

## EDMUND HUSSERL'S REHABILITATION OF CARTESIAN FOUNDATIONALISM : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

In this paper, I intend to discuss Edmund Husserl's theory of foundationalism. Husserl's foundationalism is purely a rehabilitation of the Cartesian version of the theory. Epistemic Foundationalism, as we know, is the dominant theory of justification in traditional epistemology and Rene Descartes is one of its most consistent advocates. Foundationalism as a theory of justification is the stand that our beliefs can only be justified if they are self-evidently justified or they are related to some beliefs which are themselves self-evidently justified.

Edmund Husserl (1859 - 1938) is best known as the patriarch of the phenomenological movement. Husserl in his book *Cartesian Meditations* sold his philosophy to Cartesianism and proclaimed that his phenomenology is neo-Cartesianism.<sup>1</sup> The objective of his own philosophy, as he consistently maintained, is to rework the philosophy of Descartes and entrench it as the ideal philosophy. One aspect of Cartesianism that Husserl vigorously reworked is the theory of foundationalism. The essence of this essay is to explicate this Husserlian neo-Cartesian foundationalism and see whether Husserl's revision is adequate enough to withstand the popular criticism that any form of foundationalism is moribund.

Cartesian foundationalism, as we are aware, began with the radical quest of Rene Descartes to attain the apodictic certainty upon which other beliefs can be based. The quest involved the denial of the certainty of all beliefs except such a denial becomes explicitly senseless. The intention of Descartes is to accept as self-evident such beliefs that cannot be questioned and to establish them as the foundation of other beliefs. The conclusion of this quest is apprehension of a self-evident position which is related to the denial process itself. The fact that one is involved in a process of doubt according to Descartes, cannot be logically doubted. The certainty of the doubting and the doubter is, therefore, self-evident. The mind which is effecting this self-evident activity and all beliefs emanating

from it, therefore, becomes apodictic and self-evidently justified.<sup>2</sup>

Translating Descartes' position into vocabulary of contemporary epistemology, we can see that the basic beliefs are those beliefs which are directly related to our psychological states, while the non-basic beliefs are those that are derived from the former. Those basic beliefs are primary to others because they are apodictic and self-evidently justified. John Kekes, in a discussion of Cartesian Foundationalism, has made a distinction between the basic and non-basic beliefs. The basic beliefs in Cartesian Foundationalism, according to John Kekes, are those beliefs which relate to our sincere first person's present tense reports of perceptual experiences. While the non-basic beliefs are not products of first person's perceptual experiences.<sup>3</sup>

This foundationalist programme of René Descartes, like other aspects of his philosophy, has been severely criticised by his contemporaries and succeeding philosophers. The Cartesian foundationalism, as William Alston said, has been particularly "branded as unrealistic on more grounds than one."<sup>4</sup> It is not only the Cartesian variant of foundationalism that has been criticised, rather the entire foundationalist enterprise has received damaging attacks in this century. Many philosophers have come out with vigorous arguments to challenge the whole quest for basic beliefs which is the essential tenet of the foundationalist programme. In spite of this unpopularity of foundationalism in this age, Edmund Husserl still believes that the theory and surprisingly the notorious Cartesian version of it can be rehabilitated. It is, therefore, the essence of this essay to see whether Husserl can effectively and convincingly rework the moribund Cartesian theory, despite all arguments to the contrary.

Before we go further in our discussion, let us re-examine the tenets of foundationalism. The theory, as it is being discussed in current epistemological literature, is fundamentally a reaction to the question: How do we justify our beliefs? To the foundationalists, this question will present two problems. The first problem is the traditional problem of certainty. This problem has been posed at the commencement of philosophy by the skeptics. The problem relates to the issue of how to get the indubitable position that will serve as a starting point for justifying other beliefs. The second problem is an offshoot of the first. It is precisely the question of whether our quest for justification of beliefs based on other beliefs will not lead us in an infinite regression.

The reaction of all Foundationalists to the last question is

positive. The ridiculous situation can only be reverted if and only if there are some basic self-justified beliefs, adequate to convince the skeptics and the fallibilists and also terminate the regression by being absolutely self-justified and in no need of external justification.

