

Epistemological Reversals Between Chisholm and Lyotard

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Pradeep Dhillon undertakes a formidable task in linking the epistemology of Roderick Chisholm with the philosophy of Jean-François Lyotard. As she admits, there are major points of divergence between Chisholm and Lyotard. Indeed, they write in two separate traditions. Chisholm is an analytic philosopher in the Anglo-American tradition who takes a foundationalist approach to epistemology. In contrast, Lyotard is a post-structuralist in the continental tradition who takes on epistemological issues indirectly. Moreover, these two philosophers are typically read by scholars in different disciplines and participate in different academic discourses. For these reasons, Dhillon's task is daunting, but she is unfazed by Denis Phillips's notion that, when it comes to epistemology, post-structuralists are practically non-players in the philosophical game.

Dhillon sets out to find convergence between Chisholm and Lyotard, forcing a kind of dialogue across discourses. While she seems to favor Lyotard's approach, she does not use him as a stick to beat Chisholm. Instead, she points out some areas where, surprisingly perhaps, the two seem to cover the same epistemological territory. In the end, it is not the similarities that are of most interest, but instead the fine distinctions Dhillon exposes through her close and careful reading; for while they approach similar issues, Chisholm and Lyotard have radically different epistemological projects. These are most evident in Dhillon's discussion of perception, language, and referent to reality. Also of interest are the connections Dhillon periodically makes between Lyotard and educational philosophy. While she devotes considerably less attention to these connections (the topic is worthy of an additional paper), these connections help explain the implications which different epistemologies have for philosophical work in education. It is to these areas – the fine distinctions between Chisholm and Lyotard and the connections to educational philosophy – that I will devote attention in my response.

CONNECTIONS

One of the connections Dhillon makes between Chisholm and Lyotard is that both take on the problematic nature of perception. Traditional epistemologists such as Chisholm have been haunted by skeptics who challenge the notion that perceptions, for which Chisholm reserves a special place in his epistemological system, can be trusted as a basis for knowledge.¹ Dhillon makes her connection with Chisholm's discussion of the language "to see" and Lyotard's discussion of the language "to witness." For Chisholm, perception is the very foundation of knowledge. It is the basic unit for justification and knowledge. Things seen are self-evident. However, Chisholm does recognize the difficulty people have communicating their perceptions to others. It is not clear that Chisholm addresses to Dhillon's satisfaction the problematic communication of telling about a perception. How he deals with this difficulty is not particularly clear here, but it is certainly of secondary concern for him. For Chisholm, theories of knowledge must address the issue of perception, and

as Dhillon points out, Lyotard's does. This is an important link, because it is a common concern, and their approaches illuminate differences.

In contrast to Chisholm, Lyotard does not consider foundations of knowledge to be important. The truth of what is witnessed is rather beside the point. For Lyotard, what one witnesses contributes to knowledge, but knowledge has more to do with the interaction between persons in a historical moment, in a milieu. The inference is that knowledge for Lyotard operates with both social and individual elements, and as Dhillon notes, Lyotard foregrounds the telling. As I see it, this is Dhillon's major point. While there are connections between Chisholm's use of "to see" and Lyotard's "to witness," the connections point to a reversal of perception and telling. What is not explicit is whether Dhillon believes that Chisholm and Lyotard are talking about the same kind of knowledge. Is it the same to speak (as Chisholm does) of knowledge as justified true belief and knowledge as the result of interactions among persons (as does Lyotard)? Perhaps it is not, in which case there is a major point of divergence between Chisholm and Lyotard.

This divergence is also evidenced by the type of examples each uses. The first chapter of *Le Différend* is built around the example which Dhillon mentions, wherein a group of people has lived through an experience about which they seldom speak. The stakes are high with this example, because Lyotard is referring to the Holocaust. This example is carried through the entire work as he tackles the many difficulties of proving, with conventional logic, that gas chambers existed at Auschwitz. In contrast to Chisholm's abstract examples, Lyotard's use of the Holocaust example makes a compelling case for an interactive view of knowledge, and by implication, for the pragmatic, even tragic, limitations of foundationalism. To expand upon Dhillon's distinction here, it seems to me that by centering the aspect of telling, Lyotard distances himself fundamentally from traditional epistemologists such as Chisholm.

A second connection Dhillon makes is in the turn both philosophers make to language. Chisholm's turn to language is analytic. His approach to perception is indirect with this turn, whereas Lyotard is more direct; for him, language enfolds perception. This difference is rather important. Chisholm works with grammar to distinguish simple observation and perception. Dhillon suggests that Chisholm has made a normative departure from causal theories of knowing and drawn close to Lyotard. The difference here, though, is a substantively different turn to language. Lyotard's turn to language is more continental and more radical. As Dhillon says, for Lyotard, the phrase presents the universe. Chisholm would never go this far, because, for him, language is a tool with which he hopes to locate a more accurate depiction of knowledge. As Dhillon points out, the difference is between use and grammatical usage. Lyotard centers language by locating knowledge in networks of communication, and he raises the issue of language being controlled by propriety. Propriety sometimes determines and always limits what someone is able to say. This is why Lyotard opts for "witnessing," which is enfolded in the web of communication as pedagogical telling. In a statement Chisholm would never make, Lyotard claims that knowledge is limited by the ability of persons to express themselves

within the accepted language. Chisholm would never make this statement, because he does not have these kinds of epistemological concerns.

The distinction in use of language carries through when Dhillon takes up the similar issue of how Chisholm and Lyotard establish the reality of referents. She draws connections between Chisholm's conditions for perceptual taking and Lyotard's similar conditions for refuting silences. For example, in the case of the first conditions of each philosopher's system, she connects "there is someone to signify the referent" (Lyotard) with "S is appeared to" (Chisholm). Notice that the focus for Lyotard is language, and for Chisholm, it is perception. Both have a subject, but as Dhillon says, Lyotard's is embedded already in a web of communication, and Chisholm's subject is non-reflective. Clearly, Lyotard's orientation is different, which provides Dhillon a different position from which to draw inferences for educational philosophy. The crux of the difference is that, for Lyotard, reality is not given² — in other words, perceptions are not justified; reality is something that language lets be said. This is a rather stunning difference between Lyotard and Chisholm. In fact, and I agree with Dhillon, it is another reversal, but significantly, it is a reversal which violates Chisholm's grounding in the tradition of knowledge as justified true belief.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Turning now to the educational implications, it is evident that Dhillon draws inspiration from Lyotard in her frequent comments about educational issues. While I agree that educational philosophers appropriately may select a philosophical position based on pragmatic and aesthetic reasons, it seems to me that Dhillon has also made the case that it is essential that one choose a theoretical framework whose approach to knowledge is consistent with one's project. I believe Dhillon makes the point well that Lyotard gives us pause to critique our own rules of scholarship, seeing them as a discourse which necessarily limits and shapes knowledge. More on this would be helpful. Also, by linking the limits of discourse to educational practice, Dhillon implies that educational practices necessarily limit possibilities for knowledge. This seems to be an epistemological reversal between Chisholm and Lyotard over perception and telling. This strikes me as a compelling challenge to traditional conceptions of knowledge and would be an intriguing area for further elaboration. While I am unsure what implications Dhillon would enumerate for education based on the distinctions she makes between Chisholm and Lyotard, she has given us cause to believe that the analytic approach to knowledge as justified true belief has less to offer educational philosophers than post-structuralists such as Lyotard, who help us understand, as Dhillon points out, how knowledge is enfolded by all forms of language, including educational discourse.

1. Roderick Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given," in *Empirical Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Savage, MD: Rowman and Litchfield Publishers, Inc., 1986).

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).