

The struggling towards a Transdisciplinary Metaphysics

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Introduction

What is transdisciplinarity? I don't know, but I do feel that the majority of those writing about it are not willing to jettison their disciplinary positionality to look for something which cannot be realised from what we currently accept as knowledge. Let me be clearer. Transdisciplinarity by its nature transcends inter-, multi- and inter-disciplinarity, for it seeks to resist the epistemological hegemony of disciplines to be the sole arbitrator of the real. Basically, I propose we can't start from here seeking a new way of knowing and agency without understanding the metaphysics of the new reality (which may or may not somewhere in between being and non-being) which transcends disciplines. In a postdigital reality (Jandrić et al. 2018) where we tend to understand and respond to the unleashed power of technology is a *Weltanschauung* in the terms Heidegger envisioned it in his essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' (1977) of where technology rule humanity rather than harnessed to enrich humanity. Like him, we can enhance our being through and with technology but we need to be in control of it. However, first we need to understand why this is important for our notions of being and I suggest we need to think bravely in the terms of that I develop below for of nature of being (see Fuller and Jandrić 2019 for a fuller discussion).

Don't Start Your Epistemological Journey from Now

My argument is premised upon transdisciplinarity's actuality, as an authentic and appropriate way of exploring the unity of Being¹ and creating immanent knowledge of the forms of being within and across different realities and in transcendence. I caution myself not to make brute distinctions here. Transcendence will not mean to entirely escape or sublimate the immanent nor do I want to use immanence to altogether seal and close off the horizon of transcendence. In transcendence and immanence, we find a doubled presence of worldliness and universality. This contextualises disciplinary epistemologies as offering necessary, but not sufficient, revealing of realities in which being and its forms can be understood essentially as well as existentially. What is important to this argument is a contemporary understanding of scholasticism emergent from the medieval philosophers such as Duns Scotus² and summarised by Feser (2013) to offer a non-scientism base for the discussion of a transdisciplinary reality and our being as part of that world.

Since emergence is an important feature of human life, all knowledge development which is concerned with human beings and their activities in the world might, I will argue, be derived from a transdisciplinary metaphysic contingent on causal powers. This is certainly not my intention, to assert that casual powers are in direct competition with the empirical science and its claims of truth and knowledge known through experience. I do, however, distinguish transdisciplinarity from interdisciplinary (like Scott 2017) on the basis of the emergence of realities to those of complexity. This occurs where outcomes cannot be generated by the additive pooling of the knowledges of the various disciplines concerned, and 'requires a whole integration, or genuine transdisciplinarity' (Scott 2017: 40).

¹ Capital B is used for Being when referring to the totality of Being; lower case for humans' being.

² Duns Scotus is used rather than other scholastics because of the development of his methodology and the subtlety of his approach as well as his key position on univocity and singularity.

This idea settles transdisciplinarity as an exploration of ontology rather than a distinctive epistemological method and offers an alternative to disciplines' hegemony of verifiers of knowledge. In this sense transdisciplinarity is a metaphorical tool; a catalyst, with a teleological ideology for change. The inherent difficulties of such models are the experience of a multiplicity of realities which are neither laminated nor fixed but flow rhythmically under the influence of complexity and intra-reality causation, yet deny causation between realities. The rhythm of realities forms an open system in which possible worlds emerge and realities are (a) perceived as independent yet indeterminate and (b) realised and dependent on the location of the becoming being. To view these open systems in which becoming is the realisation as potentiality, (both internally natural and externally elicited as) energy and power that enables the capacity to bring about change in another thing or in itself, aligns with Aristotle's fourth and final cause (Aristotle 1984).

Being You

This brief sketch is grounded historically in Aristotle's extensive discussion of the emergence and harnessing of potential in Book Θ, Chapter 9 of his *Metaphysics* as well as in *De anima* and the *Physics* (1984). Although an extensive discussion is not warranted here³, Aristotle introduces a notion of the being of a thing fixed in terms of a categorical substance, where the identity of being is able to be 'distinguished in respect of potentiality and fulfilment, and of function' (1984: 1045b: 33) and its capability to become (1984: 1003a: 6). For example, Jane is first a human being with a capacity for knowledge, like all humans (her first actuality). She can develop that capacity's potentiality in many ways, one of which is to become an engineer. In realizing her nature, Jane is flourishing under those conditions that allow her to do so as herself in the form of engineer. In this sense we draw a distinction between the power and the capability for it to be actualised; the holder of the power. In a real sense it is the processor of the power which is the cause of change, not the power in and of itself.

