

# **Walking the boundaries in Antwerp: some informal comments about carrying out interdisciplinary conversation**

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The most important feature of the Antwerp conference, for me at least, was the serious interest shown by participants in engaging in interdisciplinary conversation with the other disciplines involved with business ethics. From Mike Naughton's opening comments onward, this commitment was audible in the papers I heard, and in the plenaries which tapped the legal field and other domains of expertise. To me as a Lutheran, such a broadly construed conversation represents Roman Catholicism at its best—openminded, inquisitive, eager to learn and borrow from the full range of human knowledge.

Two styles of interdisciplinary conversation were evident, and I would like to comment upon each. The first is what might be termed the “evaluative” model. Important texts, questions or domains of knowledge are mapped out, and then tested for their adequacy relative to Catholic norms—for example, normative conceptions of the common good, society or of theological anthropology. Such claims then become a litmus test of the value of the text or discipline in question. Now, the strength of this approach is obvious: it locates new material within a familiar framework of teaching, thus making or at least implying an authoritative judgment about its utility for the faithful seeking guidance. But it has a corollary weakness. The danger is that such evaluation easily can short-circuit the conversation, depriving Catholic social thought of new insights. Of course, this danger is hardly restricted to Catholic investigations; it is sorely tempting to Lutherans (I speak here from personal experience!) and to other traditions to evaluate other realms of knowledge for adequacy relative to doctrinal beliefs.

The question which I suspect will always confront theorists embedded in a Catholic (or Lutheran, etc.) worldview is how and to what extent to engage economists, organization theorists, and representatives of the other secular disciplines. Must one evaluate their claims upon one's own turf—effectively redefine them—before proceeding with the conversation? Or can one move to their own turf of argumentation—by accepting, as heuristically helpful even if not correlative with ultimate reality, their assumptions and claims?

Since I suspect that many of the Antwerp conference participants would be more interested in exploring, rather than simply evaluating other realms of knowledge, let me sketch a second model of interdisciplinary conversation, which I would call the “inquisitive” or “exploratory” approach. This model may already be intuitively familiar, but let me outline it in ideal form. Here the questions a secular discipline poses and the answers it offers are approached on their own terms. The rationale for such open-mindedness is the confidence that one’s religious tradition has something to learn from this domain of knowledge, until proven otherwise. One therefore asks questions of the following sort: what is the kind of knowledge being sought—what is the discipline trying to accomplish? What parameters of methodology and language does it set itself, and why? What are its own internal criteria of success in explaining how business organizations function, and in prescribing how they ought to function? What does it help me understand about business organizations? What room does this domain knowledge leave for alternative or competing explanations and prescriptions?

Let me illustrate with Father Mele’s paper. He economically and judiciously traces the evolving debate about the kind and degree of moral agency which can be ascribed to the modern corporation. This is no trivial issue, as I gathered from currents of conversation at the conference, and I doubt that he would be satisfied with the anthropological judgments rendered by the evaluative model he used. In applying the exploratory model, one might further ask how adequate these competing philosophical models are as judged internally, by criteria which have emerged in the philosophical debate. An empathic investigation is needed: what are these philosophers trying to accomplish; what kinds of problems are they running into and why; what other disciplinary viewpoints might help resolve some of these problems?

Once a thoroughly empathic understanding has been reached of what they are trying to accomplish, then it becomes appropriate to reach into Catholic social thought for correlative debates and proposed answers to the problems which the philosophers have encountered in explaining corporate moral agency—rather than simply using Catholic social thought as a criterion to separate the sheep from the goats in secular models. Here the Catholic tradition has a resource of astounding heuristic value: the marvelous thing about a tradition committed to natural law is that any phenomenon one is looking at already should be familiar in some sense. If it indeed is natural, one should find hints and patterns already in existence, and Catholic social thought should already have begun to discuss it, in some sense, however provisionally. (Witness, for example, how the principle of subsidiarity has been found so useful by people outside the Catholic tradition.) It is for this reason that no discipline or domain of knowledge should be seen as threatening by virtue of whatever “error” is found to reside within it.

There is an additional consideration which serves to focus attention on the “exploratory” model of interdisciplinary conversation. When discussing corporate moral agency, contract theories of the firm, social contract thinking, models of motivation, and the like, as happened at Antwerp, it usually is premature to ask about the raw truth value (=the degree to which they correspond to reality), because that is not what these intellectual constructs aim at. These are models, and the value of models lies in the way that they

help us understand. The first question is whether they are heuristically fruitful, rather than whether they are true as a matter of fact. One debates their adequacy as frameworks for representing reality, rather than their rightness in actually representing it. I noted a tendency at the conference to debate the truth value of the assumptions upon which these models are based, and to find them correct, in terms of describing the world, or false because they fall short of Catholic anthropology. The more helpful approach, I think, would be to ask: does model x, y or z help us understand what goes on? Or is model x, y or z implausible, overly stretched, undernourished, bizarre?

The exploratory model requires, as a methodological commitment, the temporary suspension or shelving of one's religiously minded convictions about human nature and sociality. I don't pretend that this is easy to do, particularly since religious worldviews find themselves embattled by the individualizing and secularizing assumptions which undergird Western economic systems. Of course, it remains important to ask what are the limits of knowledge achieved by the non-Catholic disciplines, particularly relative to normative Catholic claims. Yet that kind of judgment needs to wait until all the juice has been squeezed from the fruit. (And, if I may be puckish for a moment, truly interdisciplinary conversation requires being willing to receive as good as one gets. To round out the open character of the conversation, Catholic scholars need to open themselves to critique: to turn the tables and ask: how would people within the discipline (economics, philosophy, etc.) might appraise what use which is made of their ideas within the frame of Catholic social thought?) The point here is not only to avoid erroneous interpretation, but to model genuine conversation.

To summarize, I would suggest that the steps in the "exploratory" or "inquisitive" model include the following: a) approach a domain of knowledge with the conviction that there is something to be learned from it, and retain that operating assumption until it is proven false. b) Adopt an empathic perspective. Engage domain of knowledge on its own terms, by bracketing (temporarily) one's own faith convictions. Squeeze from it every bit of insight. c) Resume an external, critical perspective: ask what are the limits of the discipline's competence from the perspective of other disciplines (not yet Catholic social thought). d) Engage the evaluative step, in order to interpret the knowledge generated according to the normative visions of the faith; to discern what useful knowledge one can gain from this domain. e) Ask how scholars operating within that domain might assess the interpretive appropriation made by Catholic social thought.

It is presumptuous of me to hold up for critical inquiry the methodology of a religious tradition which I share only in part. I would not dare to do so if the dangers of the "evaluative" model were not already so familiar to me, as I have seen it practiced in my own tradition! In any case, I sketch these two models in a tentative and interrogatory fashion, and could benefit from critical responses. It seems to me entirely appropriate to the nature of this conference that there be self-conscious reflection about what it means to engage in interdisciplinary conversation. I therefore would welcome feedback; in fact, I hope this opening bid would be viewed as a challenge to develop a robust method for interdisciplinary conversation particularly appropriate to Catholic social thought.