



International
SOCIAL SCIENCES
STUDIES JOURNAL



SSSjournal (ISSN:2587-1587)

Economics and Administration, Tourism and Tourism Management, History, Culture, Religion, Psychology, Sociology, Fine Arts, Engineering, Architecture, Language, Literature, Educational Sciences, Pedagogy & Other Disciplines in Social Sciences

Vol:5, Issue:44
sssjournal.com

pp.5232-5237
ISSN:2587-1587

2019
sssjournal.info@gmail.com

Article Arrival Date (Makale Geliş Tarihi) 30/07/2019 | The Published Rel. Date (Makale Yayın Kabul Tarihi) 28/09/2019
Published Date (Makale Yayın Tarihi) 28.09.2019

DESCARTES FOUNDATIONALISM: AN ANSWER TO THE SKEPTICS' OR A WAY OUT?

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Article Type : Research Article/ Araştırma Makalesi

Doi Number : <http://dx.doi.org/10.26449/sss.1717>

Reference : Bubu, N.G. (2019). "Descartes Foundationalism: An Answer To The Skeptics' Or A Way Out?", International Social Sciences Studies Journal, 5(44): 5232-5237.

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of knowledge is a fundamental issue in epistemology as a main branch of philosophy concerned with knowledge related problems. Over time, epistemologists attempted to give us or provide clues as to what reality actually is, that is the question of the certainty of knowledge has always been topical in any epistemic enterprise. The search for knowledge becomes more cumbersome when one considers the challenge of the skeptics and sophists about the ability of man knowing anything for certain. To some philosophers, the emergence of the skeptics' challenge is seen as an attempt to bring this noble enterprise into a quagmire. However, the introduction of Descartes foundationalism opens a new chapter and a serious challenge to the skeptics' position on the certainty of knowledge. Consequently, many have asked the question: is Descartes foundationalism merely an answer to the skeptic's challenge or a way forward for epistemology? This paper examines this question with a view to asserting a position regarding the issue, which is that it is both a response and a way forward for epistemology.

Keywords: Foundationalism, Epistemology, Descartes, Skeptics.

1. INTRODUCTION

It may not be incorrect to state that the business of philosophy is basically the business of epistemology because the enterprise of philosophy is subsumed in epistemology. One takes this position based on the fact that the issue of knowledge or reality underlies our efforts towards understanding the world, ourselves, phenomena and ultimate reality. Basically, all activities of philosophers from time immemorial spanning the ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary epochs, denote the zeal to know, and "to know" is a fundamental epistemological phrase. This may be why I mentioned in one of my write-ups that epistemology envelops the entire enterprise of philosophy and drives itself towards what it considers not just knowledge but the type or kind that can satisfy human curiosity or taste for indubitable reality (Ncha, 2000). It is worth mentioning that this drive to achieve knowledge is what came under the sledgehammer of the sophists and basically the skeptics, denying the fact of certainty of knowledge and in one way making this enterprise a futile effort.

This challenge forced Descartes to introduce the concept of foundationalism. Foundationalism is associated with Rene Descartes, a rationalist who is often called the father of modern philosophy. It is a concept in epistemology which is a theory of knowledge and talks about basic and fundamental problems of knowledge as to whether we have knowledge or not, asking questions about the origin of knowledge, its extent, sources, validity and invalidity and even the composition of knowledge. Most philosophers see epistemology as a theory that is concerned with truth, reality or knowledge. Omoregbe posits that the question of the impossibility of knowledge was first

mutated by the sophists around the 5th century B. C. (35). Therefore, as a modern contemporary epistemological theory, it has its origin in this skeptical challenge. In this paper, we examined this theory in order to determine the extent to which it contributes to the epistemological battle. However, before, looking at this objective, it is necessary to do a conceptual clarification for understanding and benefit of all categories of persons.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY

Simply, epistemology is a main branch of philosophy called the theory of knowledge. This is a peripheral understanding of epistemology. We have deeper meanings of epistemology as given by different sources or philosophers. For instance, Pence, describes epistemology as “the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, how it is acquired and whether true knowledge is possible (18). The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy defines epistemology as “the study of the nature of knowledge and justification, specifically, (a) the defining features (b) the substantive conditions (c) the limits of knowledge and justification” (233). It is interesting to note that the last function is the concern of this paper since foundationalism is an epistemological attempt to provide a justification for our knowledge in order to make it valid. In line with the above, Ben, explains that epistemology determines what we know and how we know it while listing the conditions to be met for something to count as knowledge (17).

