

Followers of French Fashions: Neo-Cartesianism and Analytic Epistemology¹

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Evidence and Inquiry falls into three parts: chapters 1, 4 and 10 incorporate a presentation of Susan Haack's epistemological position (foundherentism); chapters 2–3 and then 5–9 provide criticisms of several contemporary epistemologies, and contribute to the formulation of the positive theses expressed in the *pars construens*. A somewhat neo-Cartesian perspective (see below) informs the whole project. In an escalation that reminds one of the *Meditations*, C. I. Lewis, BonJour and Davidson are criticised for reasons “internal” to the family of theories sharing some interest in the Cartesian enterprise (foundationalism and coherentism); whereas Popper, Quine, Goldman (who might have been discussed in the first half of the *pars destruens* before his “cognitivist turn”), Stich, the Churchlands and eventually Rorty are challenged as contemporary detractors of Cartesian epistemology.

In the passage from the first to the second half of the *pars destruens*, the dialogue becomes a *querelle* within which the interlocutors seem to speak rather different languages (p. 96). Both Popper and Haack reject psychologism as the ultimate answer to the problem of critical assessment of knowledge, but while the former is repudiating the neo-Kantian, genetic psychologism of the *Fries'chen Schule* in favour of a more Platonistic approach, Haack is rebutting contemporary trends in cognitive sciences, on the basis of a reevaluation of a partially Cartesian perspective within which only *the doxastic activity of the subject* is interpreted as fundamental, transparent to itself, and fully examinable on purely rational grounds. I take it as an unfortunate, but I hope not inevitable, repercussion of Haack's “personalism” (as opposed to “subjectivism”, see p. 20) that in her book Popper's fruitful concern for the nature and evolution of “objective knowledge” remains excluded from the agenda of foundherentism.

¹ I am grateful to Susan Haack for her comments on a previous draft of this paper.

Since the introduction onwards, Haack expresses her utter contempt for the “followers of the latest Paris fashions”. This is an obvious reference to Rorty, whose *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* seems to express more a final departure from the context that would make dialogue between Haack and him possible at all, than a true desire to engage in a discussion of epistemological topics acceptable within the analytic and empiricist approach still *à la mode* in the English-speaking culture. Rorty has moved within a philosophical *milieu* where explanation and understanding are in fact more important than justification and assessment; history, literature and the intellectual tradition of Western culture are more central than formal logic and the mathematical sciences; philosophy has departed from an atomistic, bottom-up procedure of analysis in favour of a holistic, top-down perspective, that allows the philosopher to present broader and more interrelated narratives; the philosopher himself is seen as an intellectual, working, and to be placed within his own culture; relativism and perspectivism are more popular than absolutism and objectivism; a conversational tone rather than a problem-solving mentality is taken for granted; and this is to mention only a few points, at random. So I suspect that Rorty’s position is too radically different from Haack’s to be touched by her criticisms. Perhaps this is mere “perspectivism”, to use one of Haack’s labels, but while I perceive very well their contrast, I miss a conclusive reconciliation of the divergent positions, the *Aufhebung*, to use Hegel’s term. If this is impossible, then obviously ultimate contrasts are not a hyperbole (see p. 206 for Haack’s position on this issue); if it is possible, then perhaps an extra effort could be made to reach such a unifying perspective. I am obviously resisting the temptation to consider one position simply right and the other merely wrong.

René Descartes is the only French philosopher constantly present in the book. Haack repeatedly characterizes her project as a *moderate* form of Cartesianism, but obviously foundherentism is not simply an orthodox or integral form of neo-Cartesianism. This is shown by her gentle refusal of rationalist solutions to the sceptical challenge, and the way she deliberately distances herself from a priori forms of knowledge, a step motivated by the desire to remain neutral with respect to the existence of such forms of knowledge (see p. 212). The former leads her to renounce the more speculative consequences of Descartes’ subjective internalism. The latter makes Haack restrict her discussion to empirical foundationalism, “leaving non-empirical foundationalism out of account [p. 15]”.² Such related features make me wonder whether *any form* of neo-Cartesianism can still be historically justified, and whether

² See also pp. 16, 19, 28 and 212. The only exception to Haack’s programmatic neglect of Kant’s epistemology is the neo-Kantian philosopher Leonard Nelson (his surname is mistyped on pp. 232, 240 and 253), whose attack on epistemology is compared—I believe mistakenly—to Rorty’s in note 2 of Chapter 9, rather than to Quine’s.

