A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DESCARTES' BASIC BELIEFS AND CHISHOLM'S *SELF-PRESENTING* THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, knowledge is classified as "Justified True Belief" but for the problem of infinite regress, Descartes came up with an indubitable foundation upon which he believes secured knowledge could be established. There were several incursions of epistemological problems associated with the justification of foundationalism and many versions ranging from the classical to coherentism and foundherentism eventually emerged, but, none was without its embedded problems. Chisholm however came up with a version of foundationalism, a development over Cartesian foundationalism, based on the principles of self-presenting to solve the problem of infallibility and indubitability. The "self-presenting" is an improved version of the Cartessian basic beliefs. Therefore, this paper attempts a comparative analysis of the Cartesian basic beliefs and Chisholm's "self-presenting" thesis using the philosophical analytical and conceptual methods to determine how successful Chisholm has been in his exploit.

Keywords: Basic Beliefs, Coherentism, Self-presenting, Justification, Knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Rene Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy because he brought philosophy out of the medieval period to a new era of scientific revolution of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and later on, Newton. Even though he did not actually break up with scholasticism, he did not accept the philosophical foundation laid by them. He went in search of a new foundation envisioned for science and philosophy. He discovered the *cogito* (I am thinking, therefore I exist) which became the awareness of basic, self-evident and necessary truth upon which the foundation of knowledge and philosophical theory can be built. The *cogito* was the result of the Cartesian methodic doubt; it serves as the basis of epistemological foundationalism stated in terms of clarity, distinctness and certainty that are self-evidently true (Descartes, 1931: 92-94). The traditional account of knowledge or "theory of justification" concerning a proposition states that S knows that p iff (i) p is true: truth condition (ii) S believes that p: belief condition and (iii) S is justified in believing that p: evidence condition (Dancy, 1985: 23). This definition with Plato in perspective held sway in the philosophers' analysis of knowledge until the Gettier problem. In two counter-examples, Gettier argues that the tripartite conditions of the traditional account of knowledge even though may be necessary cannot be sufficient for knowledge because it is possible for

a person to be justified in believing a false proposition (Gettier, 1963: 121).

The focus of the theory of justification is directed towards the evidence condition which requires that our beliefs need be justified before they can pass the test of knowledge (Armstrong, 1974: 137). But, how can our beliefs be justified without resulting into an infinite regress? The traditional account of knowledge projects that "knowledge is justified true belief". And for beliefs to be justified without resulting into an infinite regress, it requires that some of our beliefs are non-inferentially justified while others are inferentially justified. Hence, our beliefs relation stops at the non-inferentially justified beliefs else we run into an infinite regress problem. The terminal point of all beliefs, the non-inferentially justified beliefs, is the Cartesian foundation upon which the edifice of knowledge rests and that which stops the epistemic regress problem. Basic beliefs or basic propositions stopped the vicious infinite regress that may arise in the account of the justification of empirical beliefs (Bonjour, 1985: 54).

Chisholm's foundationalism is a development over the Cartesian foundationalism. It is an attempt to resolve some of the crisis generated by Cartesian foundationalism. He thus proposed "self-presenting" as a replacement for basic beliefs with improved characteristics. This paper attempts a comparative analysis of the Cartesian basic beliefs and Chisholm's "self-presenting" to determine how successful Chisholm's version has been able to resolve the epistemic regress in foundationalism.

Basic Beliefs

Foundation theories, such as classical foundationalism and foundaherentism are characterized by the thesis that there exists some class of beliefs which have some degree of justification that are not derived from relation to other beliefs. These beliefs, according to these theories, provide us with genuine and secured foundation for knowledge. The classical foundationalists divide our beliefs into two groups: those that need support from others and those that can support others but need no support for themselves. The latter constitutes our epistemological foundation while the former are the superstructure built on these foundations. The Cartesian argues that basic beliefs expressed in basic propositions are necessarily true because they are immediately derived from our psychological states. They are non-inferentially justified and spontaneously derived from intuition. Basic beliefs are so direct and immediate that the Cartesians believe that it will be difficult for them to be fallible. According to Descartes, they are characterized by "clearness, distinctness and certainty" (Descartes, 1931:94).

