

THE TRAGIC CHARACTER OF A MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCHER

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1. INTRODUCTION: THE PERSON BEHIND THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Jeanne Gaakeer is a person with three professions and three disciplines. Her two current profession roles, as judge and law professor, are nicely symbolized in the two gowns on the cover of her book *Judging from experience*.² However, she started her career by teaching English in secondary education. She has a background in three disciplines: she studied English language and literature, law and philosophy. Her academic work draws on each of these disciplines. This combination of disciplines and professions provides quite a unique perspective which distinguishes her work as a law professor. Whereas interdisciplinary legal research nowadays focuses mostly on empirical legal studies, the combination of law and social sciences, Jeanne's work highlights a different combination of disciplines, namely law and the humanities.

Interdisciplinary research can take many forms, ranging from a superficial use of a second discipline to a thorough integration of disciplines. Large interdisciplinary research projects are usually executed in teams that include researchers from different disciplines. However, sometimes only one researcher is involved, when a researcher masters different disciplines. This is the case with most of Jeanne Gaakeer's research. Of the 128 articles since 1992 listed on her EUR website, only six are co-authored.³ There is no need for cooperation in broader teams for her, as she masters the relevant disciplines herself.

In this article, I will focus on scholars like Jeanne who have a full mastery of two or more disciplines. I will call them multidisciplinary scholars.⁴ Not every multidisciplinary scholar engages in multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary research.⁵

1 I would like to thank Rebecca Bosch, Tegan Snyman and Sanne Taekema for their helpful comments on a draft version of this article.

2 J. Gaakeer, *Judging from Experience: Law, Praxis, Humanities*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2019.

3 <https://www.eur.nl/people/jeanne-gaakeer>, last accessed 19 September 2023.

4 The meaning of 'multidisciplinary scholar' is thus completely neutral with regard to the type of research: it only implies that a researcher masters multiple disciplines.

5 Multidisciplinary research combines multiple disciplines but does not integrate them, whereas interdisciplinary research integrates them. See S. Taekema and W. van der Burg, *Contextualising Legal Research. A Methodological Guide*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2024, p. 124.

Sometimes the disciplines are such that a combination of them in one research project is rarely useful, as when a researcher has backgrounds in law and quantum physics. Even if disciplines could easily be combined in interdisciplinary research projects, for example when someone has studied both philosophy and law, researchers may decide not to do so and only do monodisciplinary research. In this article, however, I will discuss researchers with a multidisciplinary background who engage in some form of interdisciplinary research. My focus is not, as in most methodological discussions, on the project but on the person. The question is how the two or more disciplinary dimensions can be combined within a researcher's personality.

2. VARIETIES OF INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

One reason why this topic interests me is a personal one: I have a multidisciplinary background as well. I studied philosophy (in particular ethics) and law and have some basic understanding of social sciences. Most of my research has been interdisciplinary in nature, often in broad interdisciplinary groups. I strongly advocate research projects in which law, philosophy and social sciences are integrated. One of the core problems that I have tried to address in my research on methodology is how the various disciplines can be integrated. How can we translate, transform and incorporate insights from different disciplines into the disciplinary frameworks of other disciplines? However, this is not merely a problem for research on methodology but also a personal problem. What is my identity as a scholar? How do these different disciplinary aspects of my work combine? Sometimes it may seem that I integrate these aspects harmoniously into one interdisciplinary personality. But frequently, there is also tension and even incommensurability: it is as if I try to live in two different worlds simultaneously. I can illustrate this best with two examples from my own experience.

The first example relates to a project on ethical and legal issues with regard to AIDS and HIV infection, in the early years of the disease. With two colleagues, I set out to write an article for a popular academic journal on whether mandatory HIV tests for life insurances would lead our society on a slippery slope towards a broad acceptance of genetic tests. I had to write the section in which we summarized the literature on the slippery slope argument, but I wrestled in vain. For days, I was wandering around, frustrated, doubting my academic future (my PhD project was stuck at the time as well), because I seemed too stupid to understand an argument that was so intuitively simple. Then I realized that the problem was associated with my multidisciplinary background. If I formulated the argument in way that satisfied the jurist in me, the ethicist was not satisfied – and vice versa. On further reflection, I discovered that the slippery slope argument worked differently in the case-oriented context of judge-made law than in the rule-oriented context of legislation and that both contexts were different from that of moral change. In the end, the article on mandatory HIV tests

was never finished, and I published an article on slippery slope arguments in an ethics journal.⁶ In this article, there was no integration between the jurist's and the ethicist's perspectives – the core idea was precisely that they could not be integrated because law and morality were very different. The perspective of law could not do justice to that of ethics, and vice versa. However, the two were combined at a higher level, in a third disciplinary perspective, namely that of argumentation theory. This made it possible to analyse the differences between the contexts of morality and law and provide an interdisciplinary, integrating perspective on when slippery slope arguments might be valid and relevant. In this example, it was the initial resistance against integration that led to novel insights. I had to switch repeatedly between the two perspectives in order to understand the differences.

