



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Cartesian Epistemic Foundation- An Appraisal

Dr. Juthika Das

Assistant Philosopher, Department of Philosophy
Sibsagar University, Sivasagar, Assam, India

Abstract: Foundationalism as one of the core of epistemology states that knowledge and beliefs are founded on some certain indubitable and self evident truths and knowledge. Foundationalism states that the justification of all our knowledge is ultimately derivable to the foundations of basic beliefs. Every belief needs a fundamental basis from which other types of epistemic beliefs can be derived. There is a long list of philosophers who claimed themselves as supports of foundationalism. This paper mainly makes an attempt to discuss the foundationalism of Rene Descartes. In Cartesian epistemology, foundationalism is ultimately based on one and single proposition *Cogito ergo sum*. Descartes carefully examined this judgment. This judgment has two important features. They are clearness and distinction. The statement *Cogito ergo sum* is the basic belief for the justification of other beliefs.

Index Terms - Descartes, basic beliefs, foundationalism, epistemic justification.

I. INTRODUCTION

I.INTRODUCTION

Epistemology as a branch of philosophy deals with the certainty, criterion, and sources and more specially the justification of knowledge. From the time of the Ancient philosophy to the present time, philosophers engage with the various epistemic issues of philosophy. The term 'epistemology' has derived from the Greek word *episteme* and *logos* which means science of knowledge. The term epistemology was coined by the Scottish philosopher James Fredrick Ferrior (1854). This term was used as the title of the first section of his *Institution of Metaphysics*. "This section of the science is properly termed the term Epistemology- the doctrine or theory of knowing, just as ontology is the science of being.....It answers the general question 'What is knowing and the known?'- or more shortly what knowledge is."¹

Regarding the justification of knowledge there are various topics of epistemology. These are foundationalism, Coherentism and Infitism. Foundationalism as one of the core of epistemology states that knowledge and beliefs are founded on some certain indubitable and self evident truths and knowledge. Coherentism as an epistemic an epistemic justification implies that a belief to be justified, it must belong to a coherent system of beliefs. Coherentism as an epistemic justification is mainly based on idealistic

philosophy. Infinitism as an important topic of epistemology deals with the possibility, justification and the nature of knowledge. In Infinitism knowledge is justified by an infinite chain of reason. This paper is mainly deals with the appraisal on Foundationalism as an epistemic justification with the special reference to Cartesian philosophy.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study is completely based on secondary data of journals and books. The entire study is carried out through analytic and descriptive methods.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Foundationalism is that issue of epistemology which deals with the justification of the knowledge claim. Generally in the field of epistemology there are two kinds of epistemic justification of all our beliefs- Basic and non-basic beliefs. Basic beliefs are those beliefs which are self justifying. On the other hand non-basic beliefs are needed to support themselves. The non-basic beliefs are which need to justify by their inferential relationship to the basic beliefs. Foundationalism went a step further to make distinctions of these beliefs and further divided these beliefs into two groups- one is infallible and self evident and the other group is inferential beliefs. "Foundationalism as a theory of justification posits that some beliefs are incorrigible and infallible and as such need not to be justified. Such beliefs are said to be self evident or derived by intuition."² According to Dr. k.A. Owolabi, "Foundationalism is a theory of justification that claims that a belief is justified if it is derived from some basic beliefs called foundations."³ Foundationalism states that the justification of all our knowledge is ultimately derivable to the foundations of basic beliefs. Every belief needs a fundamental basis from which other types of epistemic beliefs can be derived. The foundationalist also states that if any belief does not derivable to the set of basic beliefs, in that case that belief to be justified they must be inferentially connected to the basic belief. Another important feature of foundationalism is that, it is structural. According to foundationalism, all justification can be traced on the foundation of justifications; hence, since justified beliefs are what make up the structure of genuine knowledge, there can never be a justified belief that is unconnected to these foundations. Foundational beliefs are static in nature. Because, it constitutes that belief which remains constant and unchanging, irrespective of other knowledge. In the history of philosophy, there are variances of foundationalism. These are Classical foundationalism, Cartesian foundationalism, Chisholm's foundationalism and Moorean foundationalism. This paper makes an attempt to explain Cartesian foundationalism as a theory of epistemic justification.

