

Of Fractious Traditions and Family Resemblances in Philosophy of Education

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In an address to the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Denis C. Phillips identifies the postmodernists as non-players in the philosophical game as examples of “deconstruction gone mad.”¹ In his essay, “Constructivism Deconstructed,” Professor Phillips maps the terrain of constructivist theories of knowledge. First, he opposes the many forms of constructivism against traditional epistemology which he defines as: “The dominant tradition in late twentieth century Anglo-American epistemology that focuses upon the analysis of the conditions under which a person may reasonably claim to have knowledge; and the preferred treatment of this problem is in terms of justified true belief.”²

Having made this first cut, Phillips then suggests three dimensions that might be useful in drawing the boundaries between different positions within constructivism. The first, “along which many, if not all, forms of constructivism are spread, is this: They take a stand on the issue of whether knowledge is an individual or social construction.”³ The second is described in terms of activity and passivity of construction. The third “is with respect to whether epistemological or broadly socio-political concerns are dominant.”⁴ Using this system of demarcation, Jean-François Lyotard and the other “postmodernists” are located in the territory of the “strong program” which “distinguishes sharply between intellectual systems and social systems, and tries to explain the former as effect of the latter.”⁵

I suggest Professor Phillips’s account of these oppositions is inadequate for three broad reasons. First, his mapping of postmodernism makes it appear as an exponent of classical Marxism.⁶ Second, there is an adequate and growing conversation between deconstruction and analytic philosophy; this conversation weakens the possibility of drawing boundaries quite in the manner Phillips suggests. Third, Phillips uses Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* as the exemplar of postmodern theory, or what Phillips calls deconstruction. On Lyotard’s own account, this is not a philosophical work; rather, it is a philosopher’s report on the status of education in Quebec. For Lyotard’s philosophical work, we must turn to *Le Differend*. The context within which he places this work is the “linguistic turn” taken by Western philosophy under the influence of Martin Heidegger, but also Anglo-American philosophy, on the one hand. On the other, the decline of modern metaphysics frames his thought. Both these movements, as he sees it, have created a weariness of theory and a turn to “new this, new that, post-this, post-that”; and the time has now come to philosophize.⁷

In *Le Differend*, Lyotard draws on both the analytic and continental traditions to offer a theory of language and justice. In drawing on these traditions, Lyotard presents a postmodern way of doing philosophy which is irreverent towards the

ideological link between location and thought. That is, he delinks the connections made between place and philosophy which are reflected in the very terms we use: Anglo-American — mainly analytic — and Continental, European, philosophy. Of special interest to philosophers of education is his suggestion that it is not possible to separate education from the practice of philosophy. That is, he does not hold to the view that educational issues are derivatives of basic philosophical positions. Nor does he think it possible to trace particular pedagogical methods unerringly to some underlying philosophical principles. Rather, in the main, poststructuralism and certain strands of analytic philosophy share the idea that philosophy and education are mutually constitutive.⁸

At first glance, no two philosophers would seem to stand further apart than Roderick Chisholm and Lyotard: one the apostle of justified true belief, the other a case of “deconstruction gone mad.” A closer look no doubt reveals sharp differences. It also alerts us to surprising convergence. In this essay I read in a zigzag manner between Chisholm’s discussion of the role of the perceptual verb “to see” in a theory of knowledge, and Lyotard’s use of the verb “to witness” in establishing a referent. Through such a reading I do not wish to suggest our two philosophers are really quite the same and it is all a matter of looking; nor do I wish to establish a winning or losing philosophical genre. Rather, I hope this reading will illuminate and deepen our understanding of these two genres, the relations between them, dissolve some preferences, and help justify those we wish to maintain. To dismiss one or the other out of hand seems cavalier, but it also reflects an unawareness of the increasingly international dimension of all knowledge production. Quick judgments based on philosophical citizenship are now somewhat difficult to sustain.

Roderick Chisholm asserts that it is primarily by means of perception that we know the external world. Our senses provide us with evidence about the things that stimulate them. In Chisholm’s words, “the more we consider the nature of perceiving, the more difficult it is to understand the nature of perceptual evidence and one has to come to grips with the evidence of the senses.”⁹ In *Le Differend*, Lyotard sets up the issue of the senses in a manner which links philosophy and narration. Imagine, he says, a situation where humans beings, endowed with language, were placed such that none of them is now able to tell of it. When they do speak about the situation, their testimony bears only upon a minute part of this situation.¹⁰ He then poses the following set of questions: How does their telling count as evidence? How can we know that such a situation existed? That it is not imagination?

