

APPRAISING THE PROBLEM OF FOUNDATIONALISM IN CARTESIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

A critical look at the history of philosophy reveals that philosophers are not in agreement regarding the criterion and method of acquiring knowledge. While the rationalists elevate and argues for the primacy of reason in that regard, the empiricists on the other divide argues for the infallibility of sense experience. As opposed to the rationalist and the empiricist is the position of the skeptics who questioned and doubted the possibility of knowledge. This position stands at the background of the thoughts of Rene Descartes and agitated his philosophising about knowledge. In his attempt to purge philosophy of all uncertainties, Descartes sought to ground philosophy on a foundation that is indubitable as that of mathematics. This led to his postulation of epistemological foundationalism. This paper seeks to appraise Rene Descartes' foundationalism and brings to the fore, its implications for knowledge acquisition. The work employed the qualitative research design where data were sourced from books, journals and periodicals. In line with the above, the expository method was employed to establish Descartes' thoughts on foundationalism, while the evaluative method was adopted to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of Descartes' thoughts before bringing to the fore, its implications for knowledge acquisition. The paper found out that as plausible as Descartes' foundationalism may seem, it is not without flaws. The study therefore concludes that any attempt to purge philosophy of its uncertainties as attempted by Descartes is tantamount to the reduction of philosophy to some other science. This is because; the uncertainties inherent in philosophy are what make for the beauty, substance as well as the continuity of the enterprise of philosophy.

Key Words: *Cogito Ergo Sum, Epistemology, Cartesian, Foundationalism.*

Introduction

The problem of certainty of knowledge is a major concern in the philosophical enquiry. The very act of wonder, which is believed, stimulated the Ionian philosophers, led philosophy through many ages to its present position. However, as a result of the fact that many philosophers in the ancient times

found it hard to reconcile this major problem of knowledge between the knowing subject (man) and the objects, they turned sceptics. Scepticism, which questioned the very possibility of true knowledge, no doubt agitated many philosophers. This agitation pushed philosophers into the desire to acquire certain knowledge. This search led to the development of some traditional theories of knowledge, which equally aimed at resolving the problem of certainty and thus give the knowing subject a place in the universe. One of such theories is the Cartesian foundationalism.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) wrote his meditation with the aim of finding out what he knew for sure; this certain truth would be the foundation of knowledge. Rene Descartes believes that the senses are deceptive and therefore accept reason as the very source of certainty. Descartes fields a rationalist foundation for truth which builds on the *cogito ergo sum* and being faced with the same problem of certain only of that, which can never be false or doubtful, he set out to achieve this certainty by postulating his famous method and guidelines, the methodic doubt and the clear and distinct perception of ideas in the light of reason. These helped him attain his foundation, the *cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). It is also on this frame work that Descartes was later to build and put forward his arguments for the existence of God.

This paper seeks to appraise the problem of foundationalism in Cartesian epistemology. Hence, in what follows, the concepts of epistemology and foundationalism will be briefly clarified, the place of the *cogito* in Cartesian epistemology will also be accounted for as part of the build-up to the major crux of the paper which is an appraisal of Descartes' foundationalism before the conclusion which will be a summation of all that might have been articulated in the paper.

Making sense of Epistemology and Foundationalism

Epistemology

According to Scientific Revolution Encyclopaedia, the word Epistemology is derived from the ancient Greek words, "*episteme*" meaning "knowledge" and the suffix, "*logos*" meaning "discourse". J. G Fernier coined the word on the model of "ontology" to designate that branch of philosophy which aims to discover the meaning of knowledge. Epistemology studies the nature of knowledge justification and rationality of belief. According to Jurgen Habermas in his book "*Knowledge and Human Interest*" was coined only in the nineteenth century, but the subject that it retrospectively denotes, is the

subject of modern philosophy in general (3). According to David Truncellito, epistemology concern themselves with a number of tasks, which we might sort into two categories, first, we must determine the nature of knowledge, that is, what does it mean to say that someone knows, or fails to know something? This is a matter of understanding what knowledge is and how to distinguish between cases in which someone does not know something. Secondly, we must determine the extent of human knowledge that is , how much do we or can we know, how can we use our reason, our senses, is it possible that we do not know nearly as much as we think we do? (1). Providing answer to these questions has become the work of epistemology.

