

Stacking the Cheese

Justin Sytsma

Writing comments on a post about adversarial collaboration feels like a place where I should be adversarial (if in a collaborative spirit). But I agree with basically everything Eric says here. Frankly, this is all spot on. You probably don't want to read 500 words from me just saying "yep, this" and agreeing with his excellent, sensible advice, though. So, let me attempt to be provocative: Eric doesn't go far enough! (Not that he was trying to, of course.) *All* philosophers should be asking themselves what empirical evidence would actually test their views.¹ Collaboration should be the *rule*, not the exception. And we should expect collaborations to have an adversarial element, treating this as a *feature*, not a bug.

Each of us is like Swiss cheese: we've all got our holes. We've got biases and blindspots. There are things we miss, problems that just don't occur to us, possibilities we don't see. And, further, we're generally bad at recognizing exactly where our holes are. If we want to get things right, we need to deal with our holes. Unfortunately, too often philosophical practice instead accentuates them, enshrining our prejudices (Machery 2017). In my opinion, what is needed is a fundamental shift toward methods that minimize our holes or otherwise cover them over.

Embracing empirical and experimental philosophy is one key step in this process. We should all be asking ourselves what actual evidence would support our views. (And if we can't come up with anything that would do the trick, then maybe we need to pause and reflect on what that tells us about our views and why we hold them.) Good scientific practice helps deal with our holes. And collaboration is part of this. There is a reason why work in the experimental sciences tends to be heavily collaborative. As Eric says, it can help keep you honest.

The promise of collaboration is not that it will get rid of our holes, but that it will help cover them over... like stacking multiple slices of Swiss cheese on top of each other. Of course, this will only work if the holes are in different spots. And this is most likely if you're taking slices from different places in the block. For this (increasingly tortured) metaphor, distance between slices corresponds with how adversarial the collaboration is. The further apart – the more adversarial – the more likely that your holes will fall in different places.

Most of my own work is ~~collaborate~~ collaborative², some of it deserving of the label "adversarial" (e.g. Fischer, Engelhardt, and Sytsma forthcoming; Sytsma, Schwenkler, and Bishop ms). In my experience, though, all collaborative work will have an adversarial element: even those philosophers I've worked with who I most agree with, I still disagree with on a lot of details. There's a tradeoff in how adversarial a collaboration is: as above, the more adversarial the more likely you'll cover up each other's holes; but on the flip side, collaboration can be difficult, and in my experience the more adversarial the project the more work it involves and the more likely to run the risk that you won't be able to come to a conclusion that all parties are willing to endorse.

In general, collaboration is hard work (although worth it). Anecdotally, it seems that many in philosophy harbor the feeling that collaboration is a cheat or a shortcut; that joint-authored papers

#

¹ Well excepting formal work where proofs will replace empirical evidence.

² Collaborators also help catch typos *before* you submit something.

shouldn't count for as much as solo-authored papers in hiring or promotion because the work has been split up between multiple people. I believe this is a mistake. Certainly, it hasn't been my experience. If anything, I think I end up spending more time on collaborative projects than on comparable solo papers. But I think it is worth the effort, and my work is better as a result of the collaboration.

Collaboration, especially adversarial collaboration, gives you built-in critics. It forces you to get clear on exactly what you're arguing, increases the likelihood that you'll identify and address questionable assumptions and live alternative possibilities, and as a result should increase your confidence in the finished product.

References

Fischer, E., P. Engelhardt, and J. Sytsma (forthcoming). "Inappropriate stereotypical inferences? An adversarial collaboration in experimental ordinary language philosophy." *Synthese*.

Machery, E. (2017). *Philosophy Within Its Proper Bounds*. OUP.

Schwitzgebel, E. (2021). "Adversarial Collaboration." Brains Blog:
<https://philosophyofbrains.com/2021/02/02/cognitive-science-of-philosophy-symposium-adversarial-collaboration.aspx>

Sytsma, J., J. Schwenkler, and R. Bishop (ms). "Has the Side-Effect Effect been cancelled? (No, not yet.)"