One of the few philosophers to conform totally with the spirit and letters of classical foundationalism is Rene Descartes. Husserl's programme, in as much as it is a revision of Descartes', is, therefore, another instance of foundationalism in its classic form. Commenting on Husserl's epistemology, Richard Schacht confirmed the above point when he said that the fundamental objective of Husserl's epistemology " is to locate those cognitions that are first in themselves and can support the whole storied edifice of universal knowledge".<sup>5</sup>

Husserl's foundationalist programme, as it is presented in his books *Cartesians Meditations*<sup>6</sup> and *The Paris Lectures*<sup>7</sup>, is purely a neo-Cartesian theory. Husserl agrees with Descartes that the set of basic beliefs are those directly emanating from the subjective mind of the knower. The evidence that by necessity precedes all others, he agrees with Descartes, is the evidence of the subjective ego. But Husserl believes that the Cartesian enterprise should be revised especially in the light of his own phenomenological philosophy, which is to him the ideal method of philosophy. The phenomenological method, therefore, becomes an instrument of reconstruction of the Cartesian foundationalist theory.

The reconstruction of the Cartesian theory commences with the rejection of the " methodic doubt" in the search for the apodictic. Husserl was aware of the criticism against Descartes' methodic doubt especially the allegation that the method is very destructive and will never attain anything positive. In replacement, Husserl employed the method of *epoche*, which is the act of suspending beliefs. The method of *epoche*, unlike the Cartesian doubt, will not destroy all beliefs but will only put within bracket for a moment "the observers' mode of experiencing the world".<sup>8</sup>

The *epoche* is not only advantageous for this, it is also preferred by Husserl because it will totally purify the subjective ego from its obvious inherent natural hindrances that might disqualify it from being the foundation of all knowledge. Husserl's ego on the basis of this is slightly different from Descartes'. This is the reason why Husserl's ego is referred to as " pure/transcendental ego ". The explication of this difference needs to be done, because this essentially is the basis of Husserl's revision of Cartesian foundationalism.

Rene Descartes' discussion of the concept of ego is not as detailed as Husserl's. Rene Descartes, in his writings, talked of the ego merely as the residue of the doubting processes that automatically becomes apodictic by its survival of the doubting exercise. But the Husserlian ego is not only self-evident, because it is the residue of the process of *epoche*, but also because, as Husserl emphasised, it is pure and transcendental. We must acknowledge the fact that while in Descartes' case, every ego is apodictic, with Husserl not all subjects are. In Husserl's discussion of the concept of the ego, there is the clear indication that the apodictic subjects are those subjects that have been purified and at the same time have become transcendental from the worldly hindrances. This is the reason why Husserl always prefixes his own ego with either the word "Pure" or the word "Transcendental", to distinguish it from the unpurified or intranscendental one, which he called empirical or natural ego.

The Husserlian ego is not merely apodictic because of its ability to survive the *epoche*, but also it has been purged and purified of the worldly hindrances that can inhibit it from having correct and exact epistemic facts. The ego of Husserl, therefore, is not only pure but transcendental. Transcendental, according to Husserl, because it is no more the worldly ego or the empirical ego that operates with the worldly prejudices. The process which turns the worldly ego to the transcendental ego is the process of transcendental *epoche*.<sup>9</sup> The transcendental *epoche* is the last stage in the Husserlian series of bracketing processes. It involves the act by which the subject abandons the world and becomes transcendental and completely independent of the worldly limitations. This transcendental ego can perceive the world in an independent manner, devoid of the natural worldly limitations that have hitherto prevented it from having correct and objective knowledge of everything. At this standpoint, according to Husserl, the transcendental ego becomes equidistant to every part of the world. This stage is referred to as the Archimedean point by Husserl. Only when an ego has attained this height can we describe it as self-evident and apodictic.<sup>10</sup>

The above discussion is exactly the argument of Husserl for the certainty of the basic foundation. As we have said, the incorrigibility and absolute certainty of the basic foundation is one of the fundamental tenets of a theory of foundationalism. This has been satisfied by Husserl. From the above, we can see that the certainty of the basic foundation in Husserl's theory is more established than that of Descartes'. While Descartes ego is certain because it is able to

survive the doubt, the ego of Husserl can lay claim to certainty because it is completely purged and purified ego, absolutely free from the limitations of the world by its being transcendental. In the light of this, Husserl feels that whatever beliefs that emanate from the transcendental ego ought to be accepted as justified because of the status of the transcendental ego as a purified and objective source.

