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Roderick Chisholm's Philosophical Cartoons

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Abstract

Roderick Chisholm (1916–1999) was among the most creative and influential figures in twentieth-century American philosophy. This essay considers how Chisholm's cartooning contributed to his philosophical charisma.

Keywords: Roderick Chisholm; twentieth-century American philosophy; academic charisma; teaching philosophy; cartoons

Roderick Chisholm (1916–99) was among the most creative and influential figures in twentieth-century American philosophy. For decades, he contributed to the study of epistemology, metaphysics, and free will, and trained generations of philosophers.

In December 1970, Chisholm's friend Richard Taylor wrote to him with a request: "Would you be willing to let me compile a small book of your philosophical cartoons?" (Richard Taylor to Roderick Chisholm, 30 December 1970). The cartoon book never materialized. But, in 2022, I found traces of Chisholm's cartooning at the John Hay Library at Brown University, where Chisholm's personal papers were archived following his death.

Beyond the intrinsic delights of a cartoon book by Chisholm, its failure to be published amounts to a missed opportunity to learn something about where philosophical charisma comes from.¹

Observers might naturally assume that the history of philosophy is a history of words. When you want to know about past philosophers, you read their texts. Sometimes scholars seek to understand earlier thinkers by setting them in historical context—revealing how, for instance, thinkers' ideas were shaped by relationships and experiences. But even for historians, the deeper story is typically found in private letters, diary entries, students' notes, course syllabi, and other written records. A logocentric perspective seems inevitable. We measure a philosophical life by its words and everything else becomes ephemera.

Logocentrism misses the fact that far more than printed words make a philosopher whatever they are. That is because philosophy is a social practice. If Chisholm had done nothing more than sit alone in his basement, pecking away at his typewriter, it is doubtful we would know of him today. During his career, he actively engaged with students and colleagues, traveled near and far to deliver lectures, and performed in public settings. His work and his reputation depended on his charisma.

And I want to suggest that some small part of his charisma flowed from his making ideas incarnate in cartoons. The cartoons were in his bag of tricks for philosophical performance and his audiences got a kick out of them. One philosopher, Richard Feldman, recalled the cartoons were "very clever" and drawn with "a distinctive style." Some teachers draw stick figures or happy/sad

¹I am indebted to Clark (2006) for the notion of academic charisma.

faces, but Chisholm rendered his characters with a hallmark duck head, perhaps echoing the duck-rabbit illusion made famous by Ludwig Wittgenstein. To experience Chisholm in a seminar room was not just to hear words spoken or to read propositions written in chalk. You might also see him sketching silly illustrations on the blackboard. “The pictures are hilariously funny to philosophers,” as Taylor wrote to Chisholm in 1970, “and esoteric to everyone else” (Richard Taylor to Roderick Chisholm, 30 December 1970).

Although Chisholm’s cartoon book wasn’t to be, Taylor had years earlier published a first batch of cartoons in his book *Metaphysics* (1963). One chapter, entitled “Persons and Bodies,” outlines problems arising when we distinguish between body and mind, treating these as different things. Chisholm’s cartoons illustrate the plethora of mind-body theories (Figure 1). In one of Taylor’s other books, *Action and Purpose* (1966), a cartoon by Chisholm is used to present the homunculus theory of the self, where a miniature self exists inside the mind or brain, controlling the operations of thought (Figures 2 and 3). In other surviving cartoons, Chisholm riffed on philosophers’ examples in unexpected ways (Figures 4 and 5). For whatever reason, none of his cartoons appeared in his own books.