there could be a *purely empirical*, neo-Cartesian approach to epistemology—the withdrawal from the a priori—which may still be successfully anti-sceptical. About the first question, I wish to remark here only that—although the analysis of knowledge in search of a solid reconstruction, and the philosophical vindication of scientific methods are tasks belonging to the cultural revolution of modern philosophy—nevertheless, I concur with Haack that in a world which lives more and more by knowledge and information, there is an increasing demand for firmly rational investigations that may help the mind to understand its new encyclopedic environment and orientate itself within it. That I would be inclined to share a more Kantian and much less “personalist” view explains why I am not sure Haack and I would completely agree on the way in which such a firmly rational approach could be achieved (see pp. 10–11). This does not mean, however, that I would answer our second question in the negative. Empirical forms of Cartesian epistemology are obviously possible and, in so far as it avoids any particular commitment in favour of the a priori, *Evidence and Inquiry* finds its place within a highly respectable tradition of empirical studies, running from Locke to Quine. It is a tradition whose “robust sense of reality” (Russell) is often ontologically unidimensional or nominalistic (the real is what can be subject to empirical experience), usually fails to take the speculative challenge of methodical scepticism seriously enough—as Berkeley pointed out to Locke, and Stroud to Quine—and at other times turns out to be incapable of answering sceptical doubts at all, as in Hume. But none of these remarks apply to Haack’s case. She appreciates that, as a descendant of the Cartesian project and as an empiricist theory of epistemic justification, foundherentism faces the fundamental threat of vicious circularity, which is part of an even more radical set of objections—called by Sextus Empiricus the problem of the *diallelus* (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* II.20), and by Haack the “no tolerable alternatives argument” (p. 22)—affecting the justificatory status of any theory of knowledge. Haack discusses such meta-epistemological issues twice, in relation to foundationalism in chapter 1, and in relation to foundherentism in chapter 10. In both cases, she argues that the meta-epistemological problem can finally be solved. In each case, I suspect we should be rather more pessimistic. In the rest of this article I shall try to explain why.

Any normative theory of knowledge develops as part of, not apart from, the body of human knowledge itself, and therefore is threatened by the necessity of providing its own meta-theoretical validation. The regress affecting any justificatory procedure becomes, then, a major problem. Starting from the assumption that our beliefs are not yet justified unless there are other beliefs that justify them and so forth, the sceptic interprets the regress as showing that all our beliefs remain logically ungrounded. According to Hume, for example, “[...] as you cannot proceed after this manner, *ad infinitum*, you

must at least terminate in some fact, which is present to your memory or sense; or must allow that your belief is entirely without foundation.”³

The foundationalist, however, argues that precisely because resorting to previous beliefs in an endless process (R) would be a fruitless procedure, there must be a set of basic beliefs (p) from which the justification (J) of all our other beliefs proceeds. But the obviously valid inference $R \rightarrow \forall p \neg (Jp)$, $\exists p (Jp) \vdash \neg R$ can have no anti-sceptical force, since it presupposes that at least some of the initial beliefs under discussion are already justified. What the argument does achieve is simply to shift the interpretation of the problem: from proving that our beliefs are justified, to understanding how and from where our beliefs obtain the level of justification we have already assumed them to enjoy. The sceptic calls this a mere assumption, quite correctly, and makes it another alternative in the *diallelus*. The dogmatist is now forced to accept that any branch of his justificatory tree ends in

- a) a *regressus ad infinitum*; or
- b) in a mere assumption; or
- c) in a *circulus in probando*.

None of the previous alternatives is sufficient to justify his beliefs, for in each case, the subject believes p, but is incapable of establishing that he is justified in believing that p. But the argument does not establish that he is not justified in believing that p either, for he could in fact be justified in assuming the validity of p as an instance of knowledge, even if he himself is not able to justify p in a non-fallacious way.⁴ But more on this point in a moment.

Haack discusses the regress in the way most favourable to the foundationalist, and shows that even in this case he still has to realize that the combination of our beliefs does not form a unique long sequence, but rather a network in which internal relations are perfectly acceptable. With the help of an instructive crossword analogy, she shows how positive it would be to assume internal correspondences in our set of beliefs. So when we enlarge the problem to include the whole *diallelus*, Haack’s approach rests on the possibility of denying that the set of beliefs gives rise to a “one-dimensional” sequence. We should rather speak of a network including the possibility of internal, mutual support.

Such a form of “impure foundationalism” is very reasonable, and it does avoid the naive charge of vicious circularity put forward by a superficial sceptic.

³ *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 34.

⁴ Cf. W. Alston, “Epistemic Circularity”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 (1986): 1–30. Haack accepts the validity of the distinction on p. 221, and her oversight of it, at the end of p. 22, may be due to a generous attitude towards the sceptic.

tic. But we have seen that there is no reason why the sceptic should grant to the foundationalist that the regress works in his favour. And once we have adopted a more critical stance, it is undeniable that the internal loops cannot represent a really substantial improvement in the justificatory state of the web of beliefs as a whole. The latter still “systematically lacks the power to escalate the credence of its conclusion for those to whom it is directed”,⁵ and impure foundationalism is in no better position than foundationalism when the sceptical *diallelus* challenges its own justification. Nor would an appeal to a Quinean holistic position with respect to the status of the entire domain of beliefs be sufficient to avoid the “wreck of the raft”. The sceptical challenge is a progressive procedure, not a theory, which develops piecemeal, not all at once. Therefore it cannot be stopped either by the criticism that it is inconsistent, or that the entire set of our beliefs cannot be challenged as a whole.

