



## THE LUXURY OF CONFUSION PATRIK NOSIL

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In my experience, clarity regarding difficult empirical or conceptual academic issues tends to emerge only after periods of intense confusion. These periods of confusion can be extremely prolonged. Sometimes, when I have persisted in such confusion for long enough, and stayed devoted to solving the problem at hand, clarity has eventually emerged. However, the luxury and freedom to be confused about a problem until it is solved does not often exist. I have found that in “normal” academic life there is often insufficient time to devote to pondering difficult but interesting problems. There is so little time to devote to nagging inconsistencies about the way one is thinking about a problem. In essence, there is so little time to be confused, insufficient time to convert that confusion into clarity. The year at the Wissenschaftskolleg removed this problem by providing the luxury of plentiful time to be confused. On numerous occasions, this allowed clarity to emerge from the confusion.

I stress that the title and topic of my yearly report are not meant to be negative in any sense – it was truly a luxury to have the freedom to be confused for as long as one wants, on any topic one chooses. Of course, this removed any excuses for why one did not find the solution to a problem. If I gave up on pondering a problem, failed to solve it, this was solely due to my own mental inadequacies, my own mental laziness for example. There were no other excuses. I could blame failure to solve a conceptual or analytical problem only on myself, not on a meeting, a pressing e-mail, a student at the door, or having to cook lunch. I will elaborate using some examples from the year.

To start, let me provide some background on my situation. A few years back, during the period when I was a post-doctoral researcher, Axel Meyer organized a focus group on sympatric speciation (the formation of new species in areas of geographic overlap) to be held at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I was fortunate enough to have Axel invite me to participate in this group, along with Jim Mallet and Jeff Feder. I owe and thank Axel very much for this. After accepting the invitation and being accepted by the Wissenschaftskolleg itself, I was offered and accepted a permanent job as Assistant Professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. The department that hired me was kind enough to allow me an extra year of leave to come participate as a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Thus, I came to Berlin before ever arriving at my new post in Boulder, with a year to spend in Berlin before setting up my own laboratory. The year was invaluable in giving me time to consider my own research directions. I will be arriving in Boulder immensely more prepared for my new position than if I had not had this year at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

During the academic year, personal confusion was often transformed into personal clarity. Some of these transformations were rather concrete and pragmatic. For example, I had been struggling for years with how to conduct a certain analysis. I knew in the back of my mind that conducting this analysis properly would require learning at least the basics of a new programming language, a task I never had time for before coming to Berlin. Once here, I learned the necessary commands and conducted the analyses. Some of the transformations were less tangible. For example, I managed to finish papers that had been mostly written for years, but that were missing the final touches required to make them potentially useful contributions to the field. I had not previously had the time to decipher just how to make those finishing touches. I also had topics that I had not written about in the past, issues that I had simply been pondering for years, but that remained too obscure and abstract to formalize into a project. During the year, I managed to crystallize my thoughts pertaining to some of these issues, and to then write drafts of papers or grants

based upon them. Finally, and beyond “reason” (especially for someone at my junior stage of an academic career), I undertook the writing of a book. The topic is the role of adaptation to different ecological environments in the formation of new species. I made this decision and started the book in mid-December and managed to make good progress during my stay. This progress, however, was not without periods of confusion, and indeed I feel I learned much of the content of the future book during the actual writing of it.

The luxury to turn confusion into clarity was by no means restricted to my own individual work. There were many instances of turning confusion among the members of our focus group into clarity, collaborative confusion turned to collaborative clarity if you will. This always occurred under the guidance of our thoughtful leader, Axel. An example that concerns all four members of our group pertains to the very foundation of “sympatric speciation”: what is the actual meaning of “sympatry”? This topic has been debated for decades, and although in general agreement, the four of us in the focus group were not clearly united in our answer to this question. Our fuzzy discussions slowly crystallized into more lucid ones. We wrote a manuscript on the topic, which in turn got clearer and clearer through each revision. In the end, it all seemed obvious to us, and now it simply remains to be seen how our article, which is accepted for publication, affects debates concerning the meaning of sympatric speciation. In particular, Jim is to be thanked for persevering on this project and for undertaking the overwhelming bulk of the actual writing.

Another example concerns the development of a collaboration with Jeff Feder. It took the two of us almost the whole year to understand each other. I believe I am too narrow and strict in my thinking, and Jeff, perhaps, a bit too diffuse (apologies Jeff). Somehow, after hours and hours of discussion, we managed to merge my narrow-minded focus with his creativity to create papers that I believe are (forgive the cliché) greater than the sum of the parts. In no other academic setting do I remember having the luxury to sit in a colleague’s office for hours on end debating, going in circles, without interruption. Although at times it seemed we might go in circles endlessly, we had enough time to ensure this was not the case. In the end, a productive and truly enjoyable collaboration has emerged. We have one article accepted for publication in an international journal, two others submitted to such journals, and several other projects in the works.

The topic of confusion pervades outside of academic life. During my stay, I attempted to learn the basics of two languages, German and French. This was a true joy, although it did lead to constant confusion, verbal bumbling, and sometimes genuine headaches (luckily, the German and French languages were so busy fighting one another, they did not

interfere much with my two known languages, English and Croatian). The intensive German course I took in September and October was one of the most intense, humbling, and difficult experiences of my life. It was also one of the most rewarding. Being able to interact with people in the streets of Berlin using German truly enhanced the quality of my Berlin experience. The same goes for the ability to have basic conversations with the Wissenschaftskolleg staff in German. Admittedly, my German remains very rudimentary, but the basics exist, and are readily available (to both the amusement and frustration of the German teachers, I used to often proclaim: *Ich brauche nicht gut Deutsch, ich brauche schnell Deutsch! Wann kann mann nicht schnell sprechen, mann kann nicht sprechen!*). I thank the German instructors, particularly Eva, for their limitless patience. Learning French this year was important for my personal life and an undertaking I had been putting off for the year preceding my stay in Berlin. The bits I learned allowed me to at least enter basic conversations in French with my partner's parents. I am truly grateful to the Wissenschaftskolleg for providing the time and, importantly, the atmosphere, in which language learning could be so readily undertaken.

A final point I wanted to make is that this year provided the most extreme possibilities for both seclusion and for interaction. I enjoyed my interactions with the other Fellows and their families, which often involved discussions concerning an amazing array of topics. On this note, the Wissenschaftskolleg is to be commended on its efforts to integrate the spouses and other family members into the daily life of the institute. Also, it was a pleasure to visit the amazing town of Berlin with my partner H el ene and other friends. But I also took solitary time to myself to be, as described above, confused. The opportunity to have both factors, interaction and seclusion, so readily available at once is one of the great aspects of the Wissenschaftskolleg. In the end, it is hard to tell whether the year was dominated by confusion, amid some clarity, or perhaps the opposite? I do know one thing. As I start my new job and devote time to teaching, setting up my laboratory, writing grants, attending faculty meetings, and taking care of the multifaceted duties involved in normal academic life – I will miss the precious time I had to be confused this academic year. I thank the Wissenschaftskolleg once again for that time.