Descartes argues that the *cogito*, basic belief, is what we know by intuition. Beliefs derived as such, according to him, are distinct, clear, indubitable and credible with no fear of error (Sosa, 1980:4). These beliefs are devoid of error and infallibility because they are immediate experience of our sensory states. The infallible status of basic beliefs gives them the power to justify other beliefs about external world, about science, about our past and future, about other minds and so on. Kai H Kwok (1998:2) argues that beliefs capable of holding such a high degree of standard of basic beliefs are "beliefs about mathematics and beliefs about sensations".

Basic beliefs are essentially characterized by three features which include (i) they are non-inferentially justified (ii) they are self justified

and (iii) their justifications are non-doxastic, that is, they must be justified on the basis of something which is not a belief (perception, memory or introspection). They are proposed to solve the epistemic regress problem: the problem of how to avoid an infinite and presumably vicious regress of justification in one's account of the justification of empirical beliefs.

Chisholm's "Self-presenting" Thesis

Chisholm believes that some properties are self-evident, clear and distinct to the perceiver just as the Cartesian position. The self-presenting is like the Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. He gave the example of "someone feeling sad"; "thinking about the mountain"; "believing oneself to be wise"; "appeared redly to", etc. He argues that such locutions are self-presenting because they are necessarily true in that if a person has them and he considers having them or not, he will *ipso facto* directly attribute them to himself. He claims that they are properties we cannot contradict. If we have them and consider whether we have them or not, we cannot deny having them (for example, if I am sad). Self-presenting also can be in the form of "being appeared to". If something appears to you redly and you have a direct attribution of it to yourself, then it becomes self-presenting. For Chisholm, the direct attribution of a property to oneself is objectively certain if it is beyond reasonable doubt for that person to accept it. If certainty constitutes the highest degree of epistemic justification, then it is not out of place to claim that anything that has a self-presenting property is an object of certainty for that person. He affirms a "material epistemic principle" which shows a relation to certainty.

P_1 if the property of being F

is self-presenting, then, for every X, if (i) X has the property of being F, and if (ii) X considers his being F, then it is certain that X has the property of being F (Chisholm in Dancy, 1985 :543)

Therefore, if being sad is a self-presenting property, then if you are sad and if you consider whether you are sad, it will be certain for you that you are sad. And if considering this is also self-presenting, and if you consider whether you are sad, then it will be evident to you that you are considering whether you are sad. Hence, we could deduce from p_1 that;

For every X, if (i) X has the property of being sad and if (ii) X considers his being sad, then it is certain for X that he then has the property of being sad (544)

We could affirm from the above argument that for every X, if it is certain for X that he has the property of being F, then the proposition that something is F is one that is epistemically certain for X.

The Notion of Basic Beliefs and "Self-presenting"

Basic propositions are what the classical foundationalist considers as basic beliefs. They are the product of our immediate experience derived from our sensory states. They are self-justified and provide secured foundation upon which the justifications of other propositions are built. Basic propositions are considered infallible by the Cartesian foundationalists because of its nature in perception; they are the product of our sensory states and so are perceived directly. The

equivalence of basic propositions is "self-presenting" in Chisholm's version of foundationalism. It has the closest property to what the Cartesian described as basic belief. The "self-presenting" properties present themselves to the subject intuitively and they are the product of psychological states as well. According to Chisholm, the "self-presenting" constitutes its own justification and it is self-evident as basic beliefs are self-evident and are self-justified for the Cartesian foundationalism.

The "self-presenting" properties are not infallible: they are merely described in terms of properties. The Mooreans are also of a similar notion about the status of basic beliefs. For them, basic beliefs are not infallible but incorrigible just because it is the last of human beliefs that are logically impossible to correct: they are human final court of appeal (Kekes, 1977: 90). What divides the Mooreans from the Cartesians here is that while the Cartesian claims that basic propositions report private psychological states, the Mooreans hold that basic propositions are readily observable public facts. The Cartesian foundationalist argues that basic beliefs are the terminal point of justification and that no new issue of justification is raised beyond them. The concept of "self-presenting" is close to self-justifier yet it gives room for other evidential presuppositions which can still support it to building an edifice of knowledge: it is fallible but incorrigible. Chisholm says that the fact that someone has a "self-presenting" property does not mean that it is self-evident to him. He emphasizes the importance of considering having the property. It is only when one considers having the property that it becomes evidential to him that he has it. Then, "self-presenting" is necessarily tied to consciousness. Also, on the side of the Car-

tesian foundationalism, it is argued that basic propositions are the product of our psychological disposition; hence, they cannot be divorced from the fact that we do give "consideration" or better still, do consider our basic beliefs.