I am not sure what Haack’s position is with respect to this kind of more radical scepticism. If she wishes to extend her analysis of impure foundationalism to foundherentism, then the previous considerations would obviously apply to foundherentism as well. But she does not seem to (perhaps because she thinks that the “coherentist contamination” of foundationalism is not a satisfactory reply to the sceptical attack, as I have argued?), for in chapter 10 no reference is made to the argument, and we are offered, instead, a different set of considerations (all the following quotations are from pp. 220–21).

Haack now concentrates her attention only on the circularity problem, and her reply to the objection consists of three considerations:

- i) she has not argued that the foundherentist criteria are truth-indicative by assuming that the foundherentist criteria are truth-indicative;
- ii) she has not employed a method of inference or belief-formation in order to conclude that that very method is a truth-conductive method.

As Haack herself acknowledges, however, this is not yet sufficient. For all (i) and (ii) establish is that, in such cases, she would have been guilty of vicious circularity. They leave completely open the possibility that foundherentism may still beg the question in some other way, run into an infinite regress, or merely assume some unjustified premise. So Haack offers us a third argument, which this time is unfortunately less clear than one might wish it to be. To the question: “how do you know that the senses are a source of information about things in one’s environment, that introspection is a source of information about one’s own mental goings-on?” she replies that:

⁵ J. Woods and D. Walton, “Petitio Principii,” *Synthese* 31 (1975): 107–127, quotation from p. 122.

- i) if this is a request “to give my reasons for believing that R”, i.e. all the direct reasons she has offered in her ratificatory argument, then she can meet the challenge “simply by giving my reasons for believing that R. And this is enough”;
- ii) if this is a challenge to show that one’s reasons for believing that R are good enough for one’s belief to constitute knowledge, then such a request cannot be met without resorting to foundherentist principles and hence being accused of circular reasoning.

About (ii), I agree that to ask the foundherentist not to refer back to his own theory in order to articulate his answer would be too unfair. But I would also suggest that the problem is whether the foundherentist possesses, *in his theory*, a reply to the sceptical attack which is immune from one of the charges put forward in the *diallelus*. This, I take it, is at least part of the meaning of (i). But why is Haack so confident that simply giving her reasons for believing that R is enough? The sceptical question is: “how do you know that R is justified?”. Stating that these are the beliefs one entertains with assent has no anti-sceptical force, but giving one’s reasons for believing that R is justified either means now to run up against one of the three objections of the *diallelus*, or to appeal to one or more justifying criteria that justify, but are not in need of justification. This is what underlies the foundationalist project, which remains logically possible, but is factually in progress, to say the least.

Haack attempts to escape such alternatives via a conditional strategy. So after (i), there follow four hypothetical statements:

- 1) if one’s reasons (call them Q) are independently secure and genuinely support R, then they are good reasons for that person to believe that R;
- 2) if one’s evidence for believing Q is good evidence, then one is justified in believing Q and hence in believing that R;
- 3) if one is justified in believing that R then (*mutatis mutandis*) one knows that R;
- 4) if one knows that R, and if R are good reasons for believing that the foundherentist criteria are truth-indicative, then one knows that too.

Ifs. But what if the sceptic does not grant the premises? I suppose this is the problem that motivates Haack to offer one final conjunction:

- 5) “Even if I can’t know that I am justified in my weakly ratificatory conclusion, I can be justified in it nonetheless”.

This is a correct use of the logical distinction introduced above: both statements in (5) can be true at the same time. And yet, (5) does not provide a satisfactory answer to the sceptical attack. The fact that even if one cannot justify p it remains logically possible that one may still be justified in believing that p , can be taken as a not too unsatisfactory starting point for an individual, but if it is all that a theory of knowledge can provide it represents a defeat. We can postpone the elaboration of a theory of knowledge, but if the delay is *ad infinitum*, then we are losing the game and must admit that, when explicitly required to do so, we are not able to justify our position without running into some fallacious reasoning.⁶

If the previous analysis is correct, then foundherentism has not yet solved the metaepistemological problem of its own justification. This, of course, is not a good reason for rejecting it. But it does mean that foundherentism needs to be strengthened against radical challenges. Rejecting the latest Paris fashions is not yet sufficient. Perhaps we could follow the old French style of a Descartes, and combine foundherentism with an a priori strategy. It remains to be seen whether the two can go together.

⁶ Cf. Alston, *art. cit.*, p. 24.