

## THE FAILURE IN THE PURSUIT OF FOUNDATIONAL JUSTIFICATION : AN ALTERNATIVE RESPONSE

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Foundationalism means a doxastic view of epistemic justification; the view that holds the justification of a belief for a person to be a function of or determined by other beliefs that he has. Since it is said that beliefs are internal states, all doxastic theories are otherwise called 'internalism' (though the converse is not always true). If so, then foundationalism is to be regarded as the internalist kind of justification. It cannot, however, be denied that almost every theory of justification has the aim of putting the believer in his best position for getting the truth, and foundationalism is no exception. But the best position which this theory seeks to provide us for getting the truth does not, in fact, succeed. In this paper, I shall, first, try to sketch the foundational justification to show how it has drifted itself towards its failure in reaching the truth. Secondly, I would like to conclude by saying that some soft realistic attitude should be a possible kind of response.

### I

The first task is to describe the general feature of foundationalism with a view to show the failure in its style of constructing epistemic justification. The fundamental idea of any foundational theory, whether traditional or modernist, is that there are epistemically basic beliefs which confer justification upon all other beliefs which are justified for a believer. The intention of Sosa's view is approximately like this. For a believer S there is a belief-system B containing as its members the beliefs B1, B2, B3, and so on such that the justifying function of B1 by B2, and that of B2 by

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B3, and that of B3 by still another in the series gets a stopping place in some basic belief P. The fundamental idea behind it is that the regress in justification of any belief on the basis of another finds its halt finally in some basic belief P. The problem of infinite regress has been put forward as an argument to show the need of such basic belief. But the job is not finished here, for the basic beliefs themselves as Quinton also holds must be self-justified. Unless they are already self-justified, no reasoning from them can provide the adequate [inferential] justification to other beliefs. He says, "If any beliefs are to be justified at all...there must be some terminal beliefs that, do not owe their...credibility to others".<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the essential feature of every foundationalism is the acceptance of basic beliefs as constituting the "foundation", of our knowledge. Pollock's version exhibits this characteristic very explicitly. He says, "Foundational theories are distinguished from other doxastic theories by the fact that they take a limited class of "epistemologically basic" beliefs to have a privileged epistemic status. It is supposed that basic beliefs do not stand in need of justification-they are "self-justified". Non-basic beliefs, on the other hand, are all supposed to be justified by appeal to basic beliefs. Thus the basic beliefs provide a foundation for epistemic justification".<sup>2</sup> Its contention is, then, two-fold :1) There are self-justified basic beliefs and 2) There are non-basic beliefs deriving their justification ultimately from the basic beliefs. The vital question therefore seems to be of the notion of basic and controversy splits the foundationalists regarding the origin and nature of these beliefs, Here we have two - fold approach to this question, namely, Rationalistic Foundationalism and Empirical Foundationalism. Descartes, the chief exponent of rationalistic foundationalism, holds that reason alone provides the epistemically basic beliefs, and they are self-evident indubitable truths. They are, therefore, self-justified and as such do not depend for their justification on some other belief. The example of such a belief which Descartes admits is: '*Cogito Ergo Sum*', the foundation from which he deduced all the philosophical truths. This justification, according to Descartes, is a sort of deductive justification where consequences are deduced from certain self-evident truths and principles. The knowledge so gained is regarded as completely justified true belief. The justification to

be complete requires two things. Firstly, the deduction of the conclusion must be free from "Logical fallacies", Secondly, the premises from which the conclusion is deduced must be self-evident truths. But the historical picture is something different. The epistemologists do not bother about the justification in knowing the conclusion so deduced because if one is able to follow the deductive procedures correctly, then one is justified completely in knowing the truth of the deductive results. But when they try to obtain the complete justification in knowing the empirical propositions to be true, they are found to be beset with the problems of various types. One of the reasons is that the empirical evidences which are accumulated to derive justification are not only inexhaustive but the evidences themselves are also imperfect. Epistemic justification on the basis of such evidences usually fails to be truth conducive. This empirical knowledge is potentially a case of scepticism or a case of Gettier situation. Epistemologists, therefore, are found to be busy constructing adequate justification of empirical proposition or belief to defend it from the attack of sceptics. Consequently, the empiricist philosophers subscribe to the empirical foundationalism. The contention of this view is that all our basic beliefs originate in sense-experience. Pollock says, "The simple motivation for foundation theories is the psychological observation that we have various ways of sensing the world and all knowledge comes to us via those senses. The foundationalist takes this to mean that our senses provide us what are then identified as epistemologically basic beliefs".<sup>3</sup> The basic beliefs, therefore, come to us ultimately through our sense-experience, and hence, they are all perceptual by nature. But basic perceptual beliefs as the foundationalists hold are about the character of our sensory experience, the character about which one cannot be mistaken. Pollock says, "I can be mistaken about what color something is, but it is not so obvious that I can be mistaken about what color it looks to me."<sup>4</sup> The foundationalists claim that the statements regarding our sensory experiences, or the beliefs therein, lead us to from beliefs about physical objects like "this is a chair". Here one's reason for having a belief about physical object is having some sensory experiences as visual, tactual etc. If so, then the truth and justification of our beliefs about physical objects depend ultimately on the