For Chisholm, the problem of “evidence” involves descriptive or phenomenological questions about those aspects of our experience that make perception a source of evidence about the external world. This is the type of question within whose domain would fall Lyotard’s description of the experience of the people endowed with language who were placed in a situation such that none of them is now able to tell of it. Through this move, Lyotard places his description within Chisholm’s typology. This inability to tell does not imply an absence of perception; rather, for Lyotard, this inability ruptures the necessary link between perception and the evidence of the senses as set up by Chisholm. Lyotard foregrounds the role of

telling, of educational discourse as the play of the autoethnographic testimonial, in a discussion of evidence about the external world. Having done this, he is able to question what can be counted as evidence so that we are justified in believing that such a situation existed and is not a figment of our imagination.

In approaching the problem perception poses for knowledge, both philosophers turn to language. The difference in their turning lies in that, for Chisholm, we approach the problem of perception through an indirect turn to language. In fact, Chisholm tries hard, but unsuccessfully, to develop his theory of perception without language. For Lyotard, on the other hand, perception is enfolded in language. Chisholm suggests we consider grammatical objects of a perceptual verb such as “to see.” On his account, we would do so to determine what the perceiver *believes*, and the implications such believing might have for *knowledge* or *evidence* from a particular knower’s standpoint. For Chisholm, when perceptual verbs take simple objects (for example, “He sees a dog”) they have no implications for what the perceiver believes, and hence, no implications for the knowledge she has. For it is possible to say: “He sees a dog but does not think it is a dog he sees,” and still be consistent. He then goes on to show that when the grammatical object of a verb is a “that” clause, then it has implications for both belief and knowledge. Thus, “I hear that a cat is on the roof” is to say that I know that there is a cat on the roof, and thus also to believe it.

Furthermore, Chisholm examines instances, which he calls “semi-complex” or those which fall between simple objects (“a cat,” “a dog,” etc.) and propositional objects like those signaled in subordinate “that” clauses. Thus, for example, consider “He sees the cat on the roof.” Such statements, he tells us, are often considered by philosophers, like Alvin Goldman, as presenting no philosophical problem at all since they “simply refer to a familiar kind of causal process which is of concern to particular sciences, but not to philosophy.”¹¹ Rather, Chisholm argues, a mere description has no implications about the perceiver’s immediate experience or about what he is justified in believing. It is in this normative departure from causal theories of knowing that Chisholm again draws close to Lyotard. This is a point I shall return to. For now I want to underscore the role that language plays in Chisholm’s discussion as also Lyotard’s.

For Lyotard, unlike Chisholm, language does not happen in a vacuum or pass as a message from addressor or addressee. “He sees the cat” is not an assertion a speaker utters in a universe composed solely of the speaker. This phrase is presented in a universe that at least contains at least the speaker, the person of whom she speaks, the person to whom she addresses the utterance (and this addressee could be the speaker herself), and of course the cat as the object of the activity of seeing. It is the phrase that presents this universe. It is the *utterance* of the phrase which calls forth certain relations, the universe, which gives the phrase its sense.¹² Perception is enfolded in language. Pedagogical discourse would summon a particular universe of educational relations; ethnographies yield relations between the ethnographer and “the natives” in ways which demand responsible attention to how we phrase.

Second, not only is language linked directly to Lyotard's discussion of perception, his discussion focuses on language use rather than grammatical usage as does that of Chisholm. Not surprisingly then, for Lyotard, a discussion of perception and knowledge is located in networks of pedagogical communication that can be, or are definable through, terms of property and propriety. In other words, the message is part of a social, political, and economic milieu — the propriety of information analogous to the propriety of uses.

And just as the flow of uses can be controlled, so can the flow of information. As a perverse use is repressed, a dangerous bit of information is banned. As a need is diverted and a motivation created, an addressor is led to say something other than what he or she was going to say. The problem of language, thus posited in terms of communication, leads to that of the needs and beliefs of interlocutors.¹³

Furthermore, what is said about and in a situation has at least as much to do with what can be said, what cannot, and what must remain unsaid. It is in this manner that all seeing, including ethnographic participation-observation, for Lyotard, is a witnessing. Such a seeing is enfolded in the web of communication as a pedagogical telling. In other words, practices of teaching, writing, and reading are enfolded in the possibilities, restraints, and limits offered by educational institutions.

