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FOUNDATIONALISM

Foundationalism refers to the assumption that knowledge claims must be grounded in a source of certainty that cannot be called into question, and from which the truth value of other propositions can be inferred. Rationalist foundationalism identifies this ground of certainty in intellectual intuition of some sort, i.e. most of what we know we know by reasoning. Empiricist foundationalism identifies the grounds of certainty in sensory observation, i.e. most of what we know we know by experience. The key point about discussions of foundationalism is that they are concerned with *epistemic justification* – with establishing the grounds for justifying when a *belief* counts as *knowledge*.

The most famous example of a foundationalist **epistemology** is Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, in which the act of thinking is identified as the foundational ground of certainty which can guarantee non-foundational beliefs. It is from the confidence of this 'I Think' (specifically, in response to the question 'How do I know?') that the possibility of justified knowledge claims is derived. Descartes established the criterion of *certainty* as the basis for epistemic justification. This leads to a radical scepticism about external reality. All foundationalist epistemologies share a monological, internalist view of the subject of knowledge, confronting the external world wracked with doubt. Criticisms of foundationalism therefore have a content, in that they are about more than simply the best way of justifying belief; they are fundamentally about disputed pictures of what it is to be human.

Rorty's (1979) repudiation of the idea that philosophy can ever possibly find the objective, transcendent grounds of certainty from which to justify belief informs a line of anti-foundationalist argument in human geography. For him, what confers epistemic justification on beliefs is whether they work, whether they are useful, or whether they are held valid by a community of practice. This implies that the philosophical study of knowledge as an abstract conceptual matter of justification should at least be augmented by looking at how knowledge claims work in practical contexts. While, this type of empirical programme can certainly help to understand the conditions that determine *when* claims will be believed as knowledge; but it closes down the question of when they *ought* to be so believed.

In geography, anti-foundationalist arguments are sometimes invoked to question the validity of explanatory social science, but it is far form clear that modern social science is vulnerable to the charge of foundationalism as this term is used in philosophical debates (cf. **essentialism**). Geographers have also engaged in wider debates about the political significance of anti-foundationalist perspectives. These centre on the degree to which it is possible to square the academic disruption of knowledge claims, by showing them to be contingent and contextual, with the assumed requirement for political movements to be based on secure grounds of identity and experience. Various formulations finesse this problem, such as Judith Butler's *contingent foundations* and Gayatri Spivak's *strategic essentialism*. White (2000) develops the idea of *weak ontology* to negotiate the fact that any

argument requires making presuppositions and fundamental ontological commitments, arguing that it is nonetheless possible to adopt a degree of rhetorical **reflexivity** to show their contingency. But all of these formulas tend to rest on the "the implicit assumption that one could think like a sceptic but act like a foundationalist" (Zerilli 1998, 438), and therefore tend to misconstrue what is at stake in issues of foundationalism. The widespread assumption that anti-foundationalism involves a generalised affirmation of contingency betrays a scholastic perspective that is unable to grasp the conditions of its own critical doubt, and remains caught within the problematic of epistemic certainty. A less deceitful response to the problems of foundationalism might be derived from Wittgenstein's considerations of scepticism. He held that absolute doubt of the sort entertained by Descartes does not provide plausible grounds for understanding the way knowledge works in practice: "the questions we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn" (1969, #341). The point here is twofold: the world of human affairs is not only held together by relationships of knowledge, either of certainty or contingency; and the expression of doubt is always undertaken in context, in relation to a particular set of concerns, and against a background of beliefs and commitments which stand fast.

References

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White, S. (2000). *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Zerilli, L. (1998). 'Doing without knowing: feminism's politics of the ordinary'. *Political Theory* 26(4), 435-458.

Suggested Reading

Appiah, K. A. (2003). *Thinking it Through: An Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Ch. 2.

Taylor, C. (1995). *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, Ch.1.