

## **The first person perspective of differend as threshold to madness**

I will argue that the concept of Jean Francois Lyotard's differend, which entails unsurmountable conflict and unjustifiable speechlessness, is not only politically and ethically important, but also has profound implications for the first person perspective in phenomenology, likely also pertaining to so-called madness, and certainly comparable to the paradoxes Wouter Kusters has related to the first and zeroth person, in his article *On understanding madness - a paradoxical view*. Differend however, is first and foremost about ethics. I won't be able to discuss all aspects of this differend ethics here, which will be addressed in a forthcoming book about my lifelong preoccupation with Lyotard's philosophy, still after my dissertation about him 25 years ago, *Philosophy between the public and the speechless*.

Let me cite an Oxford's definition of differend first:

A wrong or injustice that arises because the discourse in which the wrong might be expressed does not exist. To put it another way, it is a wrong or injustice that arises because the prevailing or hegemonic discourse actively precludes the possibility of this wrong being expressed. To put it still another way, it is a wrong or injustice which cannot be proven to have been a wrong or injustice because the means of doing so has (also) been denied the victim.

This is the differend as presented by Jean Francois Lyotard in his 1983 book *Le Differend*. The concept of differend came embedded in a philosophy of language, an ethical version of Wittgenstein's language games. Lyotard's philosophy of language, however, is even ontologically far more radical than Wittgenstein's. In Wittgenstein's language games, individual subjects with a first-person perspective are fully part of the party, whilst in Lyotard's phrases, they are only present as transmitters in discourses, sentence regimes, with senders, receivers, meanings, and references, all attuned to the leading Idea, the Idea of the purpose a discourse is about.

*In mental health care, for example, practitioner and client occupy and even exchange sender and receiver positions, within more or less confined frames of acceptable references and meanings, all directed towards exploring what hinders the purpose of mental health, which is the leading Idea, the telos of this discourse.*

With this philosophy of language, Lyotard is on a par with the structuralist mainstream in 20th-century Western Atlantic philosophy. In that tradition, the subject gives way to the structure, the system, and the logos. However, Lyotard went further than that. His philosophy of phrases is first and foremost an ethical approach, with differend as its focal point. Differend as marker of double injustice caused by language and excluded by language: instances of harm or suffering that cannot be articulated, rendering victims speechless, as discourses dominating the context of suffering exclude articulation of injustice as meaningful or even valid expression of language.

*Examples occurring in disability care are obvious, but speechless injustice occurs almost every day in health care, education, in political and social areas of tension, in the economy, in organizations and not least in science.*

The example of mental health care as a discourse in which patients often cannot articulate forms of injustice done to them has been denounced for decades by the quarter-making of Doortje Kal in Holland and Peter Dierinck in Flanders, right here in Ghent.

Here I would now like to turn to philosophically underlying aspects of the differend, and explain why in my opinion, the first-person perspective cannot be ignored here. At first, *Le Differend*, the book, seems to be primarily about a war between discourses, like a dance of musical chairs in which there are no rules which discourse is allowed to speak, how long it can retain its privilege to speak, or be interrupted every moment by another, more powerful and often incompatible discourse.

*For instance science and ethics are discourses often in differend, scientists claiming something is good because it is true, or ideological claims something is true because it is good or bad.*

This is Lyotard's ontology of the differend: there are no universal rules or laws for a necessary continuation of any discourse, logic, and sense, and the next sentence may conflict with the preceding one, without being able to settle that conflict from any of the discourses involved.

A few years after *Le Differend* 1983, Lyotard more explicitly nuanced this radical agonistic ontology by turning his focus on whom or what is actually involved as victim of the differend. He then refers to the *differend meme*, as the feeling or affect itself of being unable to articulate suffered harm or pain in any form of language, especially in the discourse that may be deemed responsible for that suffering.

In light of contemporary ecological criticism, it is noteworthy that Lyotard keeps open here who or what occupies this first-person perspective of the *differend meme*. This could include not only children but animals and other life forms as well, or even geophysical constellations. This has been a very prominent, radical, and criticized aspect of his critique at the time, which, however, applies quite well to ecological differends in our time.

In recent years I have begun to wonder, why Lyotard neglected phenomenology after his own 1954 dissertation. Especially since phenomenology had already intensively explored pre-linguistic, even pre-reflexive experience long before and after Lyotard. Isn't the *differend meme* also to be understood as such an experience?

What distinguishes the experience of the differend as felt injustice from the phenomenological mode of consciousness is its focus on involuntary and seemingly powerless subordination to language and logos. Yet it appears to be a first-person experience, although seemingly not intentionally directed toward forms of reflection and attention as in most types of phenomenological perspective.

I take it that Lyotard wanted to separate the experience or at least the event of the differend from subjective and intentional forms of consciousness, in accordance to the structuralist mindset of the 20th century. But even if we were to follow him in this, I think there is much more to be said about the experience of the differend itself.

Indeed, in that experience, several levels can be distinguished, or rather it is a layered experience with several possible dimensions of perception. I will mention three.