beliefs about sensory experiences called basic beliefs. So we can avoid errors in physical object beliefs if we can infer them from the beliefs about our sensory experiences.

## II

We find so far a general agreement among the empirical foundationalists that there are basic beliefs which are about our own sensory reports. But here we encounter two sorts of interpretation, namely, 1) a basic belief is about the reports of the given and 2) a basic belief is about the reports of one's own psychological attitude towards the fact. The first is generally called the doctrine of the given, the view which Bonjour calls the doctrine of what is empirically given. It holds that basic beliefs are justified by appeal to the believer's "immediate experience" of the fact which is given. Bonjour says, "If the basic belief whose justification is at issue is the belief that P, then according to the most straight forward version of the doctrine, this basic belief is justified by appeal to an immediate experience of the very fact or state of affairs or situation which it asserts to obtain : the fact that P. It is because I immediately experience the very fact which make my belief true that I am completely justified in holding it, and it is this fact which is given."<sup>5</sup> The occurrence of a basic perceptual belief along with its truth and justification seems to have the following process : 1) The fact that P or the P-fact, i.e., the objective state of affairs ; 2) The immediate experience of the fact that P or the P-fact; 3) The basic perceptual belief that P arises with its truth and justification. The "step 2" has been supposed to be constituting the ultimate source of truth and justification of basic perceptual belief that P in the "step3". The foundationalists who have favoured the role of the given have interpreted the "step2" as the cognitive state where the mind is in direct confrontation with the relevant fact in the external world. The empirical object here is simply given to the mind (or consciousness). Secondly, this experience is infallible simply because the believer immediately cognises the relevant fact that is only directly given to his mind. The supporters of the doctrine of the given claim that the infinite regress in justification stops itself in this basic perceptual belief. But Bonjour has elaborately discussed the problem which

arises when these epistemologists try to interpret the immediate experience 'of the given. Following Bonjour we can say that some exponents of the given mean by the notion "immediate experience" the "direct apprehension of the given", while others have accepted this interpretation tacitly. What he remarks in criticizing Quinton seems to be very much appropriate to mention here. He says, "As indicated above, the proponent of the given is caught in a fundamental and inescapable dilemma: if his....immediate apprehensions are construed as cognitive, at least quasi judgemental (as seems clearly the more natural interpretation), then they will be both capable of providing justification for other cognitive states and in need of it themselves, but if they are construed non cognitive non-judgemental, then while they will not themselves need justification, they will also be incapable of giving it. In either case, such states will be incapable of serving as an adequate foundation for knowledge. This, at bottom, is why empirical givenness is a myth"<sup>6</sup>. It is, therefore, very explicit to us that the "immediate experience of the fact (or given)", if interpreted as cognitive awareness, requires for its justification another immediate experience of the fact which will raise the same question of justification, thus leading to the regress problem. On the other hand, if this "immediate experience of the fact" is interpreted as only non-cognitive, then this state being the state of the absence of cognition stops the regress. But since it is non-cognitive, it implies at the same time that the believer does not know the fact, thus leading to scepticism. The result is that the justification which is supposed to be provided by this immediate experience fails to connect the belief with the fact or given in both the senses. Thus foundational justification, if understood on the above line, can not guarantee the truth of our belief. This view in so far as it has been demanding that the basic belief must be true, and hence, infallible is called Radical or strong Foundationalism. The form of foundationalism which Bonjour considers is of this type. Now, the problem of loose fitness between justification and truth arises in this account because this view, as Pollock argues, is based on the doxastic assumption that the justification of a belief is always determined in terms of belief, but the fact is that the input from the objective world does not normally enter into our beliefs. He says, "The accommodation of percep-

tion is a major problem for any doxastic theory"<sup>7</sup>. But our basic perceptual beliefs to be true and justified essentially require, as this foundationalism holds the input from the external world. But if we stick to the doxastic assumption, then the accidental relation between justified belief and truth remains unsolvable. Pollock says, "Because it is their inability to handle perceptual input in terms of belief that leads to the downfall of foundation theories..."<sup>8</sup>.

