

Reply to Armin Krishnan

Fred D'Agostino, University of Queensland, Australia

Thanks to Dr Krishnan for the very thoughtful comments on my paper "Disciplinary and the Growth of Knowledge". I will share some anecdotes by way of reply.

When I was considering writing on the topic of "incommensurability", an issue which arises in two, related forms, I thought: "I'd better have a look at the databases and see what's been published". What I found, approaching the matter as a philosopher, was, for example, an *Annual Review of Sociology* article on incommensurability, as seen from a sociological perspective, some management studies literature, and some literature from multi-criterion decision theory. All of this was immensely influential in the approach that, in due course, after lots of cogitation, I adopted in my book *Incommensurability and Commensuration* (Ashgate 2003). I built a non-essentialist story about how what is incommensurable can be commensurated and how what could be commensurated, if we wanted, can be "declared" incommensurable around these readings from outside my own home discipline. (In which, to complicate the story, I have never been formally trained.) So I guess that I agree with Dr Krishnan that "the dynamics and tension between disciplines ... enables much of the innovation that occurs within disciplines" (20). Insofar as what I had to say about incommensurability was innovative from a philosophical point of view, it was so because I'd engaged with other disciplines.

That's one part of this first anecdote. The other part is that my work on incommensurability has never entered the specifically philosophical discourse on that topic to any significant degree. Now, of course, it may be that it's no good, or even that it's misconceived and its being ignored is really a kindness and I should complain (not that I am complaining). But it's also possible that, precisely because of the multidisciplinary underpinnings of the work, it's simply hard to process by philosophers, especially since my discussion simply bypasses as not of central significance many of the preoccupations of contemporary philosophy when it comes to incommensurability.

My second anecdote arises from my experience as an academic manager and, specifically, as a member of a review panel which did the septennial review of a School of Tourism. The other panel members were themselves founding generation tourism studies academics from Britain, the Continent and North America, and of considerable distinction. One of their major concerns, not specific to the particular School we were reviewing, was that there was a pipeline of students who had done undergraduate, then post-graduate, then doctoral studies all in Tourism and hence, unlike this "founding generation", had had limited exposure to the disciplines that they'd been engaged with as ways of entry into tourism studies: one was an economist, one a geographer, one an anthropologist "by training". They all worried that the new generation of tourism academics were not going to have the sort of disciplinary training that would enable them to do high-quality research.

Grumpy old man syndrome? Hard for an outsider to tell, but the same sort of worries showed themselves on other occasions when it was "studies" programs or organizational units that were in question.

A final point, and again my thanks to Dr Krishnan, who says: "... [T]he bigger question is whether the existing disciplines represent the optimal way for producing new knowledge and managing innovation" (20). I guess I bypassed this question, but that was because it has a presupposition which I reject; namely, that it makes sense to think there's an unequivocal answer, even in principle, to the issue of optimality. Like many other "optimisation problems", this is one with a moving target and multiple competing criteria for success, and hence without a definable optimum to pursue. So, while I think Dr Krishnan is right to raise questions about whether a different arrangement might be better, and to suggest that interdisciplinarity ought to have a look-in when it comes to arranging institutions and cultures for innovation, no arrangement is going to be optimal, for "optimal" is, unavoidably, not well defined.

Contact details: f.dagostino@uq.edu.au

References

- D'Agostino, Fred. 2003. *Incommensurability and Commensuration: The Common Denominator*. Ashgate.
- _____. 2012. "Disciplinarity and the Growth of Knowledge." *Social Epistemology* 26 (3-4): 331-350.
- Krishnan, Armin. 2013. "Response to Fred D'Agostino's 'Disciplinarity and the Growth of Knowledge'". *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective 2* (2): 19-23.