Chisholm claims that if a property is "self-presenting" then the following obtains:

i. it is necessarily such that if a person has it and if he considers having it or not, then he *ipso facto* directly attributes the property to himself;

ii. that the property remains what it is even when we consider having it.

In other words, "self-presenting" becomes an unconscious phenomenon if the subject does not give consideration to it by the time he is having it. For example, feeling sad is necessarily such that if you do feel sad and if you consider the question whether you are feeling sad or not, then you will believe yourself as feeling sad. This, on a similar note applies to all other intentional attitudes. To have "self-presenting" is as good as considering having it else it becomes irrelevant to epistemic foundation. What makes it relevant to knowledge is the ability to consider having it. Chisholm further argues that "self-presenting" property constitutes the highest degree of epistemic justification for it is an object of certainty for the subject. So, if being sad is a self-presenting property, then, if you are sad and you consider being sad, it becomes self-evident to you that you are sad.

Just as Descartes proposed the concepts, "distinct and clear" as the pillar upon which the edifice of knowledge rest or the criteria for determining all truths, Chisholm also

proposed an epistemic concept, "epistemically unsuspect" or what he calls "epistemically-in-the-clear". An attribution of a property becomes epistemically unsuspect or epistemically-in-the-clear for the subject if and only if no other attribution or property disconfirms such attribution. In other words, an attribution is epistemically-in-the-clear provided it is not disconfirmed by any set of properties that have some presumptions in their favour. Therefore, Chisholm's "epistemic-in-the-clear" and Descartes' "clarity and distinctness" are similar by the fact that they both serve as epistemic foundation.

Chisholm objected to the position that basic proposition is infallibility. He argues that man by nature is fallible (to err is human) and no human can be exonerated from errors or making mistakes He only acknowledges the fact that there is a positive relation between epistemically justified belief and truth, and favours justified true belief as knowledge. If one wants to believe what is true and not what is false, then it will be most reasonable for him to believe what is epistemically justified than what is not epistemically justified. Only on this basis Chisholm consent to "self-presenting" as a foundation for knowledge.

Chisholm is one of the strongest advocates of fallibilism and their arguments are basically on two prongs: the possibility of direct knowledge and the Gettier problem. Chisholm argues against the possibility of direct knowledge and particularly non-inferential knowledge. Observation can only be pure and direct if it requires no interpretation. Any observation that involves interpretation *ipso facto* cannot be error free. In fact, all observations are unavoidably theory-bound. No where is human entirely immune to the possibility of making mistakes in interpreting his perceptual experience. And if this be the case, we cannot have infallible beliefs. In human everyday perception, the senses mediate between the perceiver and the world and since the senses can mislead and the information obtained through them can be misinterpreted, error can occur. Actually, in the absence of interpretation in observation, it is possible to have an infallible belief but there is no perception devoid of the mediation of the senses; hence, no direct knowledge. We do perceive and respond to the world within the limits set by our senses, physiology and motor capacity (Sosa, 1980: 6), but these do not guarantee that the facts are as they seem to us to be. At least, we must interpret the facts through our psychological and cognitive equipment, and this interpretation may be faulty. Based on these considerations, Chisholm proposed a fallible foundation (self-presenting) which is capable of justifying a system of knowledge. This foundation, even though, may fall short of certainty, yet, it goes beyond uncertainty (6).

Appraising Chisholm' foundationalism

Foundationalism is a fundamental theory that is very important to philosophy as an enterprise. It is very basic and it is that which has been and is still keeping philosophy going. All our attempts in epistemology vis-à-vis philosophy are to ascertain whether the knowledge we claim to have is true. Thus, most of the basic theories in epistemology have just one major objective, and that is, to establish a solid foundation upon which the whole super-structure of our knowledge could be built.