Foundationalism

According to the *Scientific Revolution: An Encyclopaedia*, Foundationalism concerns philosophical theories of knowledge resting upon justified belief, or some secure foundation of certainty such as a conclusion inferred from a basis of sound premises (139). Foundationalism therefore is an aspect of epistemology, the philosophy concerning how we think, patterns of thoughts and how we arrive at knowledge. Foundationalism is an answer to “regress” when trying to justify an argument. All arguments are based on other arguments and are justified by those arguments. Then, those arguments have to be justified and so on. Foundationalism says that there is a basis set of beliefs that do not need to be justified, because they are obviously true. They are axiomatic, like the “self evident” truths.

In foundationalism, then, knowledge is split into basic and non-basic beliefs. The basic beliefs are the building blocks upon which non-basic beliefs are structured. Lemos in his book *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* noted that classical foundationalism asserts that basic beliefs must be infallible in order to be truly foundational, modern foundationalism says that a perception can be a justified basic belief unless proven otherwise by obvious contrary evidence (55). One of the best examples of foundationalism is in the work of French thinker Rene Descartes, who was the first to explore it. He proposed the question in his work the “*meditation*” that “if I were being deceived by an evil demon, and all my perceptions of the world around me were false, how will I know?”. He concluded that for him to be deceived he has to exist, therefore he concludes with his famous cogito ergo sum (I think therefore I am) (61). In saying this, Descartes was making a rationalism statement and asserting foundationalism in the same vein too. Africa he its beliefs system headed down by his ancestors as the foundation of his knowledge and moral principles which he holds as truth.

Cogito Ergo Sum in the Cartesian Epistemology

Descartes' *cogito ergo sum* was a direct response to the sceptics; having become a sceptic to prove the sceptics wrong that in fact, there was something that could be known for certain undoubtedly. As a foundation to his argument, Descartes observed in his meditation that; it is now some years since I detected how many were the false belief that I had from my earliest youth admitted as true, and how doubtful was everything I had since constructed on this basis; and from that time I was convinced that I must once for all seriously, undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had formerly accepted, and commence to build a new from the foundation, if I wanted to establish any firm and permanent structure in the science (66).

As a result, he set out to put everything to test using the instrument called the methodic doubt. To which in his discourse on method, he summarized his argument thus:

I had long before remarked that, in relation to practices, it is sometimes necessary to adopt, as if above doubt, opinions which we discern to be highly uncertain, as has been already said; but as I then desired to give my attention solely to the search after truth, I thought that a procedure exactly the opposite was called for, and that I ought to reject as absolutely false all opinions in regard to which I could suppose the least found doubt, in order to ascertain whether after that there remained ought in my belief that was wholly indubitable. Accordingly, seeing that our senses that they deceives us, I was willing to suppose that there existed nothing really such as they presented to us; and because some men err in reasoning, and fall into paralogisms, even on the simplest matters of geometry, I, convinced that I was as open to error as any other, rejected as false all the reasoning I had hitherto taken for demonstrations; and finally, when I considered that the very same thoughts which we experience when awake may also be experienced when we are asleep, while there is at that time not one of them true, I supposed that all the objects that had ever entered into my mind when awake, had in them no more truth than the illusions of my dreams (62).

He further stated that:

But immediately upon this I observed that, whilst I thus wished to think that all false, this was absolutely necessary that I, who

thus thought, should be somewhat; and as I observed that this truth. I think, hence I am, was so certain and of such evidence that no ground of doubt, however extravagant, could be alleged by the skeptics capable of shaking it, I concluded that I might, without scruple, accept it as the first principle of philosophy of which I was in search (62-63)

In summary, he began his methodic doubt; doubting every principle or opinion as well as everything upon which he had built his life on. But in his doubt, he discovered that he is “a thinking (conscious) thing, that is a being who doubts, affirms, denies, knows a few objects, and ignorant of many” which in Latin goes as, *Ergo sum res cogitans, multa igoraus, volens, nolens, imaginans etiam et sentiens* (Veitch 115) and because he is a *res cogitan*, he must certainly exist; a truth which could not be doubted without self-contradiction.

Although the idea expressed in *cogito ergo sum* is widely attributed to Descartes, he was not the first to mention it. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethic*, pointed out that in human activities, there is a faculty that is conscious of their exercise; so that whenever we perceive, we are conscious of their exercise; and whenever we think, we are conscious that we think; and to be conscious that we perceive or think is to be conscious that we exist. Augustine of Hippo in his book *De civitate Dei* writes “si ... fallor, sum” (I am mistaken I am) (Book X-1, 26) in the *Enchiridion*, Augustine attempt to refute scepticism by stating that “...one cannot err who is not alive. That we live is therefore, not only true but it is altogether certain as well” (Chapter 7, section 20). As many more others who are consistent with Descartes argument, and could be regarded as support for this.