### III

The failure of strong foundationalism has led some recent epistemologists to try to come out of the doxastic state (or the realm of beliefs) and to stand face to face with the fact or reality. It is argued that basic beliefs are about the reports of one's psychological attitude towards the fact. Chisholm has interpreted it by introducing the concept of incorrigibility. According to him, a basic belief or proposition is directly evident, and it is about one's own current mental state. These beliefs, he claims relate to facts. The beliefs here directly confront the relevant facts but the most important feature is that these facts are only attitudinal or subjective one, and hence, they are states of consciousness. This implies that one does not have any need to go outside one's present mental state and see whether one's belief represents the fact or not. It is argued that one's present mental state is one's privileged state to which the subject alone has a privileged access, while others do not have. If so, then one cannot but be sure of this state. The belief of such a state, when it occurs, is immediately justified. At the time of its occurrence, the belief is immune from doubt but may be false at some other time and place. There may be different perception or something may happen differently, yet none of them can confirm or disconfirm the status of this belief. Here the subject's current psychological attitude is an incorrigible evidential experience, and the beliefs composed of such experience, therefore, are "incorrigible". Chisholm has used "appearance-beliefs" in this sense, for example, "I am appeared redly". He holds that if something appears to me in a particular way, then that it appears to me in that way is a tangle from which I cannot free myself. Again,

this appearance belief is a non-comparative judgement which does not imply any other prior knowledge to justify itself. So this sort of judgement is to be regarded as basic belief which has the ability to stop the regress in justification. The use of the concept of incorrigibility helps a lot. The incorrigible evidential experience gives one a temporal truth which the subject cannot but accept as only unique and irrefutable. Chisholm seems to hold this sort of truth of basic belief as opposed to the truth in the radical sense. This trend in thought may be termed as soft foundationalism or modernism in the theory of epistemic justification. But the concept of incorrigibility which these proponents have utilized to save foundationalism is not yet free from objections. Chisholm's basic proposition "I am appeared redly" may be false and so one may be mistaken in so appearing. First, there may be a verbal mistake due to which one may say that one is appeared so. Seeing something green if I say "I am appeared redly" it is a verbal mistake which I can correct if I know the difference between red and green. So one can say that one is appeared redly if one has already the knowledge of the difference as stated above. This shows that this non-comparative use is not really so but involves the prior knowledge of comparative use. Lehrer holds that any belief involves the application of concepts. And one should be previously informed to justify this use. He says, "... to be completely justified in believing it to be of that kind one must have the information needed to enable one to tell such a state from another"<sup>9</sup>. Second, the very notion of incorrigible belief is corrigible. When I think "I am appeared redly", this very thought may be a mistake if I am not, in fact, appearing that way at all. It is obvious that there are mistakes of one's current mental state. For if there were no such mistakes then our knowledge of ourselves would be perfect and non-erroneous. So basic beliefs are fallible. Lehrer says, ".....a man can make all sorts of mistakes about what is presently going on in his mind"<sup>10</sup>. So whatever interpretation the exponents put forward on behalf of the incorrigibility of the basic beliefs, it is obvious that basic beliefs cannot be saved from being erroneous. The basic beliefs as they are about one's present mental state, express nothing about which one can be uncertain, yet such a belief can be false even when one's claim is sincere. It is not because the experience itself

can be in any way fallible but because it might be misidentified or incorrectly formulated. Thus a person here understands the report of his psychological attitude and believes it with certainty. Though this basic belief is initially certain for that person at that time, yet such a kind of being justified in believing something does not entail the corresponding fact in the objective world.

#### IV

The inevitable consequence of the views is that justified belief fails to capture the fact inspite of how far one is able to make oneself equipped with the justificatory position. Our main issue here is the justification of basic perceptual belief, and it has been attempted to solve by trying to connect it with the relevant fact. In this sense a basic belief to be justified and true is expected to correspond to the fact, but this expectation does not fulfill for the reasons which are already known to us. First, belief and fact belong to two different categories; the former is a linguistic affair and the latter is an ontological affair. Since these two are entirely different, it is impossible to connect them by means of correspondence relation. Secondly, the relation of correspondence is not determinable because we cannot go outside our ideas and justification conditions to verify the correspondence relation and see whether it holds between such conditions and fact in the external world. In such a case it is not possible to determine the truth of our belief and to pick up what kind of justification is truth-conducive. So there is a tendency among the recent epistemologists not only to consider epistemic justification but also to categories "truth" in a different manner. Ayer lends support to the notion of evidential justification which is context - relative. Chisholm also shows this tendency. On this view, a belief is justified on the basis of evidences available to the believer at a given time  $t_1$ . So considered, a belief may be reasonable to accept at one time while unreasonable at another because the evidences at the second time  $t_2$  are changing. These philosophers, therefore, define the concept of epistemic justification by temporal reference. So when it is said that basic



