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Essay Assignment 2

Phil110A Introduction to Philosophy: Knowledge and Reality

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It is regretful to report to all those who have ever thought to be knowledgeable in a subject that humanity, in fact, knows nothing at all. While highly controversial, this statement reflects the position supported by the skeptic as argued in the philosophical problem of the diallelus. In his work, the Problem of the Criterion, 20th century American philosopher Roderick Chisholm describes this problem as the “vicious circle” that oscillates between the issues of determining one's beliefs and the nature of being able to make this determination. At first glance it appears as though there is no solution to this problem. It is impossible to know which beliefs are good and bad without a criterion for judging beliefs, however, each criterion could also be good or bad, and in turn needs to be judged itself. This regression, like the debate around it, spins continually on through history as the source of great philosophical debate on the issue of the validity of human knowledge. In his paper Chisholm proposes that each of main interpretations of this problem falls into one of three schools of thought. Of these three interpretations, it is the particularist point of view which provides the strongest and most compelling solution to this problem, as approached by the Austrian-British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

In order to clarify the different views of this problem, Chisholm breaks the three stances into discernible groups referred to as the skeptics, methodists, and particularists. Each group is separated by their differing views on the issues of what to believe, and the method for choosing those beliefs. The skeptics propose that the diallelus is an unsolvable problem and that the cycle of knowing one's beliefs, and knowing how to choose one's beliefs is purely a paradox. They suggest that it is impossible to know anything and that the knowledge humanity has acquired does not have a valid foundation. The methodists attempt to solve this problem by addressing the second issue that describes choosing a criterion for determining valid beliefs. By first establishing a criterion, like a set of instructions, they argue that it becomes possible to put together a system of beliefs and sort the good ones from the bad. In contrast, the particularists propose the opposite solution to the methodists and assert that it is the first part of the diallelus, the knowing of certain beliefs, that must come before the establishment of any method. They maintain that it is impossible to establish a criterion for deciding the validity of certain beliefs without using existing truths against which a method can be applied. It is this school of thought, along with its supporters such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, that makes the strongest case for solving this problem.

Wittgenstein approaches the matter of the diallelus by combating the methodist argument that one cannot have beliefs without first having a method. He insists that certain essential components of a person's life, such as one's body, must be believed to exist without a need for formal proof. Those who suggest that the very hand that a person holds in front of his or her face is not necessarily real are playing what Wittgenstein refers to as “language-games”. Anyone who argues against this view this is “overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works in a language-game. Hence that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt even be like? And don't understand straight off” (Wittgenstein, 142). To doubt something as fundamental as the existence of one's own body simply does not make sense. A person does not need a criterion to recognize that his or her hand can be raised and lowered and that this appendage is certainly real. There are some beliefs that can and must be taken for granted if people are to be able to interact with others and their environment. In order to argue against something existing, Wittgenstein insists that it is necessary to use something that does exist as a starting point. This is the issue that methodists face when trying to first create a criterion. Wittgenstein suggests that “if you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein, 147). A methodology can only disprove a belief when it is juxtaposed against something that is known to be true. Wittgenstein concludes that there must be some initial truths that people can accept without question. Wittenstein further develops his stance as a particularist by forming set of initial beliefs and creating a criterion.

In order to develop his initial system of beliefs, Wittgenstein turns to the example of a child. Children are required to learn very quickly and in order to make progress, they must at first accept what they learn as true and doubt facts later. In contrast to Descartes' method of proving things to be true, illustrated by the Cogito, children accept a wealth of information at a time in the same way that “light dawns gradually over the whole” (Wittgenstein, 149). If a child did not believe what they initially experience to be true, they would simply not learn fast enough. Rather than a filter, the human system of beliefs is an evolution. The majority of things that children learn about, such as language, morality, and their interaction with their body, are beneficial to them. As they age, they then go on to refine what the understand and remove any faulty beliefs that do not fit with the rest of what they know. It is from this initial system of beliefs that Wittgenstein argues that the particularist should form a criterion. Like the child, Wittgenstein explains, “I do not explicitly learn the propositions that stand fast for me. I can discover them subsequently like the axis around which a body rotates. This axis is not fixed in the sense that anything holds it fast, but the movement around it determines its immobility” (Wittgenstein 150). The axis of truths that a person builds for him or herself is not stationary. It can shift as a person learns new information and affirms or denies certain ideas, but it grows more stable as they progress from a child to an adult. If a person's beliefs form an axis, then the criterion, the method used to validate beliefs, is the movement around the axis that holds it in place. Wittgenstein proposes that this movement is created by a person's interaction with the world: “I learned an enormous amount and accepted it on human authority, and then I found some things confirmed or disconfirmed by my own experience” (Wittgenstein, 150). The axis of a person's beliefs is held together by his or her experiences as a person grows older. With experience comes the wisdom to be able to decide between good and bad beliefs, and it is through this ongoing process that a person's system of beliefs is able to evolve. Wittgenstein has shown that there is a system of beliefs that all people must first accept, and rather than only admit good beliefs, it is a system of good and bad beliefs that is improved over time through the criterion developed by his or her experience.

Wittgenstein's approach to the problem of the diallelus is in line with the views of Chisolm's particularist and provides a clear, logical solution. While most people do not develop a system for determining what they know with the same rigour that a philosopher or a mathematician develops a proof, the skeptic must be wrong because these people still know a great many things. Everyone knows that they exist without deriving a proof equivalent to Descartes's Cogito. According to the methodist, trusting even the basic beliefs about morality and the external world that people develop from a young age is incorrect until they verify these beliefs using some criterion. If that were the case then as Wittgenstein puts it, “how should all these people be wrong?” (Wittgenstein, 149). These beliefs are so simple, and so integral to human society that it seems redundant to force them to be verified by some criterion before being accepted as truth. Occam's Razor suggests that it is the simplest solution to the problem that should be considered to be most accurate. The simplest solution to the problem of the diallelus is that a person should trust one's senses and beliefs, unless given reason to suspect otherwise. The methodist approach of filtering beliefs before allowing them to be accepted is overly complex and far too limiting. In reality, human society has been propelled forwards by its natural curiosity and the risks taken by pursuing unproven hunches. By forming a system of beliefs that has an initial foundation and which evolves using experience as a criterion, people are able to move forward with their lives and their theories at a much faster pace. Chisholm himself ultimately supports the particularist point of view and concludes that there are in fact “many things that we quite obviously know to be true. If you say what you think you see and feel and hear at this moment, you're most likely right” (Chisholm, 157). It is ultimately a wise decision for a person to trust his or her senses on a day-to-day basis. If people had taken the time to verify such basic beliefs as the existence of a person's own hands then it is unlikely that humanity would have discovered much of the knowledge that the average person uses and relies on today.