To explain the causes of a thing Aristotle divides things into those which exist by nature and those which exist for other reasons; artefacts of life. In the former, Aristotle offers four general classes of explanation of a thing, divided into four general causes; substance, form, efficient and final (Aristotle 1984: Book II, 194b23-35). It is Aristotle's fourth cause, the formal cause, for 'the sake a thing is done' (194b34) that natural thing develops towards if not encumbered by other forces. Clearly this teleological causation has potential to be ascribed to some divine plan.

Aristotle maintains that all things have their own nature but the elements of this nature 'of being not by accident but just because it is being' (1003a29-30). Yet he also maintains that there are 'many senses in which a thing may be said to "be" but they are related to one central point, one definite kind of thing' (1003a32-33/30). Tellingly, he also maintains that this Being is not a universal, for it has a primary cause itself. Indeed, Aristotle's onto-theological statements in Book VI of the *Metaphysics* such as 'all causes must be eternal, for they are the causes of so much of the divine that appears to us' (Aristotle 1984: 1026a16-18) gives evidence to this. Thus, Aristotle's notion of being requires eternal, transcendental causes as well as those causal powers actualised through the realisation of potentiality from which characteristics of the thing are emergent. The idea of hylomorphic form and substance underlies the following discussion.

Causality

Following Aristotle, Duns Scotus distinguishes free and self-determining causality (possibilities for being) from natural and necessary causality (mode of being) and it is the

³ See Beere (2009) for an excellent and successful rendition of such a task.

former that this paper now considers. At its essence, the questions deal with self-change and the willed possibilities this implies; a will that is the cause of its own determination. Moreover, the will is indeterminate and when it makes a positive decision of either volition or nolition which elicits a voluntarily act, it is determining itself. Such decisions require enlightenment. The arguments made by Scotus are that the attributes of being which are those of God in essence have the same meaning when used by humanity, the attributes of God being the co-existent universals which apply equally to humanity. Blending the immanence and the transcendence is Scotus's main ontological achievement that led Deleuze to suggest that there 'has only ever been one ontology, that of Duns Scotus. Which gave being a single voice.' (2014: 45) Thus 'the concepts of being; the one, trust, and the good are all *unitive contenta* in the real and indivisible whole' (Scotus 1997: 101) (emphasis from the original).

Scotus also suggests that to act is bounded by the powers in our choice to act, stimulated by the powers of our internal potential in relationship to external powers, and potentialities are aligned with the properties of the *haecceitas*⁴ (the thingness of a thing or the personhood of the individual) and this realistically⁵ determines the distinctive entity we are. It is the form of the thing which distinguishes it from matter and thus universals are considered real. The formal distinction is evident according to Cross (1999) between the soul and its powers of intellect and will.

Scotus conceives of the causal agency as separate from, and working upon, the causal dispositions of a thing. Yet not all the properties or dispositions or causal powers of a thing are equally important in understanding their singularity, which gives meaning to an individual's identity, but all might contribute to their potentialities to be realised. This recognition of difference is central to the scholastically-influenced ontology of Spinoza and, by inference, to Deleuze's transcendental empiricism⁶. In both, there is a clear appropriation of Duns Scotus' univocity where immanence rather than transcendence dominates in both of their conceptions of Being.

In the case of Spinoza it is an alternative explanation of what initiates this actualisation. He asserts that existence and its endeavour within the unified pantheistic nature of being is revealed through the multiplicity of difference. The more one is able to resist these external powers the greater is our understanding of ourselves and the more we are able to be the cause of ourselves. In *The Ethics* Spinoza calls this process *conatus* (Spinoza 1992: 109) which is our desire to cultivate the essence of oneself and the realisation of the power to do so. What this might be seems to remain problematic even for Spinoza when he claims that casual powers, when activated, are intent on creating the best we can. To achieve this, internal causal powers engage with external powers. For Deleuze it is in the notion of difference and how to 'make sense of everything as part of one and the same purely immanent reality—a reality that is free of any such absolute transcendence' (Moore 2015).

