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A Critique of Alternatives to Foundational Epistemology

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Abstract

The perceived problematics that envelop foundational status of epistemic justification informed some non foundationalists to suggest coherentism and reliabilism as necessary alternatives to foundationalism. This work observes that such suggestion is based on our idea of what knowledge is and not on what knowledge does. And so, the structure of epistemic justification should not be based on propositional structure as widely proposed, but on moral ground. If our knowledge is justified based on the moral value of its content to the benefit of all the component units of our world, then we do not need any alternative to foundationalism, but to moralized foundationalism. It is in this connection that this work supports moral foundationalism as the epistemic basis for justification.

Key words: Foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, reliabilists, evidentialist, controverted

Introduction

As Goldman (1979) rightly observes, “justification is necessary for knowing...”. So, for foundational epistemologists to search for the epistemic basis for justifying our knowledge claim is not out of place. According to foundationalists, to justify any knowledge claim, the justified knowledge must rest on the foundation of non-inferential knowledge. But different epistemic theorists objected to such view. Hence, we need to give brief highlights on selected theories of foundational epistemology which

masterminds alternatives to foundational epistemology. Finally, we will conclude with moral foundationalism which closes the possible loopholes that give rise for the search for alternatives to foundationalism.

Selected theories of foundational epistemology

A theory, according to A. F. Uduigwomen (1996) is “a unified system of laws or hypotheses, with explanatory force”. In the same respect, J. A. Aigbodioh (1997) defines a theory as “an unrestricted universal about certain objects, events and so on”. The central insights of these two definitions are the fact that a theory is constituted by laws; it must also be explanatory and should be universal. It is its universal nature that will make it applicable under certain conditions. So, to search for the theories to justify our knowledge claim is to equally search for the theories of truth. On this note, truth becomes the basis for justification i.e. when one justifies an assertion; he establishes the truth of his claim.

The formulation of the theories of justification is predicated on the necessary conditions which must be met. This implies that a justified knowledge claim is evidenced upon a clear support of such claim. According to Chisholm (1966), such “self-presenting properties are a source for certainty”. To this end, the evidence must be self-evident proof which can guarantee certainty, clarity and indubitability. It is on this ground that the need for the formulation of theories arises:

1. The theory of classical foundationalism

This theory is seen in two perspectives: (i) the claim that requires support of evidence from others; (ii) and the claim which supports others and needs no support itself. It is this self-evident quality of classical foundationalism that constitutes epistemological foundations, while the former is a superstructure built on those foundations (Dancey, 1991). Dancey (1991) further adds that classical foundational epistemology agrees with empirical tenet as we derive our knowledge from experience. On the basis of that, he argues that our knowledge can be justified if it appeals to our own sensory conditions. On that note, the foundation of knowledge claim connotes certainty if our knowledge appeals to our sensory condition. Hetherington (1996) writes in support of this structure that,

basic knowledge is like the foundation of a large building. Everything else depends on it in order to stand tall. The foundation is as basic as it gets within that building. The

foundation could stand without the superstructure; the superstructure could not stand without the foundation. Some knowledge is like that according to foundationalism.

As we observe around us, the firmness of any building is determined by its foundation. So knowledge justification cannot be different.

In support of foundationalism, William Alston (1976) asserts that,

foundationalism ... constitutes a structure of the foundations which support all the rest but themselves need no support ... in contemporary discussions of foundationalism knowledge is thought of in terms of true-justified-belief (with or without further conditions); thus the mode of support involved is justification; and what gets supported a belief.

By this, Alston (1976) places relations between the foundation as a basic structure and the belief that is supported as a superstructure. For John Kekes (1983), the “idea of foundationalism is that there are some propositions” which are basic, and they guarantee certainty and justify the truth of our claim. Those basic propositions according to him are incorrigible and they are the basis of foundationalism

There are many others that tossed the same direction. But the question now is, is classical foundationalism theory so certain that it cannot be questioned? This question leads us to objection to this theory. The theory has actually come under what I will call epistemic attacks. One of the arguments against this theory comes from Wilfred Sellars (1963) who argues that the idea of the given in traditional epistemology contains irreconcilable tensions. For him, the given is not to be involved in any other beliefs since it is designed to end the regress of justification. That is, to give us secure foundations for the rest of what we justifiably infer from the given.