The second example is one with a primarily doctrinal character. In an article for the Dutch *Nederlands Juristenblad*, I argued that excluding same-sex couples from the institution of marriage was unjustified. I relied on a philosophical analysis of discrimination and referred to empirical studies that debunked the argument that children growing up with same-sex parents would be harmed.⁷ I used philosophy and social sciences to enrich and inform my legal analysis. I did not need a full understanding of the social sciences; all I needed was the ability to assess whether the studies I referred to were valid and reliable.⁸ My understanding of philosophy, however, needed to be more thorough, because I used philosophical methods to engage in philosophical analysis. As I criticized the existing law, I could not restrict myself to doctrinal perspectives on marriage and discrimination; it was the prevailing opinion (in Dutch: *heersende leer*) that excluding same-sex couples from marriage was not discriminatory. The philosophical analysis of discrimination provided an external perspective and a theoretical normative framework on which to build my critical arguments about the existing marriage law and advocating legislative change. These critical arguments were then reinforced by showing that Article 1 of the Dutch Constitution could be reinterpreted in a way that supported my critique. In the end, it was quite unproblematic to integrate the philosophical arguments into the doctrinal one. This example is probably representative of most interdisciplinary legal research projects executed by one researcher. The doctrinal research question is dominant, and insights and methods from other disciplines are used only insofar as they are essential in answering the doctrinal question.

These two examples illustrate two varieties of interdisciplinary research, although there are many other varieties. They may range from studies in which there are two

6 W. van der Burg, 'The Slippery Slope Argument', *Ethics*, Vol. 102, No. 1, 1991, pp. 42-65.

7 W. van der Burg, 'Het huwelijk - een omstreden instituut', *Nederlands Juristenblad*, Vol. 72, No. 29, 1997, pp. 1321-1325.

8 Actually, for this purpose I would not have needed any competence in social sciences myself; I could also have relied on the opinion of expert colleagues.

separate and parallel monodisciplinary subprojects and none of the disciplines in the end provide a dominant integrating perspective, through studies with separate subprojects but with one of the disciplines providing an integrating perspective, up to studies where there is one dominant discipline and the other disciplines merely provide some input.

So what can we learn from these examples? In the first example, the analysis by the two disciplines was separate but parallel, and both resisted incorporation of their insights and methods into the other discipline. Integration between the two analyses took place at a higher level of abstraction, in the integrating perspective of a third discipline, namely argumentation theory. In the second case, the legal research question – what is the best legislation? – provided the framework for how the philosophical analysis and the empirical insights should be included in the doctrinal recommendations. Even so, the philosophical analysis was initially executed independently of the doctrinal one, whereas the input from the social sciences was restricted to merely quoting some relevant insights based on a literature study.

There is not one type which is the best. The research purposes, practical limitations and many other factors determine the most adequate research design. Multidisciplinary researchers often switch between different types. The various types may demand a more or less intensive interdisciplinary engagement from researchers. Sometimes researchers merely need to understand the literature in an auxiliary discipline, in order to critically assess the quality and reliability of the sources. That is a very minimal reliance on an auxiliary discipline. However, some interdisciplinary projects require a full engagement with two or more disciplines, combining subprojects that are relatively autonomous and that are each executed according to the methodological standards of the respective disciplines.

3. THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCHER: A COMBINATION OF ROLES?

Having analysed the different types of projects, it is time to focus on the researcher. How do the different disciplines combine in the identity of the multidisciplinary researcher? Multidisciplinary researchers can alternate between the different disciplines, and often do this unconsciously. When studying a phenomenon, they may shift between the disciplinary perspectives and between the different ways to structure and perceive the phenomenon. They may also perceive differences between the conceptual frameworks and the methods of each discipline, leading to additional insights. Thus, they may acquire a richer and more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon and of their disciplines.

