditions that gave rise to this transformation and, therefore, to bring a psychoanalytic perspective to bear on the issue of disciplinary

formations. By focusing more on the lived experience of an encounter with resistance to an interdisciplinary strategy, rather than on a general account of disciplinary language games, we gain a better understanding of what motivates these games, enabling disciplinary boundaries to continue to function as if they possessed a high degree of permanence. The key to this psychoanalytic perspective, as outlined in 'Thinking Beyond the Brain: The Psycho-Somatic' is a particular understanding – a discipline-specific one – of the 'psycho-somatic relation' between the unconscious and its outside, which we shall explore in more detail in a moment. On this point, though, we can flag already the direction in which we will be heading: an inclination to view the phrase 'body of thought' as something more than a convenient metaphor to describe homogenations of ideas, concepts and principles within a single structure. We shall seek to consider the role of the body in imagining bodies of thought.

When we use the term 'psycho-somatic' within a psychoanalytical framework, we refer to a process rather than a condition or state. Within this framework, 'psyche' and 'soma' do not refer to 'mind' and 'body' respectively, such that we might conceive of them in isolation or even diagnose states based on the effects of the one on the other. Instead, they function as terms to describe two discrete but interconnected aspects of the same process. Mind and body are viewed in these terms as being isomorphic on the basis of what Richard Wollheim calls 'the mind's image of itself' (53). We only conceive of mental states from the perspective of being already embodied, so our conception of the mind is always 'tinged with spatiality' and thus 'it is not merely that we are at home in our body: we are at home in our mind somewhat as in a body' (53). The term 'psycho-somatic relation' refers to the mind only in so far as it is embodied, and it refers to the body only in so far as it corresponds to the image the mind has of itself. This is to say that the body is not simply a container for the mind, but is its extensive correlative. Now, we may ask what this has to do with disciplinarity. As I mentioned above, after reflecting on the postgraduate seminar in which I first delivered the paper on the mind-body debate, I reworked the material before presenting the paper to the Critical Psychology conference – this new material was retained when the full paper was then later developed for publication in the *International Journal of Critical Psychology*. What I added in revising the paper was the term 'embodiment' to refer to the process by which a psycho-somatic relation unfolds. Defining embodiment in specifically psychoanalytic terms, I called it the process by which the unconscious posits an outside, meaning that one way to think of the body

is as the exterior limit of the unconscious, designating an interior mental space and an external reality.

The spatiality in terms of which Wollheim suggests we can only conceive of the mind is here recast as a normative effect of unconscious processes, not simply a side-effect of the fact that we are already embodied when we cast a reflective eye back upon ourselves. It seemed to me furthermore that the unconscious process of positing an exterior limit will not necessarily end at this limit, but remains a function of the way we continue to extend and present ourselves in the world. It is worth noting here that Wollheim's comments on mind and body form part of his discussions on art and the mind. He focuses attention on the corporeal basis of aesthetics by suggesting that painting is equivalent to the body in the degree to which both represent versions of the mind's image of itself. In the revised version of the paper – published finally as 'Thinking Beyond the Brain: Embodiment and the Psycho-Somatic' – I developed the idea that 'bodies of thought' possess equivalence to physical bodies in much the same way that an artwork manifests a representation of the mind beyond the mind itself, which brings us to the relevance of these ideas to issues of disciplinarity. Disciplines represent ways of maintaining intact the apparent integrity of a body of thought. To tie this back to the work of Lyotard and Derrida, language games might therefore be seen as specific forms of embodiment. They rely on the divisibility of the mark to designate permanence of an exterior limit which, due to the paradox of this same divisibility, they must however designate time and time again. Using this adaptation of Wollheim's ideas, I suggested in the revised version of the paper that the mind-body debate exposed the fragility of discipline formations precisely because the 'idea of the body' remained a crucial component of the way in which disciplines took on the appearance of form. This is how the published version of the paper concludes:

What is at stake is not simply opening out the boundaries of one discipline in response to a challenge presented by another; rather, it is the radical abandonment of the boundaries that have traditionally separated one discipline from another, one corpus from another, or one body of ideas from another. If we find that we are still protective of this body of ideas, it may only be because we are still too attached to the idea of the body. (68-69)

To a reader unfamiliar with the context out of which this paper emerged, these closing words might read like a defense of eclecticism or interdisciplinarity. Yet as we have seen here, these words could be just as easily attributed to what psychoanalysts call a 'reaction formation' and that a bundle of anxieties

that had accrued around the postgraduate seminar, its reception, and the larger forum that would follow provided both the stimulus and raw material from which this formation could be developed. It was not so much that I sought to defend in advance the radical abandonment of disciplinary boundaries for which the paper now presented a rallying cry; this was a defensive reaction, in hindsight, to a perceived attack on my own set of ideas. In other words, my investigation into the possibilities of abandoning established boundaries was, in itself, already calculated along a trajectory that was *limited*.

Nevertheless, this particular reaction formation does provide the terms by which we might be able to usefully conclude. I stand by the conclusions of the critical psychology paper, that the mind-body debate represents one particularly volatile zone of disciplinary friction for reasons that I have outlined above. Yet further reflection on the immediate personal context for the history of these words, their marking and re-marking, suggests that these conclusions might also be more generally relevant. In response to those dissenting voices who questioned the right of anybody in the Humanities to critique such clinically useful concepts as the psycho-somatic relation of mind to body, perhaps a valid reply could well have been that according to the psychoanalytic definition of this relation, the uses to which we put words – just like the use to which we put our bodies, our technologies, and indeed all phenomena exterior to our unconscious minds – are expressions of a basic human drive to paint an outside in which we can imagine ourselves perfectly centered. In a psychoanalytic sense, the names we own as we establish disciplinary formations are but the clothes we adorn to shelter our innermost selves from the elements. I could therefore have simply asked if they would altogether mind if I may borrow their coat. Yet perhaps this does not quite get to the heart of the matter. It might in fact be more appropriate to say that the words we utter, and by which we presume to lay claim to the world, function as substitutes for the

skin itself, the outermost membrane of our bodies. In psychoanalytic terms, the ‘skin ego’ is precisely the sense we possess that our skins are in fact the outermost layers of a body, in which we feel embodied.

Again, what does this have to do with discipline formation? I suggest that disciplines, just like any seemingly established and highly organized, internally coherent structure of language use, functions like a second skin, or as an extension of the skin ego process. The articulation of an idea, in isolation, might therefore already be understood as a connection between a word, *out there*, and a thought, *inside here*, within the mind-body relation. By connecting these ideas to something more systematic, such as a discipline, we cement this relation and, in the process, cement our sense that we ‘belong’ within that discipline. To surrender such connections is to abandon ourselves, in some degree, so it is inevitable that even when we venture into unstable environments such as interdisciplinary activity we find ourselves continually being drawn to the establishment of new connections, forming new disciplines or new bodies of thought, so to speak. The important point to make here is that if we think of these insights as generally relevant, their methodological validity is inseparable from the specific context from which they emerged, and this may well be the lesson that must be learned: every disciplinary act is at one and the same time the act of an individual seeking consciously or otherwise to position an academic body within a second skin. This is very important to remember least of all when we are considering the stakes and indeed the collateral damage in disciplinary turf wars: what is at stake and what may therefore be at risk in these ructions may be much more than academic reputations or even the prospect of retaining a job; what is at stake in protecting any body of thought may well be the academic body itself, understood within a context of the mind-body integrity of the thinker as a being capable of existing within the world.

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