

Topic Page: [Chisholm, Roderick M.](#)

Summary Article: **Chisholm, Roderick (1916–99)**

from *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Epistemology*

Chisholm was an American philosopher who has been influential in a number of different areas of philosophy, including epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. He was an undergraduate at Brown University and then a graduate student at Harvard in 1938–42. After finishing his studies, he served in the military as a clinical psychologist. He then returned to Brown University in 1947, where he remained on the faculty until his retirement.

In 1942 Chisholm published in *Mind* his first paper on epistemology, “The Problem of the Speckled Hen.” Since then, he has addressed every major problem in epistemology. The most important of his writings on epistemology are *Perceiving* (1957), *The Foundations of Knowing* (1982), and, most famously, the 1966, 1977 and 1989 editions of *Theory of Knowledge*. The result of all this work is an epistemological system whose scope and subtlety are unsurpassed in the twentieth century.

At the base of Chisholm’s system is a basic notion of justification, which he uses to give definitions of various terms of epistemic appraisal. For example, in the third edition of *Theory of Knowledge* (hereafter *TK3*), he defines “beyond reasonable doubt” as follows: p is beyond reasonable doubt for an individual S =_{df} S is more justified in believing p than in withholding judgement on p . In addition, he defines when p is certain (nothing is more justified for S to believe), when p is evident (S is as justified in believing p as in withholding judgement on what is counterbalanced), when p is epistemically in the clear (S is as justified in believing p as in withholding judgement on p), when p is probable (S is more justified in believing p than in disbelieving p), and when p is counterbalanced (S is as justified in believing p as in disbelieving p , and vice versa).

Chisholm then uses these terms of epistemic appraisal to formulate a number of epistemic principles. The principles are expressed as conditionals, whose antecedents describe sufficient logical conditions for the application of these terms of appraisal. In the most straightforward case, a principle will assert that if certain non-epistemic conditions are satisfied (e.g. conditions about what S is experiencing, believing, etc.), then a proposition p has a certain epistemic status for S (e.g. it is evident or beyond reasonable doubt for S).

The definitions above tell us to understand this status in terms of an undefined notion of justification. Thus, Chisholm’s project in epistemology can be seen as the counterpart of a project in ethics that seeks to describe various sets of non-moral conditions that are sufficient to make an action morally right. The ethicists who try to carry out this project are at odds with utilitarians, since for utilitarians there is but one source of moral obligation – namely, utility. These non-utilitarian ethicists insist that there are other sources as well, ones that aren’t directly concerned with the maximization of happiness. Equality and fairness, for example, are among the usual candidates. Analogously, Chisholm insists that there is more than one source of epistemic justification.

The principal sources of empirical justification in Chisholm’s system are self-presentation (of certain kinds of psychological states – e.g. thinkings, desirings, intendings and sensings), perception, memory, belief coupled with a lack of negative coherence, and, finally, positive coherence among propositions with some antecedent positive epistemic status. Corresponding to each of these sources, Chisholm

proposes an epistemic principle describing the conditions under which the source produces justification. For example, his principle for self-presenting psychological states is as follows (TK3, 19): “If the property of being F is self-presenting, if S is F, and if S believes himself to be F, then it is certain that he is F.”

Chisholm has a reputation as one of leading foundationalists of the twentieth century (see FOUNDATIONALISM), but as the above list of sources makes plain, Chisholm is also a coherentist (see COHERENTISM). However, unlike a pure coherentist, he doesn't think that positive coherence relations are the only source of empirical justification. Indeed, he doesn't think that positive coherence is capable of generating justification for propositions that have nothing else to recommend them. It cannot create justification *ex nihilo*. On the other hand, it can ratchet justification up a notch for propositions that already have some other source of justification.

A key to understanding Chisholm's general approach to epistemology is to understand the metaphysical status of his principles. And for this, it is necessary to understand the status of the basic notion of justification that he uses to define his terms of epistemic appraisal. According to Chisholm, the basic notion is one that we bring to epistemology. It is only because we have a pre-philosophical idea of justification that we are able to identify instances of beliefs that are clearly justified, and it is this, he says, that allows the epistemological project to get off the ground. Thus, he is a particularist when it comes to matters of epistemological method. He begins by examining particular instances of beliefs that he takes to be justified, and then out of these instances he tries to abstract out general conditions of justification, which he expresses in the form of epistemic principles.