While Chisholm's discussion of the evidence of the senses turns to grammatical usage, it does not simplistically ignore the context within which perception takes place. Let us turn back to Chisholm's discussion of the complex grammatical objects of perceptual verbs as in, for example, "He sees that the cat is on the roof." Usually, such statements tie us to what is affirmed in the subordinate "that"-clauses. However, there is the case of hallucinations. In order to avoid ambiguity, Chisholm suggests we let these statements stay in the category of locutions that allow movement from *de dicto* to *de re* locutions. Descriptive statements that describe the state of the person who is hallucinating take the form of "He thinks he perceives that a cat is there." Or, "He takes something to be a cat." In this manner Chisholm links perception, in fact claims that perception is inextricably linked, with appearing. I shall now show that this is one of the key lines of convergence between Chisholm and Lyotard's discussion of the evidence of the senses.

To account for cases like hallucination, Chisholm introduces the notion of perceptual taking. Thus a person who perceives a cat on the roof takes there to be a cat on the roof. Therefore, even though a person is appeared to in a certain way, there is nothing in that which is appearing which leads her to take it in a particular way. Chisholm characterizes perceptual taking as follows: "S *takes* there to be an F=Df 1) S is appeared to; 2) it is evident to S that he is appeared to; and 3) S believes that here is only one thing that appears to him and that thing is F."¹⁴

For Lyotard, the referent, which in his example is the situation such that none of those in it is now able to tell about it, either existed or it did not. If it did, and your informant tells about it, her testimony is false. It is false because of the four silences attendant on the telling of the situation. These are: i) because she should have disappeared and therefore be unable to give testimony; ii) she should remain silent since not able to speak; iii) she can bear witness only to the particular experience she had; and iv) it still needs to be established that this experience is a component of the situation in question.

In order to establish the reality of the referent, these silences must be refuted in reverse order. This refutation closely parallels Chisholm's characterization of perceptual taking. For Lyotard, the condition for the refutation of the first silence is that "there is someone to signify the referent," which runs very close to Chisholm's first condition which requires that there be an S who is appeared to. Both Chisholm and Lyotard require that there be a subject. The difference between them stems from Lyotard's emphasis on locating the subject in a web of communication, and Chisholm's unreflective use of the knowing subject. For Lyotard, the speaking subject does not imply some kind of consciousness. For Chisholm, it does. It is for this reason that for, Lyotard, the signifying subject and the appearing object are invoked by the phrases of signification. For Chisholm, the subject is simply the person who is appeared to. Consequently, education does not involve an unambiguous transmission of knowledge. Rather, for Lyotard, the knower and that which is presented are shaped by the discourse which connects them.

Lyotard's second refutation requires that there be "someone to understand the phrase that signifies it (the referent)." Again, consider the parallel with Chisholm's second condition which requires it be "evident to S that he is appeared to." In other words, both philosophers require some form of recognition. The difference between them, as with the first condition, runs along lines which focus on the subject as the person who is called to a specific position within a phrase universe. For Lyotard, the subject is one who understands the signifier — that is, she knows she is called forth in a particular manner. For Chisholm, on the other hand, the subject as consciousness is simply appeared to. Chisholm's discussion is anthropomorphic; Lyotard's is not. That is, for Lyotard, subjectivity is called forth by language, is embedded in knowledge, and part and parcel of the acts of knowing which constitute it. For Chisholm, despite his discussion of perceptual taking, objectivity in knowing is a possibility. The implications for thinking about archaic and new forms of knowledge, questions of freedom, in education are significant. For Lyotard, the acquisition or even generation of any kind of radically new knowledge is impossible; for Chisholm, such freedom remains possible. It is for this reason that, for Lyotard, any encounter of the self with the other implies some form of epistemological violence. On his account, all acts of reading, or representing, would inevitably be seen as imperialistic.

The third condition for Lyotard's witnessing requires there be a referent that can be signified. Chisholm's third condition has two parts: 1) it requires that S believes that there is only one thing that appears to her; 2) that thing is F. Thus, "A perceives there is an F" will imply "S knows that there is an F." Once again the differences with regards the "subject" follow the distinctions introduced already. However, two additional points emerge. The first of these undercuts the common view, often not based on a reading of Lyotard, that there is no concept of reality for him. Through our readings, we are now able to say that this not quite the case. Rather, for Lyotard, since the addressor, the addressee, referent and sense are located in a universe presented by the phrase, the focus of analysis remains the phrase. In the main, however, Lyotard's third condition is relatively uninteresting.