For Ozumba, epistemology centres around the fact of wanting to know, to understand and consequently to offer a well-considered explanation of why things are the way they are (15) very closely, Soccio, defines it as “the branch of philosophy that asks questions about knowledge, its nature and origins and whether or not it is even possible. Epistemology questions involve standards of evidence, truth, belief, source of knowledge, gradations of knowledge, memory, and perception (4).

3. BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF RENE DESCARTES

Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650), according to Socio, was born into an old and respected family in the French province of Touraine. His mother died of tuberculosis a year after his birth, and Descartes believed he inherited a frail constitution from her. His father was a famous lawyer, whose career kept him away from home for months at a time. He studied at Jesuit College, where he studied Greek, Latin, history, liberal arts, science, mathematics, and philosophy, in addition to music, dancing, and fencing (203). Law Head reports that Descartes was born in a small town, called La Haye, in France and studied at one of the famous schools in Europe, from there he went on to obtain a law degree. He engaged in a series of travels and wrote many books which include: Rules for the Direction of the mind, Le Monde, Discourse on Method, Meditations on First Philosophy, Principles of Philosophy, passions of the soul, etc (227).

Rene Descartes was a famous rationalist who stands not only as the father of modern philosophy but also as the original archetype of the modern rationalism. He boldly relied on the disciplined use of his own reason, he refused to accept as true anything that did not square with what he had personally verified as true, he exalted the thinking conscious self as the foundation of all certainty. According to Soccio, on November 10, 1619, Descartes had a revelation that transformed him and ultimately changed the direction of western philosophy. He died on February 11, 1650 (264).

4. SKEPTICS

The term refers to one who doubts that there is certainty of knowledge and the act of doubting is called skepticism (Basse, Enang, and Mendie, 13.). The notion of the skeptic is commonly applied to people who are inclined to doubt accepted beliefs or who habitually mistrust people or ideas in general. In this sense skepticism can be characterized as a healthy and open-minded tendency to test and probe popularly held beliefs, such a state of mind according to ‘Dupre’, is usually a useful safeguard against credulity but may sometimes tip over into a tendency to doubt everything, regardless of the justification for doing so (7).

For Stumpf, the term “skeptics” is derived from the Greek word “skeptikoi” which means “seekers” or “inquirers”. He describes the skeptics as those in possession of a basic mood of doubt (111). In analyzing skepticism, Stumpf mentioned that skepticism is not just all about or denial of knowledge, it is, on the other hand, a continuous process of inquiry in which every explanation of experience is tested by a counter experience. Stumpf explains that Sextus stated that a fundamental principle of skepticism holds that “to every proposition, an equal proposition is opposed (111). This means that we can at all times infer that from the truth of a particular proposition, the truth of an opposing proposition can be derived. Furthermore, we may say that a particular assertion begets a counter-assertion. Put differently, when something can be given that can render it untrue.

Law head defines skepticism as to the claim that we do not have knowledge. It is the claim that even if there is knowledge we cannot know it or have it for certainty (54). James white sees skepticism as to the view that knowledge is not possible where knowledge implies certainty (92). According to a dictionary of common philosophical terms, skepticism is derived from the Greek word “skepsis” which means “questioning”. In its most general use, it refers to a disbelieving and questioning state of mind. As a philosophical principle, it rejects the notion that real knowledge or truth is possible, perhaps because the mind is incapable of finding truth (48).