This may be compared with the bilingual person – someone who masters two languages and their associated cultures. A bilingual background has many advantages, not only in the obvious practical sense. It has been suggested that the possibility to

think in two languages has positive effects on cognitive abilities, but the jury is still out on this.⁹ More importantly for our purposes, a bilingual background may obviously provide for a richer understanding of both languages, their conceptual frameworks and associations and the phenomena expressed in those languages. Understanding the subtle or radical differences between two languages may provide a better understanding of each of those languages but may also foster conceptual creativity. We may perceive nuances in conceptual frameworks and in social reality that are beyond the grasp of a monolingual speaker. However, the comparison of multidisciplinary with bilingualism only goes so far. Integrating both languages into one interlanguage is not desirable or possible. Trying to combine English or Dutch may lead to so-called *Steenkolenengels* or to an abundance of anglicisms, but it would not combine the richness of both languages, but simply choose between the available synonyms and rules of grammar from both languages and eliminate most words and rules that lose out. So bilingualism can be compared with multidisciplinary but not with interdisciplinarity, where integration is required.

A multidisciplinary background may thus also enrich those who do not engage in interdisciplinary research but strictly confine themselves to doctrinal research. Even jurists with an additional background in theology who completely restrict themselves to law may still sometimes refer back to methods or concepts from their theological background. To me such a frequent shift between disciplinary perspectives is simply second nature; I often do it without explicitly being aware that I do so. Examining both disciplinary perspectives on a topic is almost like a routine check. However, sometimes, such an automatic alternation between the two disciplines may result in becoming aware of specific differences and may thus be the basis for more intensive forms of interdisciplinary research. In fact, my initial struggle with the slippery slope argument was the result of an unconscious alternation between the two disciplines; only after I became aware of the differences did it change into an interdisciplinary project.

Now let us focus on multidisciplinary researchers who actually engage in interdisciplinary research. Regardless of the type of project, interdisciplinary research has two characteristics. First, the research in each of the disciplines must be executed (or must have been executed by others) in a relatively autonomous way, according to the methodological standards of that discipline. And, second, the results of both disciplines must somehow be integrated, either within the perspective and framework of one of the disciplines or in the perspective of a different discipline. It is this combination of partial separation and integration that is crucial to interdisciplinary research, and that provides specific challenges to multidisciplinary researchers. On the one hand, they

9 See on this discussion: P. Bright and R. Filippi, 'Editorial: Perspectives on the "Bilingual Advantage": Challenges and Opportunities', *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol. 10, 2019, p. 1346, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01346>.

have to keep the disciplinary dimensions separate, while, on the other hand, they must somehow be integrated.

One possible approach would be to regard the two disciplines as associated with different roles. Just as Jeanne can play the roles of judge and scholar, as well as many other roles, such as friend, citizen and so on, she could also play the roles of the jurist, the philosopher and the literary scholar. Alas, this approach does not fly. The idea of a role is that it is not merely distinct but really separate from other roles. Personal preferences and commitments should not influence Jeanne's work as a judge, nor should her scholarly work influence her work as a judge. As a scholar she may have criticized a statute, but that criticism should not influence her interpretation of the statute. Her judicial robe symbolizes this neutrality. The role morality of both judges and scholars requires that they remain impartial, objective and neutral and that their personal preferences should not influence their work.

Of course, we know that this image is too simple. Both judges and scholars must necessarily rely on their personal experience, their understanding of society, and the skills and insights that they have acquired in their life in various other roles. A judge who cannot rely on personal emotions would even be severely handicapped when making decisions.¹⁰ Neither can scholars ignore their personal background. Even so, the core idea of these distinct roles is that they should not be integrated, because they have different purposes and role moralities, whereas for interdisciplinary research the two disciplines should be partly, but not completely separate. The distinctive purpose and advantage of interdisciplinary research are precisely that the two disciplines are connected and that they complement and enrich each other.

A similar objection would hold for seeing the two disciplinary sides as symptoms of a split personality, as in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.¹¹ The main problem with this metaphor is not the question of which discipline would be seen as the bad guy and which as the good guy but that the two sides are completely disconnected. When one side does not know what the other side does, perhaps is not even aware of its existence, how can there be integration?

4. A VIRTUOUS MEAN?

A second approach to understanding the relation between the various disciplinary approaches within the multidisciplinary researcher could be that of virtue ethics,

10 M. IJzermans, *De overtuigingskracht van emoties bij het rechterlijk oordeel*, Den Haag, Boom Juridische uitgevers, 2011.

11 Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, London, Longmans, Green & Co, 1886.

especially the Aristotelian notion that virtue is the mean between two extremes.¹² The extremes in this approach would be those of one fully integrated interdisciplinary personality and that of a personality with two completely separate personae. The good multidisciplinary researcher could then be seen as someone who finds the balance between integration and separation of both disciplinary perspectives.