The second point that emerges from a close reading of this condition is the unexpected introduction of the normative dimension in Chisholm's presentation. This condition rests on "the means by which you know about the appearance, that you apprehend the object of perception" leading us directly to an intersection with Lyotard. Lyotard, as I have already shown, explicitly invokes the normative in his discussion of the narratives of knowledge. Despite this point of contact, the difference between them lies in that, for Chisholm, the normative in knowing is correlative to, for Lyotard, it is constitutive of, acts of knowing. I shall now treat this point of intersection in some detail.

For Chisholm, the philosophical problem of perceptual evidence turns on the following question: "How is it possible for appearances to provide us with information about the things of which they are appearances?"¹⁵ This question leads him to pay attention to the conditions under which objects are perceived. "The appearances we sense," he argues, "are a function, not only of the nature of the things we perceive, but also of the conditions under which we perceive those things."¹⁶ Appearances of a constant external object can vary according to the conditions of observation. In other words, we see things not as they are, but as they seem within the condition under which they appear. Perceptual relativity, a small part of Chisholm's theory of knowledge, is central to Lyotard's philosophical concerns.

I now take up more specifically the intersection between Lyotard and Chisholm's discussion of perceptual relativity and the normative questions it raises for epistemology. For Chisholm, even though the conditions in which perception takes place affect our apprehension of the object of perception, the aspect maintains an unambiguous relationship with the object. For Lyotard, this is one of the central problems to be faced when thinking on perception and the evidence of the senses. The informant can bear witness only to the particular experience she had, it remaining to be established whether this experience was a component of the situation.¹⁷ But even when this can be established, to take the witnessing of a particular experience as evidence for the whole of a situation could be called a kind of totalitarianism. In Lyotard's words, "If the requirement of establishing the reality of a phrase's referent according to the protocol of cognition is extended to any given phrase, especially to those phrases that refer to a whole, then this requirement is totalitarian in its principle."¹⁸

Chisholm freely acknowledges that the problem of perceptual relativity takes us out of the descriptive or phenomenological realm. It takes us out of those aspects of our experience that make perception a source of evidence about the external world and into the normative. There is a neat inversion in the place the normative and descriptive questions hold for our two philosophers. Both acknowledge these two dimensions along which analytic philosophy typically organizes epistemic locutions. The difference between them lies precisely in the equal and opposite emphasis they place on these two dimensions. If Chisholm accepts normativity, it still remains only a sub-domain of the mainly descriptive questions which guide his theory of knowledge. For Lyotard, on the other hand, denotative utterances are true only for a small and relatively uninteresting set of utterances. Chisholm's focus on denotation stands in direct contrast with Lyotard's position, according to which addressor

and addressee are instances, either marked or unmarked, presented by a phrase. The latter is not a message passing uninterruptedly from addressor and addressee, whose positions remain independent of it. They are situated in the universe the phrase presents, as are its referent and its sense. Hence reality is “not what is given to this or that subject, it is a state of the referent (that about which one speaks) which results from the effectuation of establishment procedures defined by a unanimously agreed-upon protocol, and from the possibility offered to anyone to recommence this effectuation as often as he or she wants.”¹⁹

Now let us turn back to Chisholm’s discussion of perceptual relativity, and to normative questions in the evidence of the senses. Consider Chisholm’s definition of *perceiving*:

S perceives that there is an F=Df 1) There is an F that is appearing in a certain way to S; 2) S takes there to be an F that is appearing to him in that way; and 3) it is evident to S that an F is appearing to him in that way.²⁰

The third condition, “It is evident to S that an F is appearing to him in that way” is for Chisholm a normative expression. He wants to find a criterion which will warrant stating non-normative conditions for the assertion of normative statements. Now consider Lyotard’s formulation of the problem of the evidence of the senses. Take a situation such that human beings, endowed with a language, were placed in a situation such that none of them speaks about it. Most of them disappeared and those that remain rarely speak of the situation. These are the non-normative conditions Chisholm is looking for — the conditions which would make it evident for S that an F is appearing to him in a certain way.