Appraising the Cartesian Foundationalism

There is “no philosophy that is so watertight as not to leave some loopholes” (Okoro 51), and this returns true for the Cartesian foundationalism. The aim of foundationalism is unrealistic, and in fact, impossible. As long as man remains man, he can never have any guarantee of absolute certainty in knowledge. For as the popular saying goes “to err is human”. Man can never have any guarantee against error, in his acquisition of knowledge nor can there be any system of knowledge that that would be immune to error, criticism or scepticism (Omoregbe 55). Hamlyn seems to be thinking in the above line when he opined that:

Not only is it impossible to have such a system, what cannot be achieved is the discovery of the principle that will put scepticism out of question for all times. Sceptical criticism is always possible and indeed desirable. But the search for foundations of knowledge has as its aim the provisions of immunity from such criticism. The attempt to find such foundations is thus not only hopeless, it is also undesirable (quoted in Omoregbe 55).

In the same vein, Omoregbe, after a careful evaluation of Descartes' foundationalism, intimated that "Descartes' foundationalism lays emphasis on intuition (intuitive perception) as the foundation of knowledge and the guarantee for certainty (55) and posed the following questions and summation in reaction to same: How can objective certainty in knowledge be founded on subjective intuition? What is the guarantee that whatever is subjectively perceived clearly and distinctly must be true? What makes "clear and distinct perception" immune from error as Descartes seems to imply...thus foundationalism, as an attempt to discover principles or systems of knowledge that would guarantee certainty and immunity from error or criticisms, is a futile endeavour, because neither criticism nor error can be eliminated from human knowledge, so long as man remains human, for to err is human" (55-56).

Bonjour arguably presents one of the most concise forms of an anti-foundationalist argument. Bonjour's comments neatly draw together some of the issues: (1) 'There are basic, empirical beliefs which are justified and their justification does not depend on any further empirical beliefs. (2) For a belief to be justified there needs to be a reason why it is likely to be true. (3) For a belief to be justified for a particular person, requires that this person be in cognitive possession of such a reason. (4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe with justification the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true. (5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely a priori; at least one of the premises must be empirical.

Therefore the justification of a supposed empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows therefore that that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.'(32). Bonjour's position is that justification ultimately depends on additional empirical beliefs which need to be justified themselves. If Bonjour's assessment of Descartes' foundationalism is correct and returns true, then foundationalism generally

and that of Descartes specifically, does not successfully deal with the infinite regress problem, as basic beliefs turn out not to be self-justified after all.

Again, Descartes' argument according to Hatfield is not unproblematic. If the external world is known to exist due to a stimuli-response mechanism of the body, then how is this account any different from the common empiricist views that Descartes claims to oppose? Is it not precisely distrust in sense-perception that is supposed to function as the motivation for doubt? Descartes does not seem to be able to answer this question without relying on God. He claims that God guarantees the reliability of clear and distinct perception, as well as the validity of knowledge received through sense-perception, even though the latter is weaker and sometimes confused (49).

However, despite God's justification of the reliability of knowledge received through the senses, Descartes does not relinquish his thesis that knowledge of the external world is always secondary to knowledge concerning the mind. Due to his standpoint of Platonic realism regarding the ontology of mathematics, the world in itself is regarded simply as an extensional and divisible substance whose real properties can be understood only through the pure intellect. However, Descartes never quite manages to explain neither the epistemological, nor the ontological interconnectedness of the two substances, the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. This is because Descartes is blind to the problem of the complex relationship between language and the world. Using mathematics as the paradigm for a perfect conceptual language, Descartes holds that linguistic concepts (*idea*) are "innate", that is, the possibility for a correct understanding of the world by means of language is God-given, in a similar way as the valid understanding of mathematical concepts is given by God (212-213). It is significant to notice that although Descartes attempts to accomplish the construction of an all-encompassing system of philosophy, he carefully advises his audience that his method is not suitable for practical means.

Contributing to discourse on the critique of Descartes' foundational philosophy, A. J. Ayer in his novel work *Language, Logic and Truth* intimated of the barrenness of Descartes' procedure. According to Ayer:

It is commonly said that Descartes attempted to derive all human knowledge from premises whose truth was intuitively certain: but this interpretation puts an undue stress on the element of psychology in his system. I think he realized well enough that a mere appeal to intuition was insufficient for his purpose, since men are not all equally credulous, and that what he was really

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trying to do was base all our knowledge on propositions which it would be self contradictory to deny. He thought he has found such a proposition in "*cogito*" which must not here be understood in its ordinary sense of "I think", but rather as meaning "there is nothing thought" (46).