Such a virtue ethics approach is illuminating at first sight as it emphasizes the idea that interdisciplinary research requires both separation and integration. The extreme of full separation means that there is no integration at all, and thus no interdisciplinarity. The disciplines do not enrich or confront each other at all. The extreme of full integration would imply that the distinctiveness of the various disciplines with their distinct methodologies and perspectives is not recognized. That could lead to an eclectic selection from the distinctive conceptual frameworks and methods or even to an unacceptable hotchpotch of incommensurable elements. So we need something that recognizes both the distinctiveness of the disciplines and the possibility of integration. Somewhere between these two extremes we should find a balance, a mean.

However, there are two reasons this will not work. The first is that what is desirable on the continuum between separation and integration may vary considerably. The two examples that I have discussed illustrate this. The slippery slope project required a strong emphasis on separation, whereas the marriage project required a strong integrative perspective from the start. The second reason is that the image of a mean is much too harmonious. The tensions between the disciplines can be real; the conceptual frameworks and their methods are often incommensurable. Researchers may feel torn between what is a justified understanding according to one discipline and what is a justified understanding according to the other. Sometimes there is harmony, especially when disciplines share many characteristics, such as ethics and law. But more often, there is a serious tension, where the different disciplines have seriously conflicting frameworks and methods. These differences and tensions can be highly productive, and therefore they should also be upheld, perhaps even cherished, by the multidisciplinary researchers themselves.

5. A TRAGIC CHARACTER

Multidisciplinary researchers should – at least sometimes – not downplay the tensions and inconsistencies between their disciplines but cherish them. Both disciplinary perspectives should be fully embraced – but they cannot be fully embraced at the same time. Researchers must alternate between the two perspectives rather than integrate them from the beginning. Even if one discipline is dominant, researchers must still do

12 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, revised ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991, Book II.

justice to the methodological perspectives of other disciplines. If doctrinal scholars want to quote a sociological study, they need to ascertain that the study is sound according to the methodological standards of sociology. In a paradoxical sense, we can say that in order to do good interdisciplinary research, the researchers themselves should not become integrated interdisciplinary personalities but remain multidisciplinary.

The criticisms of the two alternatives made so far help to illuminate the problem. On the one hand, the notion of a role morality is too strong – it does not allow for integration. On the other hand, virtue ethics suggests too much harmony and integration – it does not do justice to the real tensions and incommensurabilities between disciplinary perspectives.

I suggest that the notion of a tragic character may be used to understand and structure the identity of the multidisciplinary researcher. This notion is illustrated by the Greek tragedies such as Sophocles' *Antigone*. In these tragedies, the focus is on human action. Tragic situations often give rise to ethical dilemmas in which no choice of action can avoid disastrous consequences. A tragic character is then someone who cannot help doing wrong in some respect because there are two fundamentally conflicting obligations.

Such an understanding of tragedy may seem somewhat far removed from the quiet life of the academic researcher. Nevertheless, the notion of a tragic character can be highly illuminating. Doing research is a form of action. That action is guided by a disciplinary framework, which includes its distinct sets of concepts, methods, objects, problem awareness and research purposes.¹³ Disciplines have distinct ways of understanding reality. They have different interpretations and operationalizations of the ultimate goal of research, knowledge and understanding, and of how this goal can be reached. Disciplines thus have their own disciplinary perspective, and they 'discipline' the researchers in how to act. But if researchers belong to two disciplines, both the perceptions of reality and the action guides resulting from the respective disciplinary frameworks may conflict.

Bert van den Brink provides a conceptualization of the notion of the tragic that may help us to understand the multidisciplinary personality. He suggests two core elements. The first is that "the colliding views have to have a certain validity within the social setting in which they eventually collide".¹⁴ The second is that this collision of the views "can be understood as a necessary consequence of the ethical self-understandings of the parties to the conflict".¹⁵ In the context of Van den Brink's theory of liberalism, this

13 S. Taekema and B. van Klink, 'On the Border. Limits and Possibilities of Interdisciplinary Research', in B. van Klink and S. Taekema (Eds.), *Law and Method. Interdisciplinary Research into Law*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2011, pp. 7-32, p. 8.

14 B. van den Brink, *The Tragedy of Liberalism. An Alternative Defense of a Political Tradition*, New York, SUNY Press, 2000, p. 34.

15 Ibid., p. 34.

self-understanding has an ethical (or political) character. However, if we replace ethical by epistemological, this conceptualization fits the ambivalence of the multidisciplinary researcher.