1. The most obvious is the experience to be painfully affected, harmed by a dominant discourse, without any prospect of possibilities to articulate this affect in terms of that discourse, or receive recognition otherwise. [example]
2. Beyond such concrete cases of suffering and injustice, there is also a deeper awareness, that there are no rules or guarantees at all as to who is allowed to speak, for how long, in whatever forms of reason and logos.
3. This awareness can lead to the insight that there is always and everywhere a struggle going on, about which order of discourse can come to the fore the next moment, and for how long. This is an insight very well possible from a first-person perspective. The struggle to speak as it is taking place in third- and second-person discourses, plays out just as well on the first-person level, on the stage of a first person perspective, not only in the attempt to articulate well-formulated sentences, but also in strains of thought derived from linguistic structures, which I would refer to as logos, as a broader concept of language and its diverse functions.

Thus, struggle between discourses takes place not only in the third and second person (propositions and dialogues) but also in the first person. At stake in the first person perspective however, is not only being heard and understood, recognized as competent speaker I would say, but also to retain the inner logos in the midst of all interruptions. This is not steered by some personal univocal discourse, but rather consists of numerous discourses and patterns less or more present in language and society, some of which are more dominant than others.

Following Lyotard and his neo-structuralist fellow spirits Foucault, Derrida, and Bourdieu, the subject is no longer to be thought of as a univocal presenter of a strictly distinct narrative of his own. Rather it is intersected by many kinds and categories of possible sentences and orders of discourse. The distinctiveness of Lyotard's vision is that it is fundamentally about the struggle between and incompatibility of the various kinds of possible articulations, some of which, in and through that struggle, remain unheard, cannot come to the fore, which should be an issue of ethical and moral concern.

In our human societies we are primarily concerned with logos, system of signs and their relations. However, the assumption of this logos also presupposes a dimension or basis of what this logos actually mediates, allows to be shared, as any systems thinker will also readily agree. A theory of being, or onto-logos can be thought and assumed in all sorts of ways, but what is at stake here in the context of Lyotard's differend is that this basis of being is also a matter of experience, felt in its primal and embodied forms of pleasure and displeasure. Initially, these embodied affects are still prior to language, and remain outside of language when it is not yet possible to give intelligible voice to them.

This experiential fact of corporeality, embodied experience and the ability to give voice to it, expression in sound or image, is not denied by Lyotard, even implicitly always presupposed, but remains under-theorized or even not theorized at all. Very different is the case in

phenomenology, which unmistakably assumes pre-linguistic and even pre-reflexive dimensions of consciousness. However, phenomenology holds the relations between these dimensions and language to be predominantly ontological, psychological or neurological, and much less considered in ethical frameworks.

What I will elaborate in the rest of my argument is that Lyotard's synthesis of ontology and ethics is not only about instances of injustice and suffering which language cannot represent and even brings about itself. Moreover, his philosophy implicitly presupposes a space or position from which we can be aware of the violence inflicted upon us by chains of reason and logos. From that space or position, it is possible to get a distance, at least even so minimally in thought and awareness, from the power of logos and its various regimes.

These possibilities of minimal reflective distance are in accordance with the assumptions and principles of phenomenology. A phenomenology of the first person perspective transposed in Lyotard's language ontology of sentences, however, has a very special signature of its own. Everything I am saying, thinking, feeling and doing can be interrupted at any moment by something completely different, which may conflict with what I am saying, doing, thinking and experiencing. This also happens very often, because while I am aware of my speaking and listening, participating in various orders of language, I am also aware that my speech or story can be interrupted at any moment, and succeeded by something entirely different. I also know that there are no guarantees for anyone, to be able to speak or to keep talking.

This kind of awareness and such experiences or rather sensations cannot easily be addressed in a meaningful way, at least not through language - incidentally, you can express them, but many inconsistencies cannot be resolved ad hoc, because no instant bridge can be built between felt experience and what can be addressed in language at that time.

Yet in any case, there is always a 'follow-up' to every differend. From the first person's perspective, what might be the next connection, the next move following speechlessness? Characteristic of the differend is the impossibility of reasonable objection, that is, of being able to connect to what has been said. At the same time, after the preceding linguistic violence, anything is possible in principle - after all, every sentence can be followed by something that doesn't need to have anything to do with it. In fact, after a rupture like the one just mentioned, it is possible to say or do everything except continue that violent discourse as a supposedly full and recognized participant of it (because that is not the case).

What matters is that *in the first person's perception of a differend an orientation to what might follow is always present.*

The proposition: 'perception of a differend also immediately implies an orientation to what is to follow' applies, as far as I am concerned, not only to the 'differend même', the speechless suffering from violence of language. It equally applies to all continuations, linkages to what is now at hand and at stake. For it always involves either continuation or deviation from what has just been said or done.