From the above objections and others not mentioned against classical foundational theory, the trend will continue if the basis of epistemic justification is based on what knowledge is - (sense data, propositional structure and semantic logic). But to solve this problem, this work suggests that classical foundational theory should have inbuilt mechanism of moral laws. This is because the entire universe and its constitutive elements are made and sustained by natural laws. It is this moral law that is self-evident

and non-inferential, and in fact as we will see later, it is what adds practical moral values to knowledge and makes it purposeful.

So, if our epistemic structure is morality, superstructure must necessarily be characterized by morality. By so doing we will not have need looking for abstract basic propositions that have no relevance to man's purposeful existence. In fact, when we talk about the 'given' as proposed by Ross (1970), it should not be centred on the awareness of an empirical object or semantic construction. Rather the 'given' should be seen as the natural law given to guide the affairs of man and other creatures, which implies that man has to justify his knowledge on the basis of that 'given' natural or moral law. So, classical foundational theory can only be invulnerable if and only if it is based on morality.

2. The coherence theory of justification

Coherentism holds that knowledge statement or belief is not justified by some small subset in isolation to other knowledge statements or beliefs, but by the entire set. The implication here is that, a single belief or statement cannot be justified unless there are other bodies of statements or beliefs that have similar features still within the set.

This position sets coherentism at variance with foundationalism in that the coherentists pursue the holistic whole theory that fits our actual situation unlike a restrictive mode of foundationalism. It is reasonable to have coherent beliefs or statements justified, "but that does not mean that they are all true" (Dancey, 1991). The reason for its not being true is because of its contextual nature. On this contextual nature of coherentism, John Kekes(1983) sees difficulty lying on why,

context-dependence of justification gives rise ... whether or not something is an acceptable justification is determined by standards which are part of the same context in which the attempted justification is offered. Thus, for instance, the adequacy of a particular scientific justification depends on its conformity to standards of justification in science. The conclusion seems unavoidable that if justification is context-dependence, then it is unobtainable.

What this means is that justification in this context-dependence as upheld by the coherentists is quite unnecessary because it requires internal standards for justifying a belief or a statement within the whole.

Hetherington (1996) equally admits that coherentism “aims to account for justification purely in terms of what is internal to a system of beliefs”. It is in this respect that Hetherington sees coherentists as egalitarians. These, rules out the basic belief or basic knowledge concept. The denial of the basic belief presupposes the direct denial of foundationalism as an epistemic theory. If the basic belief is rejected it means coherentism does not actually correlate with truth which is an indispensable element of foundationalism, rather with consistency within the set. Even a lie often told can be consistent but it remains a lie. It is equally possible of every member of a consistent set being false. This implies that consistency being a necessary condition for coherent epistemic theory does not guarantee truth which should underlie justification.

As epistemologically observed by Richard Foley (1979), consistency is not even a necessary condition for the justification of a set of beliefs. As he puts it,

many of us have evidence sufficient to justify believing that (q) it is not the case that 6561 is greater than 6562. But, somewhere among us there might be a person who in addition has evidence sufficient to justify that (P) 3^8 is greater than 6562. This person, for example, might have a normally reliable calculator that computes that $3^8 = 6567$ and he have a trusted friend, a mathematician who confirms this result for him, and so on. Thus, it looks as if the person might have sufficient evidence to justify believing q and sufficient evidence to justify believing p. And yet p implies not ~ q.

From the above, if consistency replaces truth in epistemic justification, it means a consistent lie should also be included in the epistemic status of justification. What then will happen to the world when there is a consistent hypocrisy by a set of hypocrites, a consistent crime by a set of criminals, a consistent corruption by a set of those promoting it, a consistent oppression by a set of oppressors, a consistent terrorism by a set of terrorists, and so on? So coherentism cannot be the basis of epistemic justification especially when it centers on the propositional epistemic structure.

3. Moral foundational theory of justification

This is the theory of epistemic justification proffered as the most authentic and reliable theory of justification. Moral foundationalism as a theory of

epistemic justification is based on moral truth as a universal basic standard for justification of knowledge. Whenever we are talking about morality, invariably we are referring to laws, that is, natural laws. This is because morality as the foundation of law “is a universal standard principle embedded in human conscience to direct man on what is right and wrong” (Asukwo, 2007). Again, everything about reality is controlled by moral laws. It is good to state that knowledge also is enshrined in alphabetical laws (that is alphabet, letters A-Z. Their combinations produce words that explain an aspect of reality reflected upon at a given time). This makes moral laws to be the foundation of all things. This gives moral truth or moral foundationalism the required epistemic status to justify any knowledge claim or belief.