Ayer was not to agree with Descartes on this point and in reference to the above, Ayer intimated that:

He (Descartes) was wrong because "*non cogito*" would be self contradictory only if it negated itself: and this no significant proposition can do. But even if it were true that such a proposition as "there is a thought now" was logically certain, it still would not serve Descartes purpose. For if "*cogito*" is taken in this sense, his initial principle, "*cogito ergo sum*", is false. "I exist" does not follow from "there is a thought now" (47).

Rene Descartes sought to establish philosophy on the foundation that will transcend the skeptic and criticism. If that were to be possible or put differently, if Descartes has succeeded and have place philosophy on the same footing with mathematics, the implication would have been that philosophy would have ceased to be philosophy and will attain the status of something else. Bertrand Russell seems to be thinking in this line when he intimated that:

If you ask a mathematician, a mineralogist, a historian, or any other man of learning, what definite body of truths has been ascertained by his science, his answer will last as long as you are willing to listen. But if you put the same question to a philosopher, he will, if he is candid, have to confess that his study has not achieved positive results such as have been achieved by other sciences. It is true that this is partly accounted for by the fact that, as soon as definite knowledge concerning any subject becomes possible, this subject ceases to be called philosophy, and becomes a separate science (68).

Deducible from the above is that what Descartes tried to achieve with his foundational thinking will provide definite answers to issues in philosophical reflections and reasoned in the line of the thought of Russell, those issues or subject ceases to be philosophy. Russell further asserted that:

The whole study of the heavens, which now belongs to astronomy, was once included in philosophy; Newton's great work was called 'the mathematical principles of natural

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philosophy'. Similarly, the study of the human mind, which was a part of philosophy, has now been separated from philosophy and has become the science of psychology. Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given, remain to form the residue which is called philosophy" (69).

Philosophy, no matter how uncertain and susceptible to the criticism of the skeptics, "it is part of the business of philosophy to continue the consideration of such (epistemological) questions, to make us aware of their importance, to examine all the approaches to them, and to keep alive that speculative interest in the universe which is apt to be killed by confining ourselves to definitely ascertainable knowledge" (69).

The value of philosophy according to Russell is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty and hence "the man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected" (69). Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect (70).

Deducible from the above is the fact that the uncertainties of philosophy and the openness of then discipline to the critiques and criticisms of the skeptics is consistent with the nature of philosophy and can be said to be what makes for the beauty of the enterprise of philosophy.

In his book the "Gray Science" Friedrich Nietzsche addresses Descartes epistemological assertion of the *cogito*. He criticized the phrase in that it presupposes that there is an "I", that does such activity as "thinking" and that the "I" knows what "thinking" is. He suggested a more appropriate phrase

would be "it thinks". In other words, the "I" in "I think" could be similar to the "it" in "it is raining". (61)

While it remains true that Descartes epistemological position and the Cartesian foundationalism is consistent with the maxim of philosophy which is taking nothing for granted and that the philosophic temper with which he put forward his thought are commendable, it remains more true to purge philosophy of all uncertainty and elevate the discipline from the realm of criticism and skepticism will do philosophy no good and hence stripe it of its very nature as Bertrand Russell will argue for. It is on the above basis that it is here argued that, in view of the fact of the impossibility of purging human knowledge of either criticism nor error that this study makes bold to state that the aim of the foundationalists and foundationalism as an epistemic doctrine is both an exercise in futility as well as an activity that is at par with the very nature of philosophical reflections.

Conclusion

In the preceding discourse, this paper has attempted an appraisal of the Cartesian foundationalism. What is crystal clear is that, the vehemence and forthrightness with which Descartes sought to erect philosophy on a firm foundation notwithstanding, the theory is not as much as water tight to withstand the sledge hammer of critics. While the theory, through Descartes refusal to accept the status quo is merited for being in consonance with the maxim of philosophy which is taking nothing for granted, the theory is flawed on the basis of the fact that the uncertainties and doubts as found in the enterprise of philosophy are what constitute the beauty of philosophy. In fact, had Descartes succeeded through his foundationalism to erect a new foundation that is indubitable like mathematic for philosophy, the enterprise of philosophy, properly construed would have ceased to be what it is. It is in that line that this study make bold to conclude that such scholars as Descartes and his disciples as well as other foundational thinkers should allow the enterprise of philosophy to exit in its pure state with its doubts. This is because, any attempt to provide direct real time and indubitable solutions to philosophical problems and issues is tantamount to removing those issues from the realm of philosophy.

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