Though Rene Descartes was regarded as the father of foundationalism yet long before Descartes we can find the discussion of foundationalism in the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle in his Posterior Analytic states that foundationalism is the basis to stop the regress of question and answer. Aristotle argued that regress argument proves that justification of beliefs require basic beliefs which are not supported any other beliefs. In Cartesian epistemology ultimately based on one and single proposition 'Cogito ergo sum'. Cartesian Cogito ergo sum is the direct attract to the skeptic thoughts. Skeptic doubted

everything which can be perceived. But there is something which could be doubt without any doubt. As a strong supporter of foundationalism 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’⁴

In order to arrive at the criterion of knowledge, he employed the method of doubt. Doubt is of two kinds- Experiential doubt and methodical doubt. Descartes employed methodical doubt in his criterion of knowledge. There are two theoretical possibilities because of which everything can be dubitable. One is the possibility of myself being in a dream. The second is the possibility of myself being under the influence of evil spirit who is keen on deceiving me. But the question is –is there any proposition which is beyond doubt even though I am dreaming now? Is there any judgment which is true even though the evil spirit keen on deceiving me? According to Descartes there is one proposition which is true and beyond doubt and that is –I think, therefore I exist. In his discourse on method, he summarized the above ideas as follows-

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.⁵

Descartes come to conclude that there is one proposition which is true and beyond doubt and that is –I think, therefore I exist. Descartes carefully examined this judgment. This judgment has two important features. They are clearness and distinction. As a result Descartes came to support the view that anything which is beyond both clear and distinct is beyond doubt. This thought can be explained in the language of Descartes as follows-

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.⁶

There is one famous quote of Okora ‘no philosophy that is so watertight as not to leave some loopholes’- it becomes true for the Descartes theory of foundationalism. Critics observed that the aim set forth by the foundationalism is unreal, in fact impossible. The reason behind this is that man can never have any guarantee about that truth and knowledge which is clear and distinct. Moreover man can never be sure be sure against any error in respect of the acquisition of knowledge and also there is no any system of knowledge that would be resistant to error or skepticism or any doubt. According to Hamlya, “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.”⁷

After a careful analysis of Descartes foundationalism, in the similar streak another philosopher Joseph Omoregbe states 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”⁶ So, here we find that objective certainty of knowledge by subjective intuition is contradict to each other.

Famous linguistic philosopher A.J. Ayer in his master piece Language, Truth and Logic contributes discourse on the critical analysis of the foundationalism of Descartes, Ayer opines that,

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 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”⁸

The other point that Ayer stated while examined the sentence *Cogito ergo sum*, Ayer stated that *I think* is not the truth of logic. The logical truth is that *I exist if I think*. Moreover, Ayer pointed out that even if *Cogito ergo sum* is the truth of logic, it would not be for that reason be indubitable. Their truth follows from their being doubted by the person who expresses them. So, the indubitability of the proposition *Cogito ergo sum* is dependent on a condition. So, for Ayer *Cogito ergo sum* cannot be treated as the foundation of our knowledge. Like Ayer, Friedrich Nietzsche in his book *The Gay Science* examines Cartesian *Cogito* as epistemological assertion. “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”.⁹

IV.CONCLUSION

This work has attempted to evaluate the Cartesian foundationalism . Descartes' idea is not watertight to endure the sledgehammer of criticism, despite his fervor and forthrightness in trying to establish philosophy on a solid foundation. Although Descartes' thesis—which is justified by his refusal to accept the status quo—is in line with philosophy's highest ideal, which is to take nothing for granted, the theory is based on uncertainties and doubts, which goes against the beauty of philosophy.

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