As a theory of justification, therefore, moral foundationalism does not owe its justification to logical inference from other justified beliefs, but practical moral relevance of any knowledge claim or belief. This can only be if and only if the moral law which is non-inferential is followed. And it will take a logical pattern,

If S believe P

The evidence of S believing in P is in

- i. S’s moral justification in
- ii. S’s interpersonal relationship with XYZ
- iii. That the by-product of S’s knowledge has the practical moral value for XYZ to benefit
- iv. The basis of S moral justification is in moral laws set in by P.

To this end, this theory tends to remove the pattern of epistemic justification from mere epistemic luck to the standard universal moral laws. By its ontology, moral knowledge is moral reality which is being constituted by three general possibilities. These possibilities according Richmond Campbell (2001) are (a) moral reality which might be theological in nature. This pertains to doing the will of God. (b) It might be a non-natural realm that is neither theological nor natural, but ‘sui generis’. (c) It might be comprehensible as a part of natural world studied by science. It is true that these possibilities are beset with difficulties, and yet no viable fourth

alternative has been conceived (n. pag). What Campbell meant here is that whichever category of these groups one falls into, moral knowledge is indispensable. Hence, moral truth is the only epistemic guarantee that can justify any belief or knowledge.

Alternatives to foundational epistemology

Though there are many alternatives to foundational epistemology, we are going consider the two major alternatives which are coherentism and reliabilism

1. Coherentism

The champions of coherentism are F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet, Otto Neurath, Carl Hempel, W. V. Quine, Lawrence BonJour, Keith Lehrer, etc. The proponents of coherentism as the best alternative to foundationalism are of the opinion that for a belief or statement to be justified as true, such must cohere with the entire set of the whole rather than the small subset of belief or knowledge. That is, coherency is the prerequisite condition for justifying any knowledge within the system. So, an independent single belief or statement without correlation with the entire set cannot meet epistemic justification.

As Jonathan Dancy (1991) observed, there is that possibility of having statements or belief cohering with others “but that does not mean that they are all true”. It is possible for a statement to cohere with faulty foundation since coherentism operates within a given context of the entire set. It is on this note that Kekes (1983) submits that “if justification is context-dependence, then it is unobtainable”. The implication here is that coherentism requires internal standards for justifying knowledge claim within the whole. If part of the whole is faulty, it therefore means that there is no whole again that can justify a part. If it does, its truth content will be mixed with falsehood.

In coherentism, there is no emphasis on basic belief. This makes Hetherington (1996) to describe coherentists as egalitarians, in that, coherentism “aims to account for justification purely in terms of what is internal to a system of beliefs”. When a basic belief is denied, in what capacity therefore can coherentism become the best alternative to foundationalism as epistemic theory of justification? In essence, what matters most to coherentists is the consistency within the set rather than the truth which should form the basic belief as a necessary condition for epistemic

foundation. When this happens, a member of a consistent falsehood will cohere with the entire set that is false, and as such moral guide that directs our sense of judgement will be thrown out. On that ground coherentism cannot guarantee truth necessary for justification. As the result of that it cannot be the best alternative to foundationalism.

Ernest Sosa (1985) argues that, "... no matter how variegated coherence may be, the warrant of a belief cannot derive simply from its coherence within a homogeneous and unstructured body of beliefs". This implies that, as coherence theory requires justification of a belief in relation to some other structured beliefs, there is that possibility of incoherency. That is, the structured beliefs though will appear foundational at the beginning, yet incoherent at the end. On this note, coherentism as a theory of justification cannot give us a standard epistemic status expected of foundationalism.

2. Reliabilism

The second alternative is reliabilism. F. P. Ramsey (2008) who first formulated the reliability account is of the opinion that "a belief is knowledge if it is true, certain and obtained by a reliable process". Many other reliabilists like Peter Unger, David Armstrong, etc, follow suit in their postulations. To discuss this alternative approach will first demand asking a question, what actually turns a true belief into knowledge? The answer the reliabilists will give is that, it is the reliability of the cognitive process that produced the belief. For them, the knowledge acquired through empirical observation of our environment is more reliable than any other experience we may think of. So the truth produce through this process is not accidental but such that should qualify as instances of knowledge. In this respect, "an analogous point could be made for other reliable cognitive processes, such as introspection, memory, and rational intuition" (DeRose, online). According to the reliabilists, what turns true belief into knowledge is the reliability of our recognitive processes.

