

# Ethics is everywhere: Human Geography, Bioethics and the value of interdisciplinary collaboration

Interdisciplinarity is becoming increasingly important at a sector level within the world of academia and research. Funders are asking for evidence of plans for interdisciplinary approaches, and interdisciplinarity is an increasingly common keyword found within papers across the sector.

As scholars, we are based in separate disciplines (Daniel in Human Geography and Kristien in Bioethics). Both of our disciplines have a history of published works claiming interdisciplinarity. Like many disciplines, bioethics takes pride in its interdisciplinary approaches. Bioethicists, having always claimed to be interdisciplinary,<sup>1</sup> have often borrowed methodologies or concepts from other social sciences as a result of the 'empirical turn'. Less often, bioethicists have considered what the arts, humanities and social sciences can contribute regarding the theoretical underpinnings of those very findings.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, geographers claim interdisciplinarity through their collaboration with artists and scientists alike.<sup>3</sup> We argue that interdisciplinarity can go beyond this borrowing. It can be an iterative process in which collaboration occurs from the outset, a process of continuous learning and teaching between representatives of each other's fields. We believe that an engagement in the methods of a certain field also implies a requirement for engaging with theoretical underpinnings in that field. Interdisciplinary collaboration within research should not be limited to research outputs, nor should it exclusively start with bioethics as per Couture et al.'s call,<sup>4</sup> or from human geography for that matter. In what follows, we explore some of the potentials of how such 'true' interdisciplinarity between bioethics and human geography can take place. With this, we hope that others will consider interdisciplinarity to a greater extent with other, non-geographical disciplines too.

Regarding Human Geography as a discipline, Gibson writes '[a]n outsider could be forgiven for thinking that human geography was the study of the existence and distribution of humans on Earth'.<sup>5</sup> However, it is significantly more complex than this. Its contents span from economics to disability to social policy.

Generally, the overall aims of the discipline since 1950 have been to examine the space, place and scale, or the processes, that occur within spaces and places that affect or involve humans; space, place and scale are concepts that specifically allow scholars to think *spatially* and to engage in a deep and critical consideration of location, conditions, connections and scales. Human geography is about people and their relationship to surroundings, inclusive of the human and non(post-)human, inclusive of considerations regarding health and well-being—perhaps where the immediate connection with bioethics lies. As co-authors, our paths crossed through mutual colleagues of ours who introduced us. Daniel visited Kristien in Antwerp for a 2-month period of collaboration and co-learning. Initially, from Daniel's geographer's perspective, bioethics was interested in medical ethics exclusively. Prior to the visit, Kristien's understanding of human geography, as a bioethicist, was that it dealt with issues such as population density, transport and urbanisation in a quantitative way. However, through spending time dedicated to learning from each other and our respective disciplines, this process of *interdisciplining* offered wonderful insights into just how much we do not know about other disciplines and about the sheer potential for nuanced and ground-breaking insights that *true* interdisciplinarity between, in this instance, geography and bioethics can offer. We reflect in a way that echoes Elizabeth Olson: 'It shouldn't take us 20 more years to convince moral philosophers and ethicists that space is not inert, and geography is more than a metaphor'.<sup>6</sup>

With this in mind, we want to use this space to offer some examples of how our reflections work in relation to some specific cases that we engaged with during our collaboration.

Starting from several cases, ranging from the local to the global, we came to understand the incredibly generative nature of *doing* interdisciplinarity as an iterative, collaborative practice. Indeed, by tackling certain issues in an interdisciplinary way from the outset, new possibilities and challenges open up by engaging with the knowledges and concepts of other disciplines. For example, we reflected on the specific case of the 'parking space'. Although a topic of interest in human geography, thinking about parking spaces seems far removed from the interests of bioethicists. Human geographers have asked questions such as those regarding on-street policies for street and cycling

<sup>1</sup>Ives, J. (2014). A method of reflexive balancing in a pragmatic, interdisciplinary and reflexive bioethics. *Bioethics*, 28(6), 302–312.

<sup>2</sup>Couture, V., Béisle-Pippon, J., Cloutier, M., & Barnab, C. (2017). Merging arts and bioethics: An interdisciplinary experiment in cultural and scientific mediation. *Bioethics*, 31(8), 616–630.

<sup>3</sup>Foster, K., & Lorimer, H. (2007). Cultural geographies in practice: Some reflections on art-geography as collaboration. *Cultural Geographies*, 14(3), 425–432.

<sup>4</sup>Couture, V., et al., op. cit. note 2.

<sup>5</sup>Gibson, C. (2010). Guest editorial-creative geographies: Tales from the 'margins'. *Australian Geographer*, 41(1), 1–10.

<sup>6</sup>Olson, E. (2018). Geography and ethics III: Whither the next moral turn? *Progress in Human Geography*, 42(6), 937–948.

safety<sup>7</sup> and creative ways of subverting expected uses of paid-for parking spaces through hosting protests and picnics.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, bioethics is often expected to come up with concrete guidelines for specific cases. Interdisciplinary collaboration allows us to rethink ideas of navigating rights and duties in public spaces in relation to the parking space, frequently a paid for space that is oftentimes charged at an hourly rate and usually reserved for cars or other motorised vehicles such as motorbike, mopeds, vans and so on. For example, questions might include who is disabled 'enough' to have a right to disabled parking space usage and how does the position and signposting of such spaces engender new rights, duties and expectations? By engaging with insights about the normative implications of space, as studied by human geographers, guidelines can become better. But guidelines themselves also affect the use of space, and bioethicists and human geographers can work together to understand this dynamic.

On the other end of the spectrum, interdisciplinary approaches can allow us new insights and futures into exploring health and responsibility in thinking about the entanglements of the biological and the social. Bioethicists, including one of the authors, have engaged extensively with the topic of the third case: epigenetics. Epigenetics is said to firmly prove the entanglement of place, culture and body. 'Biography becomes biology', but certainly this also means that place becomes biology. Human geographers can learn from bioethicists about the normative impact of discussions on biology and the nature/culture divide. Bioethicists can learn from human geographers about the normativity of entanglement with space itself. Collaborating from the outset, then, can provide new and nuanced insights for the sector as a whole.

We hope to have sketched a joint future of not only human geography with bioethics but also of interdisciplinary work more generally. 'Who gets to live under which circumstances' is an ethical question of increasing importance. We argue that disciplines as seemingly far apart as human geography and bioethics can, and should, look for non-naïve ways to care for *space* that take into account the specificity of contexts and circumstances and help to acknowledge these cases and questions in the view that ethics is truly everywhere.

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<sup>7</sup>Russel, W., & Stenning, A. (2021). Beyond active travel: Children, play and community on streets during and after the coronavirus lockdown. *Cities and Health*, 5(Suppl. 1), S196–S199.

<sup>8</sup>Sachs Olsen, C. (2018). Collaborative challenges: Negotiating the complexities of socially engaged art within an era of neoliberal urbanism. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 36(2), 273–293.