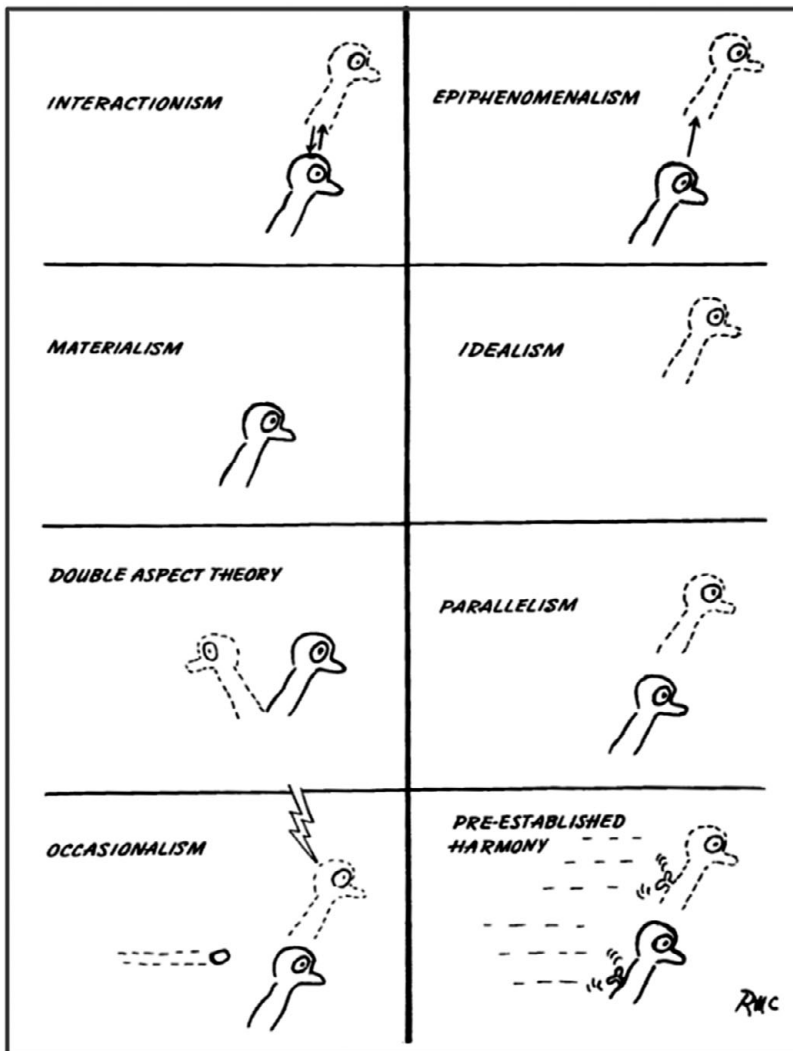


Figure 1. Image from Taylor (1963, p. 13).

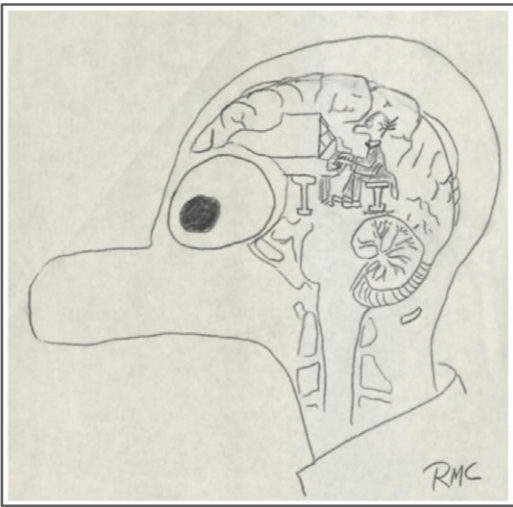


Figure 2. Image from the Roderick Chisholm Papers, Brown University Archives.

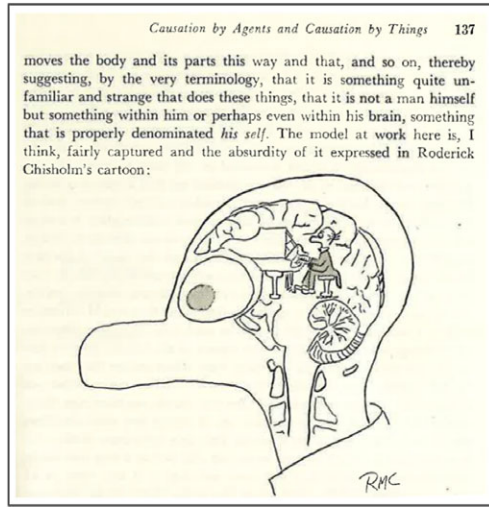


Figure 3. Image from Taylor (1966, p. 137).

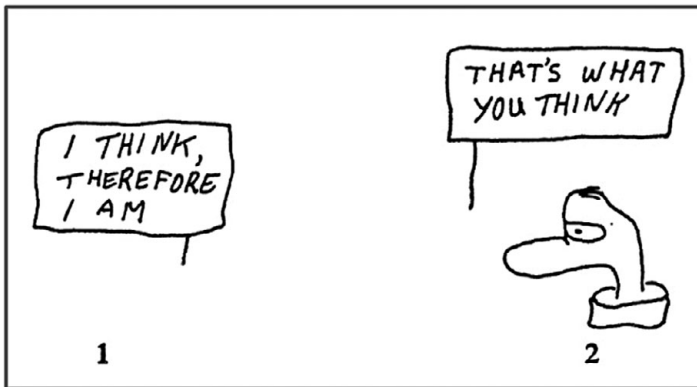


Figure 4. Image from Taylor (1975, p. 6).

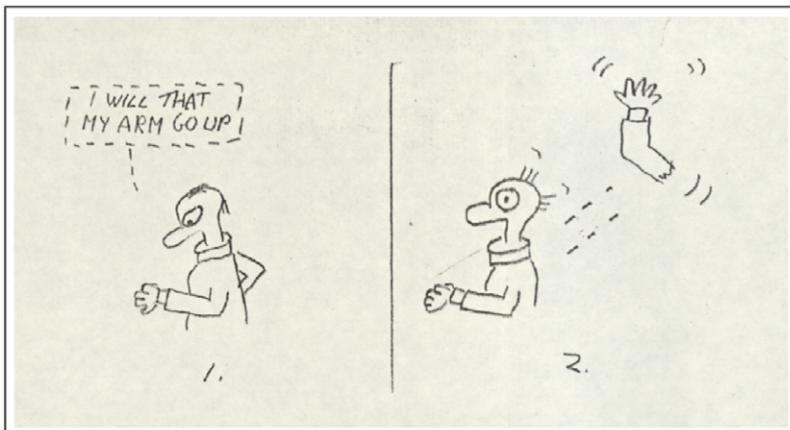


Figure 5. Image from the Roderick Chisholm Papers, Brown University Archives.