Principally, to break with what has just been said or done is possible each and every moment, and in particular also with what is just said, thought or initiated from a first person's perspective. Whether this actually takes place, is something else. For now, this very moment,

it is all about perception, and to be more precise, it is a first person perspective of what might happen or be done or said the next moment. I'm not talking about insights of others talking in the second or third person. In the first person experience, being speechless right now, does not mean speechlessness is here to stay, because it is precisely the emptiness of being speechless, outcast of ongoing discourse, which reveals, in the first person's perspective, that everything is possible and might happen the next moment. Now this seems to have two profound, and perhaps inseparable implications: having to deal with a two-faced prospect of both unlimited freedom and at the same time a groundless devastation, two sides of perhaps the same.

Those who remember the work of philosophers like Sartre and Camus will not find this simultaneity of freedom and abyss something new. But what we can begin to face here in this fusion of Lyotard and phenomenology goes even further than existentialism, which still speaks of a more or less consistent individual subject with its own identity, its own story. However, when we take the differend as an existential starting point, we do not assume a coherent individual subject as a whole anymore, but rather a body with its own awareness of that body and everything what happens to it, both inwardly and from outside. But as for the possible expressions of that embodied awareness, in words, phrases and other utterances and signs, all this belongs to everybody and nobody in particular, as Dutch novelist Gerard van het Reve once characterized with reference to a certain kind of weather condition, it is typically "of all people," in arena's of language and its phrases competing to have the floor.

From the experience of the differend, which presents itself to us every moment, we all are in need of a bearable continuation, an acceptable story, a voice that counts. When we succeed in resolving that need, it is at least at the expense of all other possible continuations, and at the same time often at the expense of others, who are drowned out, or even silenced. Only if we are silenced ourselves, and not succeed in rejoining again the bandwagon of recognized discourse, we could be aware of the nothingness between the sentences, and the fundamental indecisiveness of any next sentence.

Personally I find the differend as an event of injustice and misrecognition an extremely important and in itself insufficiently recognized aspect of our coexistence. In the context of the conference I am speaking at now, however, the existential ontological significance of the differend is in my view at least as far-reaching, be it on a deeper level than that of suffered unrecognized injustice. On that level, full awareness of the differend in the first person perspective, is also the felt perception of fundamental discontinuity both in language and in our experience of time. This felt experience of fundamental discontinuity has, as it were, a Janus head of two sides that are not so much opposed as at a high tension with each other, prospects both of freedom and groundlessness. Perception of freedom from the tyranny of language and its successive phrases is also to realize that most meanings based on language and concepts is taken out of thin air, as they not only contradict or exclude each other continually, but also prove to be very often in conflict with what we experience ourselves and what happens.

In our cultural societies, sufferings and injustices of speechlessness are often systematically ignored and repressed. In my view, this is even more true of the two-sided perception of

freedom and groundlessness in language and time, which as a first person perspective also seems to be an undeniable factor in so-called madness. A crucial factor in "madness" seems on a par with another implication of the ontology of differend, namely, that it is not only individual first persons with their perceptions who compete in the musical game of language sentences, but indeed also those sentences themselves, or rather configurations of transmitters, meanings and references of sentences. The endeavor to fill in the next moment, in accordance with what is felt and to be said or done from a first person's perspective, amounts to a struggle in and against language and logos. Discourses of language as logos follow their own tracks, as if first persons' perceptions did not even exist. However, it is only in the first person perspective that the competition between discourses is felt as differend, painful and unjust contradiction between language and experience.

In that respect, with "madness" is also involved an overload of unjust arrangement of available opportunities to participate in the struggle between language and experience, the struggle for a meaningful, just continuation of what matters and is of interest. I am far from understanding what that might mean for concrete practices of psychiatrists and their clients, and also of philosophers and their audiences. To begin with, there should be no question of a uniform discourse of mental care versus a univocal world of the care receiver. Certainly, differends between mental care givers and receivers are happening all the time, care givers not understanding their patients and patients not able to express what is happening to them.

Ultimately however, both care givers and receivers have to cope with the same ordeal, which is having to deal with both the struggle for freedom and the groundlessness of what happens and is to be done or said the next moment. This existential bewilderment is also at the heart of the paradoxes Wouter Kusters has unfolded in his exceptional reflection on understanding madness. At the core of paradoxal differend however, is not the ontological or cognitive, but the ethical aspect of this existential bewilderment, which, according to Lyotard, is triggered by injustice of speechlessness in the first place. To put this otherwise, and perhaps more clearly: differend is a possible threshold to madness particularly because it involves and even presupposes both the injustice and the inability to share existential paradoxes in discourse.

Associated to this aspect of differend I would like to end with another side of Lyotard's rich philosophical heritage that is also more in line with the article and the work of Wouter Kusters. Lyotard also conceived of the differend more as the sublime. In line with my lecture, the differend as the sense of the sublime is also about the struggle to articulate certain perceptions that are at odds with what logos recognizes and allows in the succession of sentences. These are initially perceptions from the first person, but again potentially available "to all people", in what Kusters calls the zeroth person. However, if this kind of perceptions remain imprisoned within the confines of first person experience, they remain hidden from third and even second person attempts to understand so-called madness.

Maybe its is not so much about understanding madness, but about recognizing differend and sublime in all first person perspective, and try to share and persevere this common fate with anybody anywhere.