The realisation between the imaginations that stem from the imaginal realm and personal fantasies is the *imaginatio vera*⁷ and guides to our self-activation. This end has to be imagined: as Corbin (1990: 8) states, each of us 'carries in himself the image of his own world, his *Imago mundi*, and projects it into a more or less coherent universe, which becomes the stage on which his destiny is played out' (emphasis from the original). This is a central concept for Nicolae's *Homo sui transcendentalis*; a concept within which he explores the integration of

⁴ I base here my understating of this on question six in his *Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation* (Scotus 2005). In a private correspondence, Craig Hammond points to the difference between the 'whatness' of a thing and its individual 'thingness'; the class of mammals, Zebra, and a particular zebra for instance.

⁵ The realism of the formal distinction has been contested (see Dumont 2005).

⁶ In Twenty-Fifth Series of *The Logic of Sense* Deleuze states that '[p]hilosophy merges with ontology, but ontology merges with the univocity of Being' (1179: 2003).

⁷ A feasible imagination of what could be the future not an ungrounded phantasy.

potential realities, understandings and perceptions. This is transdisciplinarity and it ‘opens an unlimited space of freedom, understanding, tolerance and love’ (Nicolescu 2002: 74).

Openness And Tolerance - It Could All Be So Different

If we are to be open to a world that is not created deterministically then the possibilities of difference must be central to such a metaphysic. Scotus (1994) develops the notion of synchronic contingency in his ‘Lectura 1: 39’ arguing that, that which is, might very well be different (Vos Jaczn et al. 1994)⁸. In essence, that which has been actualised is just one possibility: at any point in time, other possibilities are real possibilities but have not and will not be actualised. That is to say, at any moment factual reality can be different from what and how it is. If true, then as Garrison (2005: 180) suggests, ‘logical contraction and even catachresis are a necessary to sustaining emergent, endlessly evolving, and creative universe’. Finding this relationship of Being with being-here-for-oneself is the power of knowing oneself which has attracted significant attention through the history of the divine and the mortal tackled by Duns Scotus and Avicenna and indeed within the transdisciplinary axiom of Nicolescu’s hidden third (2010: 8).

The hidden third is the placeless place where the transcendental blends with the immanent and the philosophical with spiritual. To enter *mundus imaginialis* (a space of imagination separate from reason and the body) requires one to seek to know oneself, but with a knowledge that one does not already have. It is the precursor of embarking on self-flourishing and is available to us, as Heidegger has suggested, through meditation and poetry and in the self-reflection of Kierkegaard’s moment of vision (see Gibbs 2011). Our search for knowledge of how we can fulfil ourselves is a cyclical one with our return to our point of embarkation changed, more aware but still deficient. The resolution, again as Heidegger (1962) has suggested, is from the thrownness of our existence into the world and our flourishing as our true selves which is ongoing and unresolved until death.

Based on these concepts and through the weaving and patterning of the univocity of being and its co-existent transcendentals, Duns Scotus⁹ opens an access to the complexity of being, highlighting and integrating immanent aspects with the transcendental. I want to suggest that how individual beings realise their own being (I want to hold fast on identity for the moment) depends on how we and they see the openness of the system in which they are located. Thus, the spatial-temporal context is a determinant in the ways the causal powers actualise themselves, specifically as opposed to the perception of closed systems. The proposed causal powers are emergent in the sense that they are motivated by the situations and the right or natural timing of the disposition to the oneness of the being and this oneness is authentically revealed in the openness of our worldly systems¹⁰.

The causal powers can be differently willed and thus create different worlds for the emergent being to transact with. Each being is shaped by acting and thinking differently about the structure of individual becoming. It is also shaped through what is willed romantically and poetically in its first formation, rather than reifying it through the logical and calculative thinking associated with disciplines and the forms of grammatical languages they employ. These powers work within our world of experiences commonly shared yet are not constrained by them, creating a new configuration of the world as an open system within which islands of

⁸ As part of Pierce’s Scotism, he supports this notion in his Monist paper *The Doctrine of necessity Examined* (Pierce 1892). Aristotle, counter to his assumed binary notion of nature, says in the *Metaphysics*, Book Θ, that what ‘is capable of being may either be or not be; the same thing, then, is capable of both being and of not being’ (Aristotle 1984: 1050^b: 10). This has resonance with Nicolescu’s concept of the included middle (2010: 25).

