INTRODUCTION:
RECONCEPTIONS IN CONTEXT*

This issue documents the proceedings of an author's colloquium with Nelson Goodman (Harvard University) and Catherine Z. Elgin. It was organized by Peter Bieri and Oliver R. Scholz (Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany) and took place between 18–20 March 1991, at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research (Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung, hereafter ZiF), University of Bielefeld, Germany.

The focus of the conference was Goodman and Elgin’s joint book *Reconceptions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences* (1988). It was discussed in the context of the authors’ earlier works on the theory of constructional systems, on the general theory of symbols and its epistemological and metaphysical implications. Though *Reconceptions* can be read on its own – thanks to the excellent “Survey” in Part I and the concise recapitulations in the other chapters – it is best seen as one major step within a project that originated some decades ago.

The best summary of this ongoing endeavour has been given by the authors themselves in the last chapter of the book in question:

We work from a perspective that takes in the arts, the sciences, philosophy, perception, and our everyday worlds, and toward better understanding of each through significant comparison with the others. Speaking schematically, the first phase of this effort begins by observing that the use – that is, the fabrication, application, and interpretation – of symbols is centrally involved in all these fields. Accordingly, a general theory of symbols and their functions is outlined... The second phase confronts the consequences of recognizing that symbols are not merely devices for describing objects, events, a world waiting to be discovered, but enter into the very constitution of what is referred to... The present third phase starts from the realization that the prevailing conception of philosophy is hopelessly deficient when all fields of cognition, symbols of all kinds, and all ways of referring are taken into account, and so goes on to a search for more comprehensive and more responsive concepts.2

Each of these phases was considered or reconsidered in the papers and the discussions. Since every contribution to this issue has been prefaced with an abstract, and since Catherine Z. Elgin has reviewed and answered the ZiF presentations, it would be redundant and tedious to add further summaries, comments, and meta-comments in this introduction.

Instead, I would like to draw attention to some interconnections between *Reconceptions* and earlier work done by Goodman and Elgin.\(^3\) This might help to give the uninitiated reader a sense of the character of the authors’ visions of philosophy and of the character of their joint book. In passing, I shall indicate how the contributions are related to the book and to the whole project to which it belongs.

Although it is most explicit in the title of the book published in 1988, ‘reconception’ is and has been a key term for Goodman’s and Elgin’s philosophical efforts from the beginning. A spirit of — and a striving for — reconception, revision, and reform runs throughout. Consider *The Structure of Appearance* (1951),\(^4\) which grew out of the doctoral dissertation *A Study of Qualities*,\(^5\) submitted in 1940. These books are the culmination points of philosophical efforts which began in Goodman’s undergraduate years in the twenties. They belong to an enterprise which was baptized on another occasion as ‘The Revision of Philosophy’.\(^6\) (Cp. the re-evaluation of constructionalism in Guido Küng’s contribution.)

Like Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* or Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, *The Structure of Appearance* is as important for what it says about philosophical problems as for what it shows about how philosophy can be done. Different as these works are in many respects, they share one rare quality: they do not content themselves with announcing manifestos, but they show their respective philosophical attitudes and methods at work. To be sure, Goodman’s methodological outlook differs from Ryle’s and Wittgenstein’s. While dealing with concrete and perennial problems (such as: What is the relation between qualia and things?), Goodman’s first opus magnum is a forceful exercise in constructionalist philosophy; and the constructional attitude runs throughout Goodman’s efforts and those of his collaborators. *The Structure of Appearance* proposes and defends a reconception of the nature of explicative definition and, thus, of philosophical analysis by requiring a special sort of extensional isomorphism (instead of synonymy, analyticity, or coextensiveness). Goodman’s nominalism is to be seen in connection with the constructionalist outlook. It is not an extravagant metaphysical dogma; instead, the decision to countenance only individuals serves maximum clarity of construction. Whereas methodological and ontological transparency is maximal, adherence to doctrine on broad philosophical issues is minimal. A passage taken from the preface of *A Study of Qualities* (1940!) reads: