

**FOUNDATIONALISM AND DANCY'S CRITIQUE OF EMPICAL
KNOWLEDGE**

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ABSTRACT

Our primary focus in this essay is to understand the claim of classical foundationalists such as C.I. Lewis in their attempt to postulate foundationalism as a means of explaining the structure and justification of knowledge. It is also an essential part of this paper to study deeply, the idea of basic and non-basic beliefs, inferential and non-inferential evidences vis-à-vis the roles they play in supporting the validity of foundationalism.

Ultimately, this paper would test the arguments of the foundationalists, the regress argument and the resultant “epistemic circle” against Dancy’s criticism of the ‘sensory states’ as insufficient basis for non-inferential beliefs, foundationalism and consequently any claim to knowledge.

FOUNDATIONALISM

Epistemology or the theory of knowledge is concerned with the ability of the human mind to comprehend reality. It is the branch of Philosophy that thrives essentially in scrutinizing our claims to knowledge, that is, Knowledge in whatever form. The “Epistemologist is not interested in any particular knowledge as such, but rather his main focus is on whether we are justified in claiming knowledge of any whole set of truth or indeed whether knowledge is possible at all”.

(Onwuegbusi 1997:18). It focuses on three main tasks or rather projects three major questions. It scrutinizes the object of knowledge, the method of acquiring knowledge and the validity of our

knowledge claims. Put succinctly, Epistemology investigates how we justify our claims to knowledge.

This paper is tuned towards the third question where we seek to comprehend how knowledge claims can be justified and this would lead us into examining foundationalism as a means of justifying knowledge claims in Epistemology.

The importance of this task is made lucid since “philosophers throughout history have given so much attention to the problem (justification) that a writer was tempted to say that Epistemology is more of a theory of justification than a theory of knowledge (Olu-Owolabi 2001:63), prominent amongst these theories of justification is foundationalism made popular by C. I. Lewis.

Jonathan Dancy submitted that

Perhaps the most influential position in Epistemology is the one I shall call classical foundationalism. Discussions of justification of what it is for a belief to be justified, begins with this theory; other theories will be described in terms of their relation or divergence from this one (Dancy 1985:53).

Foundationalism then is ‘the view that our beliefs about an external world, about science, about a past and a future, about other minds etc. can be justified on a base which is restricted to infallible beliefs about our sensory states. It is suggested that if we can do this, the demands of Epistemology is satisfied’ (Dancy 1985:54).

The foundationalists posits that our beliefs about reality or the external world cannot stand alone, they must necessarily have a basis for which they are ascribed the status of a “justified true belief” as championed by tradition but eventually debunked by E. H. Gettier. They agree that every knowledge claim must be founded or placed on a sure footing such that its certainty is never in doubt on any account. In order to concretise this position, they divided our beliefs into two categories comprising of the “basic beliefs” which are self-justifying and as such requires no other proof for its justification in the second category is the non-basic belief which is dependent on basic belief for its justification. This division underlines a classification of those

beliefs “which needs support from others and those which can support others and need no support themselves. The latter constitute our epistemological foundations, the former the superstructure built on those foundations” (Dancy 1985:53).

From the foregoing, the basic beliefs are beliefs that are self-sufficient since they do not need any further proof to make them indubitable, they can even as a matter of fact according to foundationalists, stand as a basis for which other beliefs are justified or seen as acceptable. Since the task of an Epistemologist is designed around the search for certainty of our claims to knowledge, foundationalists propose and in fact, affirm that basic beliefs which are non-inferential stands as enough justification by any means to lay claims to the validity of any knowledge claim. In a bid to make this position clearer, C. I. Lewis demonstrates and asserts that unless “something is certain, nothing else is even probable” (Lewis 52:61). The notion of basic beliefs and its certainty is further espoused in Dancy’s translation of Lewis’ argument aptly dubbed the ‘probability calculus’ stated thus

We do not ask what absolute probability of a hypothesis h (written $p(h)$) would be. Instead, we ask about h ’s conditional probability given evidence e (written $p(h/e)$). The probability of h given e is expressed as correlations generally are, on a scale from 0 to 1. If $p(h/e)=0$, then given e , h is certainly false. If $p(h/e)=1$, then given e , h is certainly true.

The essence of the calculus is to show that there must necessarily exist a sufficient link between evidence e and h which is the basis for which one is said to be certain and the other dependent; that is e in this case is the basis or reason for which we can admit that h is a justified belief. This also assumes or presupposes that e is in itself a self justifying belief and stand as a foundation on which other beliefs or superstructures can be created because of its certainty but for Dancy this is unacceptable since “certainty and infallibility are not identical and we are trying to explain a theory which takes its basic beliefs to be infallible” (Dancy 1985:55).

It is now apparent that the crux of the foundationalist thesis is a point of discord since basic beliefs or non-inferential evidences are expected to be not only certain but also infallible. A germane question is posed by (Olu-Owolabi 2001:65) where he asked that “can a belief be self-evident such that it will be impossible for the belief to exist without being justified. Most of

the objections raised against foundationalism has been on these questions'. The quagmire is further elucidated in the fact that it leads to the regress argument and consequently the 'epistemic circle' where attempts to propose a basic belief or a non-inferential evidence would either lead to an infinite regression of beliefs or into a circle of loops. These will be further discussed in details in the following.

THE INFINITE REGRESS AND EPISTEMIC CIRCLE

The bedrock of foundationalism is that for all claims to knowledge there is a basis on which we situate the credence of these claims. In order to substantiate this thesis, foundationalists from Aristotle pointed to the notion that basic beliefs must necessarily be the sufficient reasons for justification of our knowledge claims. By this, it means that our beliefs stands solely in their relation to other beliefs and justify them all we need to do is to regress or trace the source of our claims to that belief which stands at the bottom or basic of the other beliefs since only basic beliefs can justify non-basic beliefs.

Dancy describes the "regress argument" as one which its "general thrust can be seen intuitively by supposing that inference is basically a matter of moving from premises to conclusion along an acceptable path" (Dancy 1985:55). By implication it means that the foundationalist structure presents a single belief which serves as the nexus on which all other beliefs rests or derives authenticity. It presents a form of inference where the claims of the supporting propositions may not give sufficient backing to the conclusion.

Since foundationalists agree that beliefs are justified inferentially, hence, we justify beliefs B and C by referring to A therefore our knowledge claims exist only in this pattern.

From where does belief A get its justification and how do we determine the reason for which A has been tagged a basic belief? Why do we move from these premises to assert that belief A is in fact infallible? Is it simply a means of putting a "fail-safe" on the foundationalist thesis or as a means of creating a basis for the infallibility of our knowledge claims so as to reverse the infinite regress?

If we are to put forward solutions to the above questions or lapses inherent in the regress argument, it is possible to seek justification by proposing what Dancy described as the "epistemic circle" where these beliefs are expected to form a loop in which all the beliefs are

meant to join in an intricate notion of justification. This will however, drive us to suppose that there must be some justification which is non-inferential if we are to avoid the skeptical consequences of admitting that no beliefs are actually ever justified” (Dancy 1985:56).

In view of the above, foundationalism appears prone to further battering especially on the notion that basic beliefs seems to be largely positioned on sensory states, that is our constant first-hand experiences with reality as crystallized by Dancy (1985:56) thus

Other beliefs need support, and hence must get it from our beliefs about our sensory states. Classical foundationalism thus gives expression to the central tenet of Empiricism, the view that all our knowledge is derived from our experiences. It does this by insisting that a belief which is not about our sensory states (immediate experience) must, if it is to be justified, be justified by appeal to beliefs which are about our own sensory states.

Having established the link between foundationalism and Empiricism, we would go ahead to consider some of the criticisms and flaws of this position dwelling largely on Jonathan Dancy’s rebuttal of the ‘sensory states’ as the source of basic belief and his consequent denial of foundationalism as an adequate theory of justification.

DANCY’S CRITIQUE OF SENSORY STATES

Objections to the idea that sensory states or our experience about reality is an incontrovertible means of acquiring basic beliefs, comes in different forms. Some are designed around the discourse that we cannot equate or describe our sensory states as capable of extracting information from our environment without any form of “input” arising from perceptual errors. For instance, Wilfrid Sellars argued that to proclaim the existence of such phenomenon is to say that knowledge at a point is “given” and its source cannot be challenged or doubted. He argued that knowledge through direct acquaintance by our senses assumes and “endorses a flawed model of the cognitive significance of experience” (Sellars 1963).

Sellars’ anti-foundationalism rejects the notion and argues that if there were such things as basic beliefs that are axiomatic and incorrigible they cannot be “given” since the source of

their incorrigibility is apparently fallible. Sellars noted that the 'given' or the elements and objects of experience are not indubitable and to claim that certain beliefs are given or to be taken for granted, is against reason and therefore unacceptable.