Apart from reconstructing the Cartesian presentation of the certainty of the ego, Husserl also discussed the second paramount issue in foundationalism. That is the issue of how to justify the secondary beliefs on the basis of the primary beliefs. Having attained the certainty of the ego, Descartes, in his *Meditations*, went to justify the certainty of the other beliefs by deducing them from the ego. This deduction has been questioned by many observers. Husserl's stand is that the whole attempt is unnecessary. The transcendental ego according to Husserl is not the only self-evident truth :

The bare identity of the I am is not the only thing given as indubitable in transcendental self-experience. Rather there extends through all the particular data of actual and possible self-experience even though they are not absolutely indubitable in respect of single details a universal apodictically experienceable structure of the ego.

The point that Husserl is making in the above extract is that the ego is not the only apodictic fact, but also the entire world that the ego is experiencing. The certainty of the ego, according to Husserl, will always guarantee the certainty of the world the ego is experiencing, not through the deductive method of Descartes' .

The reason for this claim is because Husserl believes that there is a cord linking the ego with the world. This link that makes the consciousness to be a logical correlate of the world is the intentional link. This theory of intentionality predates Husserl. It is a familiar theory of consciousness that says that every consciousness is consciousness of something outside it. Husserl's argument is simply this : If consciousness is truly consciousness of something, then every consciousness is a logical correlate of the object of consciousness. It is, therefore, a logical conclusion, he maintains, to say that the apodicticity of the ego automatically implies the apodicticity of its correlate; that is the worldly objects.

The Husserlian argument for the justification of other beliefs is simply that these beliefs are themselves automatically and logically justified immediately as the ego is justified, since they are correlates. This is the explanation for Husserl's change of the Cartesian dictum from "Cogito ergo sum" to "Ego cogito cogitatum" which means "I think

the object of thought". Husserl is merely saying that in thinking, which is the apodictic certainty of Descartes, there is also another certainty that is, the object of thought. The intentional theory of consciousness is the Husserlian answer to the dilemma of how to justify the secondary beliefs. With intentionality, the apodicticity of the primary beliefs will also confirm apodicticity on the secondary beliefs, since the two are interlocked.

Edmund Husserl went ahead to strengthen his argument that the transcendental ego is the ultimate foundation of all beliefs by introducing the concept of constitution. The notion of constitution is an offshoot of the theory of intentionality. By the transcendental ego constituting the world, Husserl is saying that the ego is responsible for ordering and putting in meaningful order the whole epistemic facts in the world. The notion of constitution is an offshoot from the concept of intentionality. Husserl's position is that the ego through its intentional activities of experiencing the world organises the various images and representations that we have in perception to make meaningful whole. It is the ego by its consciousness that structures and organizes the external world.

From this discussion, we can see the essence of Husserl's claim that the ego is pure and transcendental. If the ego is objective and by necessity the constituter of the world, then it is logical to say that the ego is self-evidently justified and primary to other beliefs. Husserl's foundationalism retrospectively is this : the basic foundation of all knowledge is the transcendental ego, since the genuine epistemic claim can only be made via the transcendental ego. Therefore, epistemic claim can be verified if and only if the claim is directly or indirectly derived from the transcendental ego. With Husserl's foundationalism, if an individual makes a claim that ; "Mr. A. Owns a Car", the claim can only be justified if and only if we can establish that Mr. A. is a man operating with a pure and transcendental ego. If this can not be established, the only alternative of justifying the epistemic claim is to show that the claim of Mr. A. Comes from another person, who is operating with a pure and transcendental ego. Husserl explicitly stated this foundationalist justification theory, thus :

... Only one fact is evident and guides me, namely that I accept as being only that which presents itself to me as being and that all conceivable justification of it lies within my own self and is determined in my immediate and mediate intentionality in which any other meaning of being is also determined.<sup>11</sup>

At this point in our discussion of Edmund Husserl's neo-Cartesian

foundationalism, the pertinent questions to ask are these : Has Husserl succeeded in developing an adequate foundationalist theory? Has Husserl achieved what was impossible for Descartes and other previous philosophers, that is, sustaining a fool-proof theory of foundationalism? Most especially, has Husserl disproved the contemporary claim that any theory of foundationalism -- being a product of a pseudo assumption -- is moribund?