There is also an important presupposition that shapes how Chisholm conceives this basic notion of justification. He presupposes that we can improve and correct our beliefs by reflection, eliminating those that are unjustified and adding others that are justified (TK3, 1 and 5). This presupposition acts as a constraint when we try to use particular instances of justified belief to formulate general conditions of justification. It forces us to look for conditions to which we have reflective access, since otherwise there would be no reason to think that we could eliminate unjustified beliefs and add justified ones simply by being reflective. In effect, this is to say that it forces us to be internalists (see EXTERNALISM/INTERNALISM).

The basic notion of justification that we bring to epistemology is vague, says Chisholm, but he doesn't think it has to remain vague. On the contrary, he thinks that in the process of formulating epistemic principles, the notion becomes less and less vague, until eventually we are in a position to give a precise characterization of it. The characterization he gives is in terms of ethical requirements on our believings and withholdings. For example, to say that *S* is more justified in believing *p* than withholding on *p* (i.e. to say that *p* is beyond reasonable doubt for *S*) is to say that *S* is required to prefer the former over the latter (TK3, 59).

In turn, Chisholm conceives these ethical requirements as supervening on non-normative states (see EPISTEMIC SUPERVENIENCE). Specifically, they supervene on our conscious states (TK3, 60). As such, a proposition could not have an epistemic status different from the one it does have for us without our conscious states being different.

So, this is how Chisholm understands the metaphysical status of his principles: he thinks of them as necessary truths, and the truths they express are ultimately ones about the relationship between our conscious states at a time and ethical requirements on our believings and withholdings.

This view, when combined with his particularism, yields a position that Chisholm calls (*TK2*, 124–34) ‘critical cognitivism’ (see **CRITICAL COGNITIVISM**), which he sees as an alternative to scepticism, intuitionism and reductionism in epistemology (and in ethics as well). Unlike the sceptic, Chisholm begins with the presupposition that some of our beliefs are justified and indeed that some constitute knowledge. Unlike the intuitionist, he denies that there is some special faculty that tells which beliefs are justified (just as he denies that there is some special faculty that tells which actions are good). And unlike the reductionist, he denies that the truths of epistemology can be reduced to empirical truths. Instead, the relationship is one of supervenience.

See *also* **COMMONSENSISM AND CRITICAL COGNITIVISM**; **CRITERIA AND KNOWLEDGE**; **ETHICS AND EPISTEMOLOGY**; **MORAL EPISTEMOLOGY**; **PHENOMENALISM**; **PROBLEM OF THE CRITERION**; **REID**.

WRITINGS

- “The Problem of the Speckled Hen,” *Mind*, 51 (1942), 71-9.
- *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1957).
- *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).
- *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966).

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Chisholm, Roderick (1916--99). (2010). In J. Dancy, E. Sosa, & M. Steup, *Blackwell companions to philosophy: a companion to epistemology* (2nd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chisholm_roderick_milton_1916

 Wiley ©2010

 Wiley ©2010

APA

Chisholm, Roderick (1916--99). (2010). In J. Dancy, E. Sosa, & M. Steup, *Blackwell companions to philosophy: a companion to epistemology* (2nd ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chisholm_roderick_milton_1916

Chicago

"Chisholm, Roderick (1916–99)." In *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Epistemology*, by Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, and Matthias Steup. 2nd ed. Wiley, 2010. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chisholm_roderick_milton_1916

Harvard

Chisholm, Roderick (1916--99). (2010). In J. Dancy, E. Sosa & M. Steup, *Blackwell companions to philosophy: a companion to epistemology*. (2nd ed.). [Online]. Hoboken: Wiley. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chisholm_roderick_milton_1916 [Accessed 26 June 2019].

MLA

"Chisholm, Roderick (1916–99)." *Blackwell Companions to Philosophy: A Companion to Epistemology*, Jonathan Dancy, et al., Wiley, 2nd edition, 2010. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chisholm_roderick_milton_1916. Accessed 26 Jun. 2019.