Are there any other Chisholm cartoons? Well, I got a little too curious and, eventually, one afternoon in 2022, I found myself speaking on the telephone with Richard Taylor's third wife.

But, first, at Brown's archive, I sifted through boxes of old letters and manuscripts, hoping to find other drawings. No luck. I began to suspect that Taylor, who died in 2003, had tucked some away. In the letter from 1970 that I had found at Brown, Taylor described how he could compile the cartoon book:

You could send me little cartoons from time to time, as you feel inspired, and when a decent number had accumulated, I would assemble them into a small book, compose an appropriate preface, and have perhaps one or two hundred printed—sort of a limited edition. [...] I would indicate in the preface that I had simply saved the cartoons you had passed along to me for my amusement, over the years, and here they are. (Richard Taylor to Roderick Chisholm, 30 December 1970).

I tracked down Taylor's surviving family and friends and asked them whether his personal correspondence had been kept. Nobody knew anything, and none of the institutions where Taylor taught have archival holdings of his papers. I expect that Taylor's papers, including some of his friend's cartoons, are rotting in a landfill. It would not be the first time a philosopher's sketches got lost. In Aristotle's works—which are essentially lecture notes recorded by students—it is clear that Aristotle occasionally used diagrams in his teaching; but the manuscripts passed down to us through the ages relay no images.

A final possibility occurred to me: Chisholm's living students and friends might have saved original cartoons or copied them in their notes. I wrote to a handful of philosophers who knew Chisholm to share the drawings and welcome their reminiscences.

One former student, Matthias Steup, recounted that “on occasion [he would] draw one of these duck-like heads on the board to illustrate a point, but I don't recall any specific instances of it. Too bad iPhones didn't exist at the time to take a picture of his artwork.” Another former student, Dean Zimmerman, seemed to recall a possible example: “He might have drawn a vacuum cleaner that needs to be plugged in, but there has to be an extension cord to reach the socket, and that extension cord needs yet another, and so forth in order to illustrate the (misguided) thought behind Bradley's regress.” But Zimmerman felt unsure whether there was a drawing of a vacuum cleaner, or whether all of this had only been described by Chisholm in words.

Marian David, who met Chisholm while an undergraduate student at the University of Graz, distinctly recalled a specific cartoon: “I remember one which he drew on the blackboard when introducing intentionality via the Stoic (version of the Frege) puzzle: You say you don't know the man with the mask. But he is your brother. So, you don't know your own brother?” David did not have an original but he made a sketch of the masked man (Figure 6). (One wants to imagine a duck head under the mask.)

At that point, the trail for Chisholm drawings went cold. But then Zimmerman contacted his friend from graduate school, Steven Hales, who remembered their teacher had once drawn a wizard hat. As Hales told me later on, he had “vaguely connected [the hat] to mereology, but [Zimmerman] pulled up the specifics.” Here is the report Zimmerman shared:

[Hales] reminded me that there was a drawing of a pointy hat, like a wizard's hat. Chisholm called it Suarez's hat, because [Francisco] Suarez had views about points and other boundaries—he believed they existed, but that they could only exist as boundaries (so not all by themselves). The hat had a point-sized tip; and he imagined it being annihilated from the bottom up until nothing was left but the tip. Suarez (and all the other old guys until Boscovich) thought point-sized things could not exist by themselves but only as boundaries. So that's a problem—is not there an instant when there's just the tip?



Figure 6. Image from the author's email correspondence with Marian David, 26 January 2024.

I asked Hales and Zimmerman if they recalled Chisholm drawing Suárez's head—a hat without a head is not much of a cartoon. (And I figured: would not it be perfect to depict Francisco Suárez, the great early modern scholastic and Jesuit, with a duck head and wizard hat?) "I'm quite sure about the problem," wrote Zimmerman, "and that he drew a hat. I'm not sure he drew a head under the hat! I kind of think, no."

Philosophical cartoons are treated as ephemera but they can make a great philosopher more compelling to their contemporaries. It takes skill to compress a philosophical idea into a picture that, once seen or recalled, could help an audience understand. Now we see an abstraction with our eyes. Chisholm's cartoons were effective because they guided his audience not just to understanding but laughter, too. The cartoonist was teacher and jester. If we erase the cartoons on the blackboard or toss photocopied drawings in the trash bin, the vibrant philosophical mind recedes from us a little more—some of the cleverness, quirkiness, and joy in ideas fades away. Maybe philosophical charisma is a little like a disappearing hat. Eventually, almost everything will be annihilated. All that remains is words.²

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