Basically, skepticism could be divided into two broad classes: universal skepticism and limited skepticism. Universal skepticism claims that we have no knowledge whatsoever. Accordingly, they are of the view that every knowledge claim is unjustified and subject to doubt. On the other hand, the limited skepticism permits that we may have some knowledge but they focus their skeptical doubts on particular types of knowledge claims, such as religious and moral claims, while they may accept that one can have mathematical or scientific knowledge. Law head explains that some limited skeptics might claim that mystical experience provided us with the truth about reality but science does not, but only gives conjectures, guesses and so on. There are other forms of skepticism that may be subsumed under these categories mentioned above, such as solipsism sensory skeptics, rational skepticism and methodological skepticism (Egbeke, 29).

5. FOUNDATIONALISM

Rene Descartes was concerned with the need to establish a base for his knowledge so as to validate it or make such findings, indubitable. Having found a rational ground for trusting his sense experience, Descartes is now confident that he can have knowledge of the existence and nature of his body and the external world (Law Head, 88). This position is considered a reference point, a springboard for periscoping reality. In this way, it opens the entrance to the term foundationalism which connotes a knowledge base.

The term foundationalism is derived from the English word foundation which refers to the rock bottom of any standing structure, a solid underground base of a building (Hornby, 467). Further, when one moves a little away from concreteness to abstractness, then the foundation may be the principle, an idea, or fact that we may base our beliefs, actions, behaviours, or explanation for something. This is the origin of the idea of foundationalism. Basically, when the term foundationalism is mentioned, we must understand that epistemology as a theory of knowledge is involved. Therefore, foundationalism refers to one of the sub-theories of epistemology which is given as the theory of knowledge.

The definition above of epistemology is the traditional one. Many philosophers see epistemology as such, an attempt to identify and study knowledge. Opposed to these traditionalists, are the recent arguments in contemporary epistemology which differ from the traditionalists’ view. For them, epistemology should be addressed as the theory of justification. This follows renewed doubts about the possibility of knowledge that is certain. This shows that foundationalism has a strong affinity with the idea of justification. In this connection, therefore, foundationalism is an epistemological concept which attempts to bring justification so as to dismiss doubts against the certainty of knowledge. Its epistemological task is to provide and to prove a secure foundation for our beliefs.

A dictionary of common philosophical terms defines foundationalism as “a term for any epistemological view that an adequate theory of knowledge must have a very certain base or foundation” (23). While the Cambridge dictionary of philosophy defines it as “the view that knowledge and epistemic justifications have a two-tier structure: some instances of knowledge and justification are non-inferential or foundational, and all other instances thereof are inferential or non-foundational (276). For Ozumba, foundationalism is a product of Cartesian “cogito” which provides a solid base for knowledge (96). Citing Mark Pastin, Ozumba sees foundationalism as an epistemic view that holds that all empirical propositions which are warranted for a person at a time, ultimately derive their warrant from a core class of empirical propositions which are self-warranted for the person at a time.

Basically, this theory is committed to two main claims. First, is that there are some incorrigible statements. The second is that these incorrigible statements constitute part of the foundation of knowledge of the external world. According to John Kekes, it is an attempt to bail epistemology out of the problem of having to specify the condition required before the certainty of knowledge is attained.

He argues that basic propositions constitute the cornerstone of foundationalism. “If a proposition is basic, then a person is completely justified in being certain of its truth because there could be no difference between believing that the proposition is true and the proposition is being true. For foundationalism, basic propositions are said to be incorrigible basic propositions, their certainty, in this case, is justified. Foundational epistemology insists on certainty, apodictiveness, infallibility, non-inferability, direct and unmediated knowledge. This was founded by Descartes most popular dictum “cogito ergo sum”, “I think therefore I am”, which established a solid foundation upon which knowledge can be built (Ozumba, 26).

6. IS DESCARTES FOUNDATIONALISM, A RESPONSE TO THE SKEPTICS OR A WAY FORWARD FOR EPISTEMOLOGY?

It is important to note that epistemology as a philosophical theory envelops the entire enterprise of philosophy because philosophy is basically concerned about knowing what reality is and attempting to solve problems based on the nature of reality. However, this endeavour is challenged by the skeptics who raised doubt as to the possibility of knowing truth, or certainty. This means that there can never be certain of knowledge even if we claim to know. One meaning of epistemology is that it is the theory of justification, it attempts to justify our claims to knowledge. Foundationalism as an epistemological concept tries to provide this justification by its claims of basic statements, and by determining what we know and how we know it and identifying the conditions to be met for something to count as knowledge.