Others like Dancy scrutinize the viability of the 'sensory states' by putting them to test by various methods against the arguments of foundationalists like C.I. Lewis, Roderick and Chisholm who reported that sensory states referred to as the 'given', is almost impossible to deny because the subject of perception conceives and comprehends reality in such a way that the experience is internal and it is improper to deny whatever he presents as the basic belief on which his knowledge claim is premised. They admit that "our beliefs about our sensory states can do this because they are infallible" (Dancy 1985:57). But can this position be true especially on the background of different irregularities that can occur in the process of perception either naturally due to deficient perceptual organs or errors of interpretation?

Dancy argues that if there is any such thing as foundationalism rooted in the notion of non-inferential justification its basis cannot be empirical. Better put, he posits that our senses and its processes of interpreting and comprehending reality are not reliable enough to stand as the basis for a theory of justification.

He argued against Chisholm's position that the supposed perceptual errors are errors arising from description and inability to translate our sensations correctly into verbal phrases by stating the position of the fallibilists who opine that no belief is actually infallible in response to Chisholm's notion that we must distinguish the belief that a speaker has about the words he is using from the belief he is using those words to express" (Chisholm 1977:33).

Dancy reiterated that

Chisholm is following the traditional line that all apparent errors in beliefs about our sensory states is verbal error and that verbal error is to be distinguished from substantial error. This confirms our original diagnosis of the infallibilists' mistaken move. Chisholm does make that move and provides no new reason to believe in infallibility (Dancy 1985:61).

If we cannot expressly admit that errors in beliefs are simply errors which were committed in the process of trying to explain our sensations as championed by Chisholm then we will find it almost impossible to admit infallibility as the basis of foundationalism. By extension, our knowledge claims based on sentences such as “I know that there is a book on the table because I can see and touch it” will not necessarily be true or justified due to the fact that aside from the possibility of inherent perceptual errors, there can also be the occurrence of ‘descriptive error’ which would still invalidate our claims.

John Hospers (1973:123) further cast aspersions on the incorrigibility of sensory states as a precursor for the arguments of the anti-foundationalists by asserting that

“sometimes we have sense experiences when there is nothing at all to be perceived: we may be having hallucination, such as when we are thirsty and we think we see water. Or sometimes what we see is really there, but we think it has one characteristic when it really has another”.

Moving away from this, we have been able to establish an argument against sensory states and foundationalism which posits that there are no such things as infallible beliefs especially when these infallible basic beliefs are situated on sense experiences, due to the fact that there is always the possibility of perceptual errors or errors of judgment’ as aptly captured by Hospers (1973).

Going forward, Dancy also invites us to ponder on the fact that if we are not careful foundationalism can take us from true beliefs to false beliefs especially when we intend to posit empirical evidences as the sole platform on which our claim to knowledge rests. He argued that “the principle of inference by which we are to move from basic to non-basic beliefs are fallible in the sense that they take us from true beliefs to false ones” (Dancy 1985:58). This is because

our attempts to justify our knowledge claims or inferential evidences could inadvertently lead us into either assuming or “conjuring” a belief which will suitably serve the purpose for which it is intended and if there “is this source of contamination necessarily present in the procedure, why should we insist that the input to the procedure be completely sterile” (Dancy 1985).

This notion is made lucid in (Klein 1999) where he said that “foundationalist options land in arbitrary premises that are alleged to support other claims but themselves lack reasons” due to Dancy’s aforementioned faulty process of inference where it is seen as moving from “possible beliefs to probable ones”.

By and large it is apparent that the question of infallibility in foundationalism places an irrevocable burden at the doorsteps of its advocates, especially those who propose experiential knowledge as the basis of foundationalism. This enigma is further pronounced in their inability to prove beyond reasonable doubt, the efficacy of the ‘sensory states’ as enough support for basic beliefs and consequently its infallibility. This led Jonathan Dancy to query the position of classical foundationalists by saying that

Once we have admitted that our beliefs about our sensory states are not infallible and may be false, incorrigibility would be a vice and not a virtue (Dancy 1985:64)

In earnest he proposed that infallibility should be totally removed from all notions of foundationalism and also that foundationalism can thrive if there are certain beliefs which are ‘given’ as data and are fully justified until something arises to defeat their justification or better still, if the ‘given’ belief is nearly justified and derives its full justification from subsequent beliefs such that without further support their justification is insufficient. He called the latter ‘prima-facie justification’.

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