We can see the position of multidisciplinary researchers engaging in interdisciplinary research as an *epistemological tragedy*. In an ethical tragedy there are two underlying world views, or two underlying values that cannot be reconciled in one action. In an epistemological tragedy, there are two disciplinary frameworks with their own conceptual frameworks, perceptions of reality and their own methodological requirements that cannot be reconciled. These colliding frameworks are valid within their own disciplinary settings – Van den Brink's first element. And the collisions are a necessary consequence of the epistemological self-understandings of multidisciplinary researchers who engage in interdisciplinary research – Van den Brink's second element. This does not lead to dramatic consequences in the sense of loss of life or liberty as in the Greek tragedies or to tragic choices as in the movie (and novel) *Sophie's Choice*. But it may lead to a sense of unease in researchers that they are not living up to their standards, that they are not pursuing the goal of knowledge and understanding in the ways it is understood and with the methods prescribed by *both* their disciplines. Conforming to the methodologies and frameworks of one discipline would cause them to be disloyal to those of the other.

How should multidisciplinary researchers deal with this tragic character of their work? My suggestion is that they should alternate between the two disciplinary perspectives and frameworks. In a continuous dialectical interplay, they take one perspective and compare it with the different perspective of the other discipline. That may lead to refinements in the analysis of one – or both – of the two disciplines. But at no point during this process do the disciplinary frameworks merge. It is precisely the fact that they do not merge that may lead to novel insights.

Even so, there should be integration in order to do interdisciplinary research. That can be done only by choosing one specific disciplinary perspective, usually that of one of the disciplines, but occasionally also that of a third perspective like that of argumentation theory in the slippery slope example. Which perspective should be chosen depends on the research purposes, the research question and the audience. If the question is how to interpret or change the law, the doctrinal perspective is in the lead. If, on the other hand, the question is to determine whether the law is just, the philosophical perspective provides the framework within which the other disciplinary insights are integrated. However, choosing a perspective means that not all insights or nuances from the auxiliary perspectives can be included. The incommensurability of the disciplinary perspectives implies that it is impossible to do justice to everything that is important to the auxiliary discipline. Words may have a slightly different meaning; even the formulation of the problem may be different. Some methodological or conceptual discussions may need to be skipped because they are not relevant to the dominant disciplinary perspective. This is a frustrating experience familiar to anyone

who has done interdisciplinary research in teams; the team members do not always agree on how to formulate the research results in the common publication. If a scholar does interdisciplinary research as a solitary effort, this conflict has to be settled within the researcher's mind.

Integration is always selective. This may lead to feelings of unease. The philosopher in one's mind may protest against too simple uses of the word justice or fairness, the sociologist may protest that the word institution is used incorrectly by the lawyer, and so on. In that sense it is indeed a tragic choice: the choice that is made always leaves us with feelings of unease or guilt over not having done justice to all relevant values. Of course, this does not have dramatic consequences as in *Sophie's Choice*. But the choice has to be made. Sometimes a project can lead to multiple publications directed to different audiences: for example, one directed to a philosophical audience, one to a sociological one and one to a legal audience. This may enable us to do better justice to each of the disciplinary perspectives in ourselves. Yet even then, the fact remains that in one publication, in order to provide a coherent narrative and a coherent perspective, it is usually necessary to let one perspective be the dominant one.

6. CONCLUSION: TRAGIC BUT NOT DRAMATIC

My conclusion is that the multidisciplinary researcher is indeed a tragic character – always torn between conflicting perspectives. This tragic feeling can be reinforced by the institutional context, especially in continental law schools that are strongly oriented to professional practice: multidisciplinary researchers do not fit comfortably into primarily monodisciplinary contexts.¹⁶ Multidisciplinarity comes at a cost.

Paradoxically, it is precisely because of this tragic character that multidisciplinary researchers can provide novel insights. Multidisciplinary backgrounds allow one to see things in ways that others cannot, to understand problems from various perspectives, and thus find novel solutions. A multidisciplinary background is enriching and stimulates creativity. Multidisciplinarity is certainly often rewarding. Therefore, the professional existence of multidisciplinary researchers may not be dramatic, let alone catastrophic, in the sense of the Greek tragedies or Hamlet. Yes, the life of a multidisciplinary researcher has a tragic character – but it is not a drama.

¹⁶ In my experience, in law schools in the Common Law tradition, there is much more openness to interdisciplinary and non-doctrinal perspectives than in law schools in the Civil Law tradition.