

LANGUAGE AND HUMAN NATURE

A French-American Philosophers' Dialogue

Edited by

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COMMENTS ON CHISHOLM AND LEFEBVRE

CHAIM PERELMAN

The paper by Professor Chisholm "On the Observability of the Self" is a good sample of the use of the analytical method in philosophy, such as has been fashionable in Anglo-American philosophy. I am surprised that Professor Chisholm's criticisms have also been addressed to phenomenologists, and especially to existentialists. If there exists a philosophy which accords a reality to the "self," it is certainly phenomenology, and in fact it is fundamental to its method; the same thing is true of existentialism. In effect, if of the objects which are given to us, we only perceive the appearances, the being in itself may be conceived as the infinite series of these appearances; but this is never the case with the "self," of which the existence transcends its manifestations. It is for these reasons, and without examining in detail the diverse attitudes of the phenomenologists, that I prefer to limit myself to Professor Chisholm's criticism of Hume, which is really the center of his paper.

The paper is prefaced by an extract from Thomas Reid, which assures us that:

A traveller of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and while the road is fair before him, he may go on without suspicion and be followed by others; but when it ends in a coal-pit, it requires no great judgment to know that he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.

Professor Chisholm applies this to Hume, in the doctrines of whom he claims we find "a number of obvious, but disastrous mistakes."

I believe enough in the intelligence of Hume to be convinced that if he had made such an obvious mistake, then he obviously would have seen it. And if he had seen it, and nevertheless had maintained his point of view, this would mean that he believed that he had sufficiently valid reasons not to be limited by common sense in this case. May I allude to the useful distinction made by Strawson between "descriptive"

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¹ P. F. Strawson,

and "revisionary" metaphysics.¹ It is necessary to point out that what seems to be an error because it is opposed to common sense in descriptive metaphysics, may be lucidly opposed to common sense in revisionary metaphysics, if there are sufficient reasons to do so. Accordingly, the analysis presented by Professor Chisholm and which conforms to common sense (e.g., "that our idea of a peach is an idea of something that has a particular taste, color, figure, size, and consistency"), may be in contradiction with what the empiricist methodology of Hume obliges him to assert (i.e., that all of our knowledge is derived from impressions). Hume is very conscious of the paradoxical conclusions to which he is led, but he maintains them to remain faithful to his method, and he professes to oppose the habitual manner of speaking (instead of speaking of the "self" he speaks of "what I call myself"). The systematic construction of a philosopher doesn't present itself—and the example of Hume shows this clearly—as a simple analysis of what seems *obvious* to common sense, but very often is a choice consciously made by the philosopher between incompatible possibilities. If, personally, I accept the conclusions of Professor Chisholm rather than those of Hume, it is because finding myself with the same option as Hume, I do not choose as Hume did, because I do not have the same confidence in the empiricist thesis.

By limiting himself to the method of linguistic analysis, Professor Chisholm treats at the same time three different problems which have received different solutions in the systems of Berkeley, Hume and Kant. These problems concern, besides the problem of the *self*, those of the *substance* opposed to its *predicates*, and of the *subject* opposed to the *object* of knowledge. If Berkeley, before Hume, had negated the existence of material substances, he had maintained the existence of spiritual substances, which manifest themselves by the will. For Kant substance is a category which we impose on the given to structure it. Kant does not deny that we observe the self as a phenomenon, but he denies the possibility of observing the "transcendental ego," which conditions all of our knowledge but cannot be, as such, an object of knowledge. I believe that if Professor Chisholm had taken into account the different analyses of the above three concepts, he perhaps would be obliged to introduce some further distinctions in his approach—which I am sympathetic to, because I do not believe that impressions exist without a subject.

¹ P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, Methuen, 1959), pp. 9-10.

Professor Lefebvre has entitled his paper "An Answer to Professor Chisholm;" yet it is odd that he says almost nothing about Professor Chisholm's paper directly. He is apparently simply content to affirm that since Hegel the epistemological problem of the relationship between subject and object has been superceded. The actual problem for him is to reconstruct the subject of history, i.e., the political subject, which he doesn't consider to be the state, as for Hegel, nor the party, as for Marxism-Leninism, but the new *avant-garde* composed of workers, students and intellectuals. The problem of knowledge is, in his eyes, an expression of the philosophy of individualism that he considers to be an outworn ideology of the bourgeoisie. Perhaps he is right. But it seems to me that the classical Marxist distinction between materialism and idealism is more relevant to the theory of knowledge than it is to the philosophy of history. Should he not demonstrate how and why in a revolutionary ideology epistemology has lost all of its meaning? This claim indeed would be a radical critique of epistemology; but I do not believe that useful philosophical dialogue can be carried on by simply ignoring the thesis and the analyses of the philosopher against whom one is invited to take a critical stand.*

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*Translated by Paul Kurtz

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