To answer these questions, we need to examine Husserl's theory and see whether the ideal of transcendental ego can be realised. Husserl's argument is that his own subject is an improvement on Descartes' because it is not only the residue of the denial process but it is also purified and transcendental. Pure and transcendental in the sense that it is free from worldly prejudices. But is it possible for an ego to seek to delink itself from the natural world? Can any man really succeed in putting the world in abeyance? Is such an attempt not one of the utopian dreams of philosophy? We have heard it many times in Western philosophy of the idea of jettisoning the worldly prejudices, but such attempts have never succeeded. In actual fact, Man is man because of these worldly data that Husserl calls prejudices and presuppositions. To succeed in transcending the world by any individual implies that the individual will completely lose touch with the world. The question of having epistemological relationship with the world by the ego will not come in, if Husserl's transcendence is achieved.

How can an individual who has transcended the world still continue to know the world? How can an ego that is transcendental still claim that the world is an intentional correlate? The fact that the Husserlian ego is transcendental is a clear indication that it has lost any relationship with the world, intentional or otherwise. It has been pointed out that transcendental ego robs intentionality of its genius by relinquishing the immediate world seized through its intentional consciousness".<sup>12</sup> The essence of this argument is that transcendental ego can no more lay claim to the world as its intentional correlate.

There are two alternatives facing Husserl : it is either that the ego is in the world and possesses the world as its intentional correlate, or the ego will lose the world through its transcendence and equally lose the world as its intentional correlate.

The above position, which has been popularised by Husserl's disciple Jean Paul Sartre, is a devastating criticism of Husserl's foundationalism.<sup>13</sup> As we know, the entire rehabilitation of Descartes' theory by Husserl rests on the theory of intentionality. But Sartre has argued that Husserl's ego, by being transcendental, cannot lay claim to intentionality. The ego can not logically claim anything in the world,

since it has totally broken relationship with the world through the transcendental *epoche*. Any belief or claim made by the Husserlian transcendental ego is not a belief relating to the world, since by its being transcendental, it has lost the world.

We can even ask this question : Can one even legitimately conceive of a source of knowledge that is pure and transcendental? Is it even logical for Husserl to say that the foundation of his own knowledge and the basis for the justification of knowledge is the pure and transcendental ego? The answer is emphatically negative . Knowledge *qua* knowledge involves a subject that is active rather passive. In the act of knowing, the subject seeking to know cannot afford to be independent of the object to be known. Knowledge, as Sartre defines it, is a combat and not a peaceful possession. "One does not have knowledge; one bursts out in the act of knowing toward the object known".<sup>14</sup> Whether in scientific knowledge or in any other form of knowledge, the activity of knowing demands that the subject should interact with the object to be known. It involves an active participation of both the subject and the object. Husserl's claim that the transcendental subject totally independent of the world to be known - is the ideal road to objective knowledge, is an obvious contradiction of the process of knowledge in the natural setting. The gist of our argument here is that Husserl's position that the detached ego is the foundation of knowledge is an obvious contradiction of the natural acquisition of knowledge which involves interaction between the object and the subject of knowledge. If it is impossible for a transcendental ego to attain any knowledge, it is illogical and outrageous to wish to make it the foundation of the whole epistemological enterprise.

It is in fact imperative that Husserl's foundationalism should be examined in the light of current anti-foundationalist challenge. Contemporary philosophers starting from the beginning of this century have argued that the motivating spirit behind the foundationalist programme, which is the spirit of certainty or the idea of the 'given', is a mis-conception . The assumption that there are some beliefs that are absolutely incorrigible, according to them, is a mis-conception of a man's true nature as a fallible being. W.V.O. Quine, one of the prominent figures in the anti-foundationalist trend, argues that the search for the basic beliefs is unwarranted.<sup>15</sup> The quest for the ultimate foundation, according to him, is a pseudo-quest. The programme of epistemology should be re-formulated, according to Quine, for a more psychologically oriented one. Rather than ask for the foundation of knowledge, Quine advocates for an epistemology that will study the relations between theory and evidence.