⁹ Scotus (1997) allows other transcendentals which are pure perfection such as wisdom which are transcendentals for the simple reason that they can be predicated on God.

¹⁰ There is a growing literature on system transdisciplinarity which is not addressed here but recognised.

closed systems function. The enframement of closed systems functions to shape our inauthenticity and lead us to deny what we might be, so as to settle for the comfort of what others require us to be and work against our flourishing. Powers that have been actualised within the open system are working creatively together with other powers, whereas in closed systems they are suppressed or counteracted to provide stability, in the form of, perhaps, a consistent identity.

The exploration of the ways these causal powers bring us into becoming what we might be in open systems do not reveal a stable identity easily labelled in packages of sameness but a fragmented and reoccurring being and provides the potential for us to understand our life project. This requires a blending of ways of knowing within the rhythms of realities, leading to potency's actualization. Perhaps this is what Deleuze (2013: 4) means when he suggests that the univocity of being 'has three determinations: one single event for all events; one and the same *aliquid* (something) for that which happens and that which is said; and one and the same Being for the impossible, the possible and the real' (emphasis from the original). Such a vision is central to any discussion on transdisciplinarity and has its roots in Scotist realism.

Scholastic Approach?

In developing this transdisciplinary inquiry, the scholastic method of defining a problem is employed. This involves collecting differing views, recognising differing ways of constructing arguments and giving each credence. This is followed by collectively equating them on their own merits, which provides a rigour based on conceptual rationality but without the proscribing disciplinary methods to realise action. The requirement is that prior to the intellectual decision, the moral agency of *affactio iustitae* (where the will is disposed towards the intrinsic goodness of things) should dominate. Such a pedagogy will recognise the freedom to choose for all, of openness to others and tolerance of their ideas. It would celebrate the sameness and the diversity between us and it will be able to embrace the univocity of our being both immanent and transcendental with other things in our universe.

The role of teaching is to help the will to harness the intellect to exist with others, to influence the world for the betterment of all whilst maintaining an identity of self-worth. In transdisciplinary terms, this is revealed within the concept of the univocity of Being in all things in order to develop abilities of individual self-observation, to be self-critical and to confront our illusions of who we might be and what we might become. It is about confronting self-deception when making truth statements achieved through self-referential truth seeking and finding strength to honour what one finds through such examination. For self-deception might be expedient to protect ourselves from pain but it can lead us from despair to dread and thwarts our courage to be. This also enables us to appreciate universality and difference and to seek to reveal the co-existent transcendentals (goodness, truth, beauty and unity) in our being and Being. It would manifest itself in our world, respecting other entities through compassion.

Such an approach is risky, for in doing so the unpleasant and regrettable about oneself is revealed as well as the praiseworthy but it would seek to encourage wonder, compassion, respect and curiosity in the things we notice within the ecology of Being and our part in it. This might lead to active, liberating, poetic and creative pedagogies of enquiry such as student-led play where collaboration and individuality are fused in a self-cultivation of being participants in, not observers of, new realities. In the presence of these new realities a praxis for good and justice would frame the experience of education. As a process it would seek harmony between the intellect, feelings and body to remove the distinction between formal education and the civic engagement allowing self-cultivation to be taught in the sense of the joint forms of agency argued for by Nicolescu and Scotus. The actualisation is manifest in multiple forms, shaping the patterning of our ways of becoming, and implicitly linked to an educative appreciation of

the willed self-cultivation of the individual whilst retaining a duty to others. Our individuality is the freedom with which we make choices as to our becoming in the flux of this unity.

So What?

If there is a new metaphysic to be found for a transdisciplinary reality which transcends the known, it is less anthropocentric and draws its genus not from separation of truth and faith but from wonder, awe, beauty and oneness. Then we might be able to liberate ourselves from the imprisonment of categorical lives and to understand anew who we are becoming what impact we might have on being with others. Nothing short of reshaping our societies and within it our institution of educational power might be required and that is a huge issue beyond me and this paper. It is work that is being done in the growing number of courses in postdigital humanities in universities but are these institutions the correct places?¹¹ Surely these spaces would become different places and cultures where public intellectuals might flourish outside of designated learning hubs whose function would then be coordinate instruction in disciplines as skills rather than intrinsic valuable hegemonies of knowledge. Much more could be imagined and envisioned.

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¹¹ See Knox (2019) for a wider and engaging discussion of postdigital (and) education.

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