beliefs are not incorrigibly justified, the notion of incorrigible justification involved here, is only context relative. On this version, a justified true belief implies only the temporal truth. Accordingly, these epistemologists have the inclination to consider the sort of truth what this justification leads us to attain. Thus, in recent epistemology there is the consideration of truth in terms of its epistemic and non-epistemic aspect. The non-epistemic truth of a belief is based on the strong correspondence between our belief and the relevant fact. It supports the bivalence theory of truth, i.e., a belief is either conclusively true or conclusively false. As we cannot go outside our epistemic conditions to see the correspondence with the external fact, so this truth becomes evidence-transcendent or independent of our cognitive grasp. That is why, it is called non-epistemic truth. As opposed to this non-epistemic truth, there is epistemic truth called evidence-bound truth. A proposition P is true even when this proposition may not be picture of the total fact in the objective world. The truth of this Proposition depends on the evidential backing that P has at the given time  $t_1$ . The recent epistemologists have called it evidence bound truth, for its status is entirely relative to the set of available evidences to the subject at a given time. When a belief that p is true in this sense, it does not imply that p strongly corresponds to the fact. As the subject's epistemic justification is only relative to the total set of evidences available to him at a particular time  $t_1$ , so it seems to be a quite futile attempt to connect "epistemic justification" or "epistemically justified belief" with the a-temporal truth or "non-epistemic truth". This is because both of them are altogether different entities. This is what radical foundationalism has tried to do. Chisholm's interpretation implies the acceptance of the evidential notion of justification and truth. Consequently, it should be admitted that a justified belief in this sense logically ensures the evidence-bound truth. One thing should be kept in mind that this truth is not created by us but that which is revealed to us under the set of available evidences. So we do not have any need to make a commitment to the ontological truth; we may keep it aside from the picture of our human cognitive activity. Anti-realism as propounded by Putnam and Dummett has an implication that evidentially justified belief leads to the evidence-bound truth, and this attitude does not go against realism. They

are, however, not directly concerned with refutation of any ontological realism. The thesis which they have criticized is the semantical realism which asserts that the meaning of a statement consists of what has to be the case for it to be true, and hence, we can understand the statement if we know the truth-conditions. But such truth-conditions have been interpreted in such a way that they have been reduced to non-epistemic ontological realities. The epistemological implication is that there seems to be no positive relationship between human states of knowledge and such realities. Dummett says, "The condition for the truth of a statement is not, in general, a condition which we are capable of recognising as obtaining whenever it obtains, or even one for which we have an effective procedure for determining whether it obtains or not"<sup>11</sup>. So he argues for the "semantical antirealism" or for what is called antirealism in general. He says, "According to this, the meaning of statements in the class in question (he specified) are given to us, in terms of the conditions under which these statements are true or false, conceived of as conditions which obtain or do not obtain independently of our knowledge or capacity for knowledge but in terms of the conditions which we recognise as establishing the truth or falsity of statements of that class"<sup>12</sup>. Putnam calls it "verificationist semantics" in the sense that the meaning of a statement is given in terms of verification conditions or justification conditions but not in terms of truth-conditions understood realistically by the semantical realism. This sort of anti-realism denies that we are able to say anything about the ontological fact or reality. Therefore, the final interpretation of the basic belief seems to depend upon the particular world-view which one holds. If we believe like semantical realism that there is a real external world independently of our epistemic capacities, and our beliefs purport to describe it as it is, then these beliefs must be fallible. If on the other hand we believe that we cannot go outside the data which our cognitive capacities provide, then the realities which are thus transcendent must be kept aside from the topic of our cognitive enterprise. In that case we should go along the line of anti-realism to support the view that our evidentially justified belief logically ensures the evidential or 'epistemic truth'.

NOTES

1. Quinton, A., *The Nature of Things*, London; Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 119.
2. Pollock, J.L., *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1986, p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p.26.
4. *Ibid.*, p.27.
5. Bonjour, L. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*. Harvard University Press, 1985, p.59.
6. *Ibid.*, p.69.
7. Pollock, J.L., *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1986, p.69.
8. *Ibid.*, p.27.
9. Lehrer, K., *Knowledge*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974, pp. 109-110
10. *Ibid.*, p.91.
11. Dummett, M., *Truth and Other Enigmas*, Cambridge, Mass Harvard University Press. 1978, p.358.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 358-359.

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