Reliabilism can be seen in two perspectives. Reliabilism as the theory of justification and reliabilism as the theory of knowledge. But in respect to reliabilism being alternative to foundationalism, we will only look at reliabilism theory of justification. The reliabilism theory of justification (J-reliabilism) (Cohen, 1984) holds the idea that, though justification is indeed necessary for knowledge, yet, its nature is not evidentialist but reliabilist. In supporting reliabilism, Goldman (1979) argues that the correct processes that beliefs are perceptual processes, remembering, good reasoning and

introspection. According to him, these processes are reliable as they produce true beliefs. In explaining “true beliefs”, Goldman suggests the notion of “conditional reliability”. “A process is conditionally reliable when a sufficient proportion of its out-put beliefs are true given that its input-beliefs are true”.

From the point of view of the reliabilists, it seems that truth as the last checkpoint is what justifies a certain belief and turns it into knowledge. Justification is then tied to truth as it was the case for the traditional epistemologist. The question then is, “what actually determines truth? What determines that the input beliefs are true?” Goldman does not have answers to these questions. John Mackie (1977) who seems to share Goldman’s position on reliability assumes an answer to it. According to him, reliabilism presupposes the truth of our current scientific beliefs about the world. This assertion implies that beliefs are justified by the processes which are reliable, simply because we believe them to be so. That is not because they are in fact reliable, but it is in the processes we believe them to be reliable. What if the process is reliable without any moral relevance of its input? This is where reliabilism becomes an unreliable means for epistemic justification as the point of its emphasis is that justification is something that is external to the subject (DeRose, 2000).

The evidentialists who advocate internalism reject reliabilism with their externalism. Chisholm (1966), the chief advocate of internalism says that “if a person S is internally justified in believing a certain thing, then this may be something he can know just by reflecting upon his own state of mind”. The point Chisholm is making is that the evidence for justification should be based on self-evident proof which is the only means for guaranteeing certainty and truth. This is at variance with reliabilism in that it does not base its justification on truth per se but on how reliable the process of justification is. This process hinges on sense experience which is equally based on assumption just like coherentism. On this note, reliabilism cannot be the best alternative to foundationalism.

It is this perceived confusion in seeking unreliable alternatives to foundationalism that warranted a controverted non-foundational epistemic justification based on culture as proposed by Rorty which is equally problematic. There are things that are relatively cultural-based and they are others that are objective, serving as unifying factors to other relative units. For instance, the concept of ‘tree’ is objective, and universal while the species

of tree are relative based on culture - that is, with special endowment of the soil nutrient by nature. There are some kinds of soil without nitrogen, and the trees that survive there may not survive in another kind of soil with nitrogen. But the 'treeness' remains objective unifying everything called tree. That is where the concept of universal comes in. So if we based our epistemic status of justification on culture then there will be no standard hence 'anything goes'. And of course nothing will be reasonably left of philosophy. That is why Ozumba (2001) posits that,

non-foundationalism if adopted will bring to an end the concept of justification in its absolute and certain conception. Justification is the bed rock (the touch stone) of the epistemological enterprise. This will make epistemology to lose out as a vigorous branch of philosophy that inquires into the possibility of, and certainty of our knowledge claims.

We admit that there are some imagined problems against foundationalism based on the fact that epistemic justification has been focused on 'awareness'. But as this work is proposing moral foundationalism based on what knowledge does, non-foundationalism cannot be the best alternative to foundationalism. The stand-point of foundationalism is further challenged by naturalized epistemology. The chief proponent of naturalized epistemology – Quine (1985), argues that the description of cognitive processes is paramount and central to epistemology than the search for foundations and principles of justification. In his much celebrated "Epistemology Naturalized" he writes that "the stimulation of his sensory receptors is all the evidence anybody has had to go on, ultimately, in arriving at his picture of the world. Why not just see how this construction really proceeds? Why not settle for psychology?" Quine's (1990) conception here is based on his idea that "epistemology is concerned with the foundations of science". And as such he recommends that we study ways in which we form our beliefs rather than trying to show that we have knowledge. It is his view that we study psychological processes that take us from sensory stimulations to beliefs about the world. For him epistemology,

simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz, a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input... certain patterns of irradiation in

assorted frequencies, for instance... and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as outputs a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for some- what the same reasons that always prompted epistemology: namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and what says one's theory of nature transcends any available evidence ... epistemological enterprise in this new psychological setting is that we can now make free use of empirical psychology.

