GUELPH PHILOSOPHY AT 50: LORRAINE CODE

KNOWLEDGE AND SUBJECTIVITY

As my title says, I am going to talk about "knowledge and subjectivity". To people who were here at the time, this topic may sound like a cop-out, because it is the title of the PhD dissertation I defended in 1978, supervised by Doug Odegard with Jakob Amstutz, John Thomas (from McMaster), and John Boyle. So it may seem I have spent the almost 40 intervening years writing and rewriting that dissertation. Which is and is not true! One evening I was in the department preparing for my comps, when John Hems, who was also working there, asked me about my dissertation topic. Intimidated as I always was in his presence, I mumbled and stumbled, more or less indicating I couldn't remember – to which he observed: "Well it really doesn't matter, every philosopher has only one thought and he (sic!) spends the rest of his life thinking it." Is that true of me? Perhaps, but the one thought comes in multiple guises! It is rich, complex, and its implications evolve with developments in philosophy itself.

Autobiographically speaking, I owe the possibility of this topic to the receptivity and conceptual openness of several members of this department then, and especially to my committee. I came to graduate philosophy inadvertently and almost by chance. A new faculty wife with babies and straightened financial circumstances, I came to consult John Bruce about marker-grader work such as I had previously done, at Queen's, where much earlier I had earned a BA in philosophy. John suggested, in what was THE event that has brought me here, that I might better enroll in the MA programme and apply for a TA. Somewhat incredulously, I did, and ended up writing a thesis called "Three Philosophers of Language: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty", which led indirectly into my PhD project. Some of these thoughts still inform my thinking.

"Knowledge and Subjectivity" was an odd project, then. Although they played a central part in 'continental' philosophy, the idea that questions about subjectivity might figure in thinking and writing about knowledge was outrageous to many philosophers, especially those in the Anglo-American tradition as it had developed in the first half of the twentieth century in the UK and the USA. The treat of a "descent" into relativism was still at its starkest, especially in the wake of the landmark (1952) Flew volumes which, as I was finishing my BA in 1958, were state-of-the-art quasi-biblical works that "everyone" should emulate, according to my teacher at Queen's. Fortunately, also at Queen's, Martin Estall taught a full-year course in existentialism: the

thoughts he stimulated, and their uptake with Jakob Amstutz and also with Jay Newman here at Guelph have been germane to my subsequent thinking, publishing, and teaching. A year I spent in Germany on an exchange fellowship (1958-59) had included the bizarre, yet germane, event of reading Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in just-released typescript form – in French, of course, and trying to understand it through the German discussions where I was allegedly a participant. All of this may make of me a confused, yet certainly an eclectic philosopher and, in the eyes of many, a dilettante. But this mixed and muddled legacy still contributes to the substance of my work and practice. And confusion is not such a bad thing.

After many years of teaching secondary school French in the UK, I returned as something of a stranger to philosophy. I entered graduate studies naively, with a quasi-Candide-style incredulity, especially in my incapacity to understand **why** questions about subjectivity were prohibited, perceived as threatening, in Anglo-American theories of knowledge. Still more naively but along the same lines, I was oblivious to the severity of an ever-present threat of relativism, which haunted any suggestion that it mattered to know who "S" was, in "S-knows-that-*p*" examples. What perturbed me, then and now, is the taken for granted conviction that **any** attempt to bring "S's" subjectivity – her sex, gender, location, history, culture, race, age, material circumstances – into epistemic analysis signaled a descent into a breed of relativism that would cancel all hopes of achieving objective knowledge. Some of this is a caricature, but like most caricatures, it carries more than a germ of truth.

Questions about knowledge and subjectivity continue to inform my work, albeit in different guises from these early ones. They cover an eclectic range of topics. Initially, some were products of accident rather than research, and particularly so "epistemic responsibility" which has been central, if often tacitly, to almost everything I do. For a time the very idea was something of a sleeper: prior to the birth of social epistemology there seemed to be no available conceptual space to raise and discuss it, philosophically. My 1987 book by that title had an awkward publication history: it did not do well, was subject to vicious attacks at philosophy conferences and in reviews, and is now out of print. Yet interestingly, the concept and the practices it signals are acquiring new respect: the idea occurs frequently in "the literature", and I regard both the ideal and the practices it informs as central - if sometimes implicitly – in epistemology, ontology, ethics, politics, and that elusive location "everyday life".