Onuoha, lends credence to the above when he says that in modern time, Descartes as one of the prominent figures of modern philosophy, fought to set a foundation for knowledge. The reason was that he was convinced that the goal of philosophy is to search for indubitable truth. Therefore, he sought to discover how knowledge can be obtained and the criteria for certainty (258). Rorty, as cited by Onuoha, opined that foundational epistemologically centered philosophy provides us with the organizational focus and a standard for a worthwhile intellectual exercise which is what epistemology is all about and what traditional epistemologists set to achieve (269). Rorty further observed, according to Onuoha, that the ideas of incorrigibility, foundationalism, absolute certainty by Descartes, lock, and Kant compel us to see the business of philosophy as that of investigating the foundations of science, the arts, culture, and morality and adjudicates the cognitive claims of these.

In spite of the above, the concept has been criticized by some philosophers. However, our aim is not to give a catalogue of this criticism but to attempt to answer the question whether it provides an answer to the skeptics or provide a way forward for epistemology, but before doing that a few criticisms may be allowed.

First, the idea of “cognito ergo sum” which sets the ball rolling for foundationalism has been criticized. Ozumba, quoted Hobbes as criticizing this dictum by describing it as absurd because Descartes erred by taking thought as the essence of his existence since he must exist as a being to think and not think to exist (18). For Rorty as cited by Onuoha, epistemology can continue on a new assumption without necessarily being inhibited by the shackle of foundationalists touchstones of certainty, etc (267). On his part, Onuoha, pointed out that epistemology is not concerned with the search for fixed truth, for an attempt to do that will mean pretentious inquiry for we cannot arrive at fixed and absolute truths (270).

It is interesting to note that the above criticisms do not rubbish the good intention of Rene Descartes to take epistemology to a logical conclusion, Descartes, intention was to keep the ball rolling for epistemology instead of being on a blind alley. This may be why Ozumba submits that in spite of the criticism Descartes remains one of the foremost philosophers of the modern period. Quoting Burr and Goldinger, Ozumba says Descartes was the inventor of analytic geometry and one of the greatest of French philosophers of modern philosophy (19).

Foundationalism is an interesting epistemological theory which Descartes constructed and which has added its own aspect to the totality of epistemological enterprise. It is worth mentioning that epistemology probably would have come to a standstill going by the problem of doubt raised by skeptics. This would have also affected philosophy itself, if not for the emergence of foundationalism, which demonstrated that our knowledge has a foundation. One can conclude that there is a level of success because foundationalism makes it possible for us to have a level of certainty, though we cannot talk of absolute certainty, still to a point, foundationalism gives us a phenomenon to use as a springboard, although it is not an absolute solution.

Given the above, one can conclude that Descartes foundationalism’s position above, and based on the fact that the issue of certainty of knowledge was raised by skeptics, it can be seen as a move considered as a response to the skeptics.

On the other hand, Descartes foundationalism is a plus for epistemology as he bequeathed to us a philosophic heritage, in addition to the great philosophic systems like Plato's world of forms, Baconian “Nouvum organum”, Hegel’s “Absolute idealism” etc. To this end, foundationalism can be seen as a way forward for it came to rescue epistemology from the deadly attacks of skepticism and as such pave the way for a continuous and a worthwhile philosophic enterprise. In this way epistemology and by extension philosophy could move on so that the business of doing philosophical inquiry could be done with hope.

7. CONCLUSION

So far, we have been trying to answer the question of whether Descartes foundationalism provides a response to the skeptics or a way forward. As a philosophical concept, to some philosophers, it could be dualistic in purpose. Conceived as such, foundationalism can be seen as a response to the skeptics challenge and is seen as an attempt to defeat skepticism, at the same time providing a useful ground for a useful epistemic polemics. Many feel that subsequent philosophers have been no more successful than Descartes in vanquishing skepticism.

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