The most serious attack of the foundationalist enterprise came from Richard Rorty, who devoted a substantial aspect of his celebrated book: *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* to the issue of foundationalism.<sup>16</sup> The theory of foundationalism, according to him, and in fact most traditional theories of philosophy are *pseudo* theories. Rorty particularly identified Cartesian foundationalism as a paradigm case of such *pseudo* theories. Foundationalism, according to him, is the legacy of Descartes to philosophy. To Rorty, it was Descartes who converted the Platonic doctrine of knowledge as representation into the idea of knowledge as inner perception. With Descartes, Rorty argues, knowledge became simply an issue of the consciousness replicating the world.

Rorty severely criticised the whole foundationalist programme arguing that the affair of justification is a simple affair which can be settled when the context of the particular knowledge is examined. Knowledge to him is a social affair and its justification should respect this fact. What a particular society accepts as a knowledge, according to him, is so and the justification of the knowledge must be got within the particular epistemological community. The whole enterprise of foundationalism, to Rorty, is a total misconception of knowledge. Rorty, therefore, advocates that epistemology as a branch of philosophy ought to be dismantled, since it has no genuine pre-occupation.

Although we do not intend to support the extreme position taken by Rorty, yet we agree with him that foundationalism as a theory of justification is a *pseudo* theory. Our own stand is that foundationalism is a reaction to a false question, that is the question: How can we justify all our epistemic claims? This question does not take into consideration the fact that epistemic claims are relative to situations. The genuine question of epistemology is the question: How do I justify a particular epistemic claim? This is the proper question that should be asked and the answer must be got from the situational origin of the particular epistemic claim.

Edmund Husserl's attempt to rehabilitate Cartesian foundationalism is, therefore, a futile one. It is futile because it fails to properly investigate the essence of the whole foundationalist programme which is to argue against the fallibilists. Since man is fundamentally a fallible being, it can be very difficult to seek to establish that man can have an absolutely infallible idea. As we argued earlier, Husserl's own defence of Cartesian foundationalism is not fool-proof. But this is not the basic reason why we are rejecting his revision exercise. We are rejecting it because Edmund Husserl, a philosopher of this century, should have realised that foundationalism is born out of an error of the

past which should be jettisoned by the present. Foundationalism in whatever form cannot be sustained, because it is a reaction to a misconceived notion of knowledge.

Edmund Husserl's philosophical career, as we know, is divided into two stages. At the earlier stage, Husserl argues for a realistic theory of phenomenology, while at the later stage, he subscribes to an idealistic position. It was at the idealistic stage that Husserl attempts a rehabilitation of Cartesian foundationalism which we are now examining. Husserl is popular, as we know, because of his earlier stage. Most of the disciples he won were converted by his earlier philosophy, while they were disenchanted with his later philosophy. Disciples like Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre feel that the germ of Husserl's phenomenology is at the earlier stage. We also believe that a careful look at the earlier stage will give us a better theory of justification than the moribund foundationalism he vigorously defended at the later part of his career.

At the earlier stage of Husserl's career, he advocated for all issues to be solved at their context. This is the spirit behind his slogan "to the things themselves" which means that we go to the context of problems to solve them. Epistemologically, this slogan can be interpreted to mean that the object of knowledge should be investigated, rather than the subject. This position is without doubt an implicit contextual theory of justification which is said to be the acceptable alternative to the foundationalist enterprise.<sup>17</sup> Husserl would have done a more worthwhile job, if he had concentrated his efforts at making explicit his contextual theory of justification, rather than waste his energy on a defence of foundationalism and the spirit of certainty behind it which his famous disciple, Martin Heidegger, has tagged the "Scandal of philosophy". Our own stand is that the germ of Husserl's epistemology lies more with his earlier stand than with the scandalous attempt to rehabilitate the Cartesian foundationalism.

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## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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