These claims are too large to discuss in detail today, but they continue to inform my work and practice. With the support of a SSHRC Insight Grant, I am immersed in a project I called (in the grant application) "Manufactured uncertainty and epistemic responsibility: their implications for climate change skepticism" (which now I read as 'climate change denial'). The inquiry is still about knowledge and subjectivity, and the responsibilities and roadblocks such investigations encounter, but most of the central questions are now differently framed. I suppose the short explanation would be that neither the concept of generic subjectivity I worked with, nor the conception of knowledge as a monolithic generic entity with paradigmatically truth-discerning capacities, are viable for the philosophical position I now occupy. Turning first to "subjectivity": even some of the extended examples I invoke in *Epistemic Responsibility* trouble the assumption that any occupant of the S place in an 'S knows that *p*' proposition could stand in for any other, and each or all would know the identical fact in the same way. As a formulaic device this idea was and, in some domains, still is a useful one. But once the possibility was articulated that not all occupants of the *S* place, and many potential items in the *p* place did not fit this formula as paradigmatically knowledge-conveying, it ceased to serve me well (as is true for many feminist and post-colonial thinkers, both female and male). Its explanatory powers were too situationally limited if only, at first, implicitly so. Some of these thoughts coincided with developments in moral philosophy and in psychology, where questions about sex, race, gender, situation and positionality were conceived as playing a constitutive part in generating possibilities of moral judgement. My response was to ask: "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?" an outrageous question at the time, but it prompted more responses –negative and positive – than I could have anticipated. In consequence, the query grew into my 1991 book – *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. Its principal purpose was to consider whether there could indeed be sexed/gendered specificities among the conditions of knowledge making and using which would illumine and begin to eradicate some of the widespread sexist (and subsequently racist, classist) obstacles that faced would-be knowers and doers who did not conform to the featureless norm of the hitherto paradigmatic knowing subject. I think the book began to serve that purpose.

At the risk of simply rehearsing a catalogue of my work, I must add that the subtitle of my next book – *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on (Gendered) Locations* – signals a shift to questions about place, situatedness, circumstance, which do have to evade charges of relativism, but which also

show that those very charges have, too frequently, derived from overly-simplified conceptions of relativism itself, as a profoundly destructive rather than a richly creative and deeply challenging way of thinking, and being. This outrageous declaration harkens back to the existential-phenomenological work that inspired my studies at Guelph –and – perhaps incomprehensibly – feeds into my latest (2006) book, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*.

Now for people who do not know my work, and even for those who do, the gap between asking "What can she know?" and working on a project about climate change denial and the politics of knowledge may seem to be unbridgeable. But in *Ecological Thinking* which immediately precedes this new SSHRC project –I began trying to understand something about how patterns and directions and – indeed – locations of thinking contribute to both process and product. Quite simply put, the issue is about thinking both linearly and laterally, multiply, communally in diverse ways and situations, with the intention of avoiding artificial aggregations of issues, populations, situations, deliberations. It is equally about ontology in the sense that ways of being in the world too must come under scrutiny in how they often – in the affluent world – attest to a conception of entitlement that is neither imaginable nor tolerable in a philosophical position that attests to a commitment to knowing, listening, imagining well across multiplicity and diversity. Admittedly, these are large claims but since their aim is to engage with sociality as contrasted with individuality their reach has, perhaps, to exceed their capacity. But the part of the project I am working on now is a paper called "Who Do We Think We Are?" which, in its modest way, touches on most of the issues that have engaged me from the beginning and endeavours to challenge the tyranny of certainty that haunts so many of us when we move away from the security of some more traditional norms.

Engaging knowledgeably with that question requires rethinking/re-enacting *who we are*, in ways sufficiently powerful to dislodge an array of sedimented convictions. This is the hardest, most urgent demand: it is easier, more imaginable, to think and participate in revisionary ways of doing, thinking, knowing. But to practice a philosophy and develop a pedagogical practice which requires - *must* require – such rethinking and re-enacting is ontologically-epistemologically radical, upheld as those assumptions are by the instituted social-political-epistemic imaginary in which we inhabitants of the affluent west live and think have our being, however obliquely or contrarily. Taking these thoughts seriously calls for crafting and living critically renewed

conceptions of human subjectivity at a social, collective level. Such requirements are distantly analogous to late-twentieth-century consciousness-raising practices in calling for genealogical analyses of who we are and how we are accustomed to live, conducted in ways sufficiently discerning to unsettle many of the expectations that inform many of our everyday thoughts and actions. To practice a philosophy which requires unsettling and re-enacting basic assumptions about *who we are* is ontologically and epistemologically radical, upheld as these are by an instituted social-political-epistemic imaginary (following Cornelius Castoriadis) in which as inhabitants of the affluent West we live and think, however obliquely or contrarily. In this respect, my current project has particular bearing on educational practice, for as educators we carry a special responsibility to know ecological issues responsibly and well, so that such knowledge can inform our pedagogical practices.