

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Kingsborough Community College

1981

Foundationalism and the Proper Stopping Place for Socratic Questioning

Richard Legum

CUNY Kingsborough Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/kb_pubs/67

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE PROPER STOPPING PLACE
FOR SOCRATIC QUESTIONING

For the past twenty years, Roderick Chisholm has been one of the most staunch defenders of foundationalism. Unlike Lewis, Chisholm does not present an argument that is supposed to demonstrate that foundationalism is the only plausible theory of knowledge. Nonetheless, he does outline his reasons for adopting foundationalism. I propose to explain Chisholm's reasons for adopting this view, thereby, introducing the reader to Chisholm's version of foundationalism.

1. The Myth of the Given

Chisholm tells us that the essential doctrine of his theory of knowledge is the 'myth of the given', which he characterizes as follows:

- (A) The knowledge which a person has at any time is a structure or edifice, many parts and stages of which help support each other, but which as a whole is supported by its foundation.
- (B) The foundation of one's knowledge consists (at least in part) of the apprehension of what has been called, variously, "sensations," "sense impressions," "appearances," "sensa," "sense-qualia," and "phenomena."¹

Chisholm explains that

The doctrine is not merely based on a metaphor. We are led to it when we attempt to answer certain questions about justification--our justification for supposing, in connection with any of the things that we know to be true, that it is something that we know to be true.²

Thus, we see that Chisholm's reason for adopting foundationalism is that he thinks that the answers to certain questions concerning the nature of epistemic justification presuppose the truth of the 'myth of the given'. To clarify Chisholm's reason for adopting foundationalism, it will be helpful to consider these questions whose answers presuppose the 'myth of the given'.

2. Socratic Questions

In Perceiving, Chisholm makes the following observation.

When we wish to test or confirm a statement, we seek our new evidence. We may take a closer look, interview witnesses, and perform experiments. But when we wish to defend or justify a statement, we appeal to the evidence which happens to be at hand. We weigh evidence and try to show, in effect, that the statement is probable in relation to that evidence.³

In this work, as well as in Theory of Knowledge, Chisholm sets out to answer a certain fundamental epistemological question: "Under what conditions is a person justified

in believing a proposition?" He proposes to answer this question by formulating general principles of justification or, as he puts it, by formulating a theory of evidence. Chisholm thinks that the way one proceeds to formulate these principles is not much different from the way one proceeds when one wishes to formulate the laws of logic or principles of right action. To understand Chisholm's defense of the 'myth of the given', it will be helpful to understand certain features of Chisholm's theory of evidence and the relationship between these principles and the notion of justification.

Chisholm explains that

In investigating the theory of evidence from a philosophical--or Socratic--point of view, we make three general presuppositions...first, that there is something that we know and we adopt the working hypothesis that what we know is pretty much that which, on reflection, we think we know...second, that the things we know are justified for us in the following sense: we can know what it is, on any occasion, that constitutes our grounds, or reason, or evidence for thinking that we know...third, that if we do thus have grounds or reasons for things we think we know, then there are valid general principles of evidence--principles stating general conditions under which we may be said to have grounds or reasons for what we believe.⁴

Here, Chisholm tells us that to obtain a principle of evidence, we must find certain representative instances of a certain kind of knowledge and find an answer to the

Socratic question, "What justification does the person have for thinking that he knows this?" Once such an answer is obtained, an instance of a principle of evidence is formulated as a conditional whose antecedent asserts that the proposition, which is the answer to the Socratic question, is evident and whose consequent asserts that the proposition in question is evident. From this, we may obtain a principle of evidence by dropping reference to the specific propositions in question and by making reference, instead, to schema of propositions of certain sorts.

The important point that emerges from discussion, is that for any proposition, p , which a person, s , knows, s can find an appropriate answer to the Socratic question, "What justification do you have for thinking that you know p ?" The answer to this question is s 's justification or evidence for believing p .

3. A Stopping Place

To further explain the notion of justification, Chisholm continues:

In many instances the answers to our questions will take the following form: "What justifies me in thinking that I know that a is F is the fact that it is evident to me that b is G ." Such an answer, therefore, presupposes an epistemic principle, what we might call a "rule of evidence." The rule would have the following

form:

If it is evident to me that b is G, then it is evident to me that a is F.⁵

Here, Chisholm explains that our being able to answer Socratic questions presupposes the truth of epistemic principles. Such principles set forth the conditions under which a person is justified in believing certain propositions. But, Chisholm notes that

...we should distinguish the answer to our Socratic question from its epistemic presupposition. The answer to our Socratic question is a proposition to the effect that our justification for counting one thing as evident is the fact that something else is evident. And the epistemic presupposition of our answer is a rule of evidence: It is a proposition to the effect that if certain conditions obtain, then something may be said to be evident. One could say of such a rule that it tells us that one thing serves to make another evident.⁶

Thus, we see that epistemic principles or rules of evidence are not the proper answers to Socratic questions, and hence, do not constitute a person's justification for believing anything. The following example may help to clarify this claim. Suppose that a scientist has performed many experiments which constitute sufficient evidence for his belief that smoking causes cancer in humans. If one were to ask him for his justification for believing that smoking causes cancer in humans, the

appropriate response to this Socratic question would be to cite the experiments and the results which were thereby obtained. His answer presupposes a principle of induction or a principle of scientific inference, but such an epistemic principle does not justify his belief and does not constitute part of the answer to the Socratic question.

Chisholm tells us that there are only two different sorts of appropriate answers to Socratic questions:

1. "What justifies me in thinking that I know that a is F is the fact that it is evident to me that b is G."⁷

and

2. "What justifies me in thinking that I know that a is F is simply the fact that a is F."⁸

The first sort of answer proceeds by citing some other justified belief. When this answer is appropriate, the statement whose justification is sought is said to be indirectly evident. The second kind of answer proceeds by claiming that the statement whose justification is sought is true, and, in virtue of this, it is evident. Such a statement is said to be directly evident.

Chisholm's somewhat metaphorical statement of the essential tenets of the 'myth of the given' or foundation-
alism may now be stated more clearly. The first thesis,

(A), asserts that there is a stopping place for Socratic questioning, i.e., that the justification of the propositions that we know is transmitted in a linear fashion along statements of a certain sort. This thesis further claims that the proper stopping place for Socratic questioning is the point at which we get the second sort of answer, an answer of the form "What justified me in thinking that a is F is simply the fact that a is F." To put this claim another way, the ultimate justification of our knowledge consists of statements that are directly evident. (A) may thus be stated more clearly as

(A') Every statement which we are justified in believing is either (i) directly evident, or (ii) rendered evident by some other statement which was ultimately rendered evident by some statement which is directly evident.

and (B) may also be stated more perspicuously as

(B') The directly evident is composed of, at least in part, statements about our appearances.

Having set forth these preliminary remarks concerning Chisholm's notion of epistemic justification, we may now proceed to examine his theory.

Footnotes

1. Roderick M. Chisholm, "Theory of Knowledge," in Roderick M. Chisholm, et. al., Philosophy, (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964), pgs. 262-263.
2. Philosophy, pgs. 262-263.
3. Roderick M. Chisholm, Perceiving, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1957), pg. 54.
4. Roderick M. Chisholm, Theory of Knowledge (second edition), (Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1957), pg. 18.
5. Theory of Knowledge, pgs. 18-19.
6. Theory of Knowledge, pg. 19.
7. Theory of Knowledge, pg. 18.
8. Theory of Knowledge, pg. 19.