The understanding of Quine here is that since the epistemic foundation for justification is unable to silence the skeptics, it implies therefore that epistemology is impossible. The implication here is "putting epistemology in a psychological setting" (Quine, 1990). This position is endorsed by both Wittgenstein and Rorty who felt that foundationalism should be abandoned. Quine's version and in fact all versions of naturalized epistemology is the abandonment of the pretence of classical epistemology to be the foundation of knowledge and the employment of all available means to produce a construction of what we know, using psychology and whatever.

The question that comes to mind here is, how does "naturalized epistemology" account for the epistemic justification? Michael Bradie (online) argues in support of Quine that it is possible to account for justification within a naturalistic framework broadly construed along the Quinean lines. This according to Bradie, is possible in that the 'local' justification of the particular probative methods employed by science tally with the statistical tests, the appeals to simplicity, confirmation, evidential adequacy, among others.

From the above it is proper to state clearly the very objectives of naturalized epistemology. Firstly, it aims at eliminating traditional epistemology as the distinct province of inquiry whose concern is the nature, the limit and the sources of knowledge in favour of science or psychology. By doing psychology, which is the discovering of the processes by which we actually arrive at belief, we arrive at the beliefs we ought to (Quine, 1985). This is because the processes by which we arrive at the latter beliefs are just the same as those by which we arrive at the former. The implication here is after psychology nothing is left of epistemology. And as such epistemology is to psychology as alchemy to chemistry (Bradie, 1989).

The second objective of naturalized epistemology is to show that the problem of epistemic foundation of justification is answered from within science where a naturalistic account is given. On this, Quine (1985) states that, "we gave up trying to justify our knowledge of the external world by rational reconstruction". Does it then really mean that Quine has completely drop justification? Quine (1985) says no. But that "justification is not dropped, but naturalized".

It is against these two points that we submit that epistemology cannot be so restricted to doing science and that justification cannot equally be given a naturalistic account. So, instead of naturalizing epistemology, this work suggests that epistemology should be moralized since everything is guided by natural laws, it is logical to base epistemic foundation for justification on moral truth.

Conclusion

In this work, we have been able to knock out coherentism and reliabilism as better alternatives to foundationalism. We are now concluding with moral truth which is just but one solidified foundational pillar for epistemology. Moral truth as absolute truth shades moral principle as self-evident moral principles into human minds in order to direct their sense of judgment. That is why there is no discipline or group of people that do not have the system of ethics. The reason is, as everything began with God, every person then is unconsciously looking for a way to the centre. Hence, our epistemic sense of judgment seems more active than any other senses. This is to enable us question any claim revealed way. Any perceived argument against moral truth is based on false premises or lead to absurd conclusions or self-contradictions. Moral truth appears most rational, common sense meta-ethical position that can stand as the sure epistemic foundation for justification. Its adoption is not only rational, but is also bolstered by several pragmatic arguments. The end result of this knowledge is practical moral values needed in the world today. This is against the backdrop of sectoral knowledge that is characterized by murder, terrorism, violence and other social vices.

We therefore submit that among the foundational theories of epistemology that have been discussed, moral foundationalism has in-built epistemic mechanism to screen everything called knowledge. It is the only epistemic theory that guarantees clarity, certainty, indubitability of true useful knowledge in epistemology. What we are trying to establish is that

knowledge is built on different fronts, hence is built on different foundations. Our argument is that moral foundations are the most preferred because of the following reasons: (i) There are more universal; (ii) There are more appealing to reason and less vulnerable to controversy; (iii) It is divine and absolute in its origin; (iv) It is of the highest pragmatic utility; (v) It is fault proof within its own conceptual theory or background theory; (vi) It supercedes others in its de-ontologism and utilitarianism; (vii) It is certain, infallible, non-inferential and intuitively apodictic from within its conceptual framework; (viii) It is moral, social, religious psychological utility; (ix) Its pedigrees are Socratic paradigm, Platonic paradigm, Kantian categorical imperative and Husserlian theory of essence.

Outside this, critics can argue ideologically and post-modernistically. Their position will end up as self-defeats. Moral foundationalism must be understood within a reference frame or what Wittgenstein/Peter Winch call “form of life”, Quine calls it “background theory”, and Donald Davidson calls it “conceptual scheme”. When we examine moral foundationalism from a different referential frame, we may not appreciate the close knittedness of its claims (Asukwo, 2007).

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