Lyotard treats the normative dimensions of language, as communication and pedagogy, in detail. For example, silence, and the conditions that give it its specific form, are part of Lyotard’s thinking on language as communication. Not to accept this is to presume that we are free to use language or not. But, he goes on to add, such freedom presupposes that it can be revoked by a threat. Thus Lyotard gives specific form to Chisholm’s discussion of the non-normative conditions that warrant normative assertions. These are: “Under threat, under torture, in conditions of incarceration in conditions of ‘sensory deprivation.’”²¹

Finally, both philosophers take a juridical approach in thinking about the normative dimensions of knowing. Linguists, as experts, seem like “juries of labor arbitration boards,”²² to Lyotard. They are called upon to give the normative the appearance of the descriptive. Or, in Chisholm’s case, the philosopher is called upon to set up procedures for adjudicating between different forms of epistemic justification because the relation between justification of belief and moral duty is not a matter of confusing entirely different categories. In his words, “The distinguishing feature of moral duty is that it is a requirement that is not defeated by any other requirement. An epistemic requirement, there, may become a moral duty.”²³ That is, under certain non-normative conditions of the sort Lyotard describes, the normative supervenes the epistemological.²⁴ Not only does Chisholm acknowledge the possible intertwining of ethics and epistemology, he also invokes agonistic relations between statements by using the word “defeat” in his formulation. Here again we find resonance

with Lyotard's bold claim that "to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts fall within the domain of a general agonistics."²⁵ The key difference is that, for Lyotard, this is a general claim, and for Chisholm, it is a very specific set of circumstances — such as those described by Lyotard — that make such a move necessary. Nevertheless, educational theory, as has become particularly clear in discussions of feminist and multicultural pedagogies, has much to do with questioning the legitimization of privileged adjudicating phrases.

Finally, Lyotard makes a distinction between plaintiff and victim which is relevant to educational theory in relation to subalternity. The former can bring her discourse to a tribunal that adjudicates between discourses, and the latter cannot. "The differend is signalled by the inability to prove. The one who lodges a complaint is heard, but the one who is a victim, and who is perhaps the same one, is reduced to silence."²⁶ In order for knowledge to be just we, as educators, must develop competencies that allow wrongs to be phrased. Such a phrasing would allow us to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them, for what remains to be phrased exceeds what idioms can currently phrase. Here is epistemic requirement made moral duty. This, as I have argued, would have the support of both Chisholm and Lyotard, of analytic philosophers of education and postmodernists, alike.

Eventually, of course, Chisholm and Lyotard have very different philosophical projects. The very examples they use to ground their thought reflect their different concerns. Chisholm draws his from an everyday, quite safe, world; Lyotard's world is dangerous and hostile. In this essay, however, through a zigzag reading, I have tried to place certain strands of analytic and postmodern philosophy in a more sympathetic relationship with each other. Such a reading might serve to make clearer the differences between the two strands such that we would choose one over the other for pragmatic, aesthetic, or explicitly regional reasons.

It might enable us to enter into dialogue regardless of our preferred theoretical traditions. We might be encouraged to re-read canonical texts like Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* with a contemporary sensibility. We might also be encouraged to pay moral attention to the dispersion of intellectual systems within academic institutions. We could uncover rules of the formation of disciplines and the conditions of their transmission. We might well ask ourselves what is it that commits us to rules of scholarship which reduce certain forms of knowledge to the role of plaintiffs or even victims? At the very least, we could request the remapping of the territory of constructivism.

1. "Constructivism Deconstructed" (Paper delivered to the Royal Institute of Philosophy, Northern Branch, Durham, England, November 1993).

2. *Ibid.*, 4

3. *Ibid.*, 8.

4. *Ibid.*, 16.

5. *Ibid.*, 10.

6. I would like to thank René Arcilla for drawing my attention to this point.

7. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Differend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xiii.

8. See, for example, William F. Frankena, "Is Philosophy of Education Intellectually Respectable?" in *Philosophy of Education 1960*, ed. Robert E. Mason (Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1961), 36-45; Ralph C. Page, "Educational Inquiry Supports its Own Foundations," in *Philosophy of Education 1977*, (Champaign, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1978), 273-85. See also Jean-François Lyotard, "Address on the Subject of Philosophy," in *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. and ed. Julian Pelanis and Morgan Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 99-108; and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 1-12.
9. Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989), 39.
10. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, 3.
11. Chisholm, *A Theory of Knowledge*, 40.
12. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, 11.
13. *Ibid.*, 12.
14. Chisholm, *A Theory of Knowledge*, 41.
15. *Ibid.*, 42.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, 3.
18. *Ibid.*, 5.
19. *Ibid.*, 11.
20. Chisholm, *A Theory of Knowledge*, 41.
21. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, 12.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Chisholm, *A Theory of Knowledge*, 60.
24. *Ibid.*, 43.
25. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 60.
26. Lyotard, *Le Differend*, 10.