The continental rationalists of whom Descartes is a classical example are all foundationalists and all their efforts were geared towards providing a clear ground for indubi-

table knowledge. The same thing goes for the classical British empiricists whose sole aim was to remove all obstacles on the way towards enhancing clear perception and understanding. Chisholm's version of foundationalism could rightly be seen as a kind of a retreat of classical foundationalism. It is what one can call a weak foundationalism because it waters down those features that make strong classical foundationalism. However, he cannot be accused of abandoning what makes foundationalism really foundational as his attempt could be compared to Susan Haack's syncretism: an attempt to synthesize the best elements in foundationalism and coherentism.

At the heart of Chisholm's version of foundationalism is the concept of the "self-presenting". This concept, as we have earlier noted, is the closest element in classical foundationalism and that which makes Chisholm a foundationalist. The "self-presenting" is Cartesian in the sense that the property presents itself intuitively the same way Descartes' "clear and distinct" ideas constitute basic propositions that structures knowledge claim. One becomes sure of it by deliberation and reflection which means, one must consider the fact whether one has it or not. This condition is the same as the second Cartesian element.

But Chisholm stopped-short of being a strict foundationalist in two important senses. In the first sense, he sided with the Moorean foundationalist in arguing that basic beliefs are fallible. "It seems to me as if I am seeing…" or "I seem to be seeing…" is the farthest the Cartesian can go in claiming infallibility. But, with the proposition "I seem to be seeing a red patch before me" does not assert the existence of a red patch and as such cannot be sufficient

for knowledge. The moment we agree to give this bare proposition enough content to make it adequate for knowledge claim e.g. "I know there is a red patch before me" or "I can see a red patch in front of me" then, we immediately lose the claim to infallibility. It is upon this consideration that swayed Chisholm to favour the Moorean's account of basic propositions. For the Mooreans, basic propositions are incorrigible because there is no other standard upon which they can be corrected. But while the Mooreans went further to assert that these propositions are readily observable facts, Chisholm reverted to being a Cartesian. His "self-presenting" property, based on my reading, is a private psychological state that presents itself to the subject. However, there are so many other problems associated with warrants to certainty (see Lewis, 1929; Firth, 1967:7-8; Fogelin 1994:88-9; Audi, 1998: 218-9; Bonjour, 1985:26; Lehrer, 1990:45; Jeshion, 2000:334-5).

The second sense in which Chisholm cannot be considered a strict foundationalist is that he borrowed an element from coherentism. For the classical foundationalist, basic propositions can act as the basic foundation of knowledge claim because they justified themselves. In other words, these propositions do not need the justification of other propositions. They are the last at the infallible level of justification. But, going by our previous argument, if the claim to infallibilism cannot be sustained, what is the future of those propositions? In the concurrence principle (the 8th principle), Chisholm argued for concurrent set of beliefs which lend support to each of its member. The conjunction of all the members in the set confirms it and is also logically independent of it. How does this hang together with the Cartesian implications that the "self-presenting" property

harbours? Since infallibillism has been taken way, the "self-presenting" is still foundational in the sense that the property is a private psychological state. Chisholm allowed the content of such a bare sensory state to be supplied by evidential presuppositions to play a strictly supportive role to it. The "self -presenting" property is thus the incorrigible limit from which one cannot go further. The "evidential presuppositions" caveat confirms Chisholm's debt to coherentism: the knowledge based on the foundation provided by the "self-presenting" property is not immune to the epistemological results of future inquiry. This element is also present in Chisholsm's modification of the tripartite account of knowledge. For him, S knows that P if and only (1) S accepts P; (ii) S has adequate evidence for P; and (iii) P is true. His analysis of knowledge, as we noted earlier, is based on epistemic preferability or reasonability.

But there is one last issue which Chisholm's version of foundationalism must confront. Let us put it in the interrogative form: Does Chisholm's version of foundationalism escaped the regress problem? Chisholm confronted this problem this way. If "a is F" is justified by is "G", and this is in turn justified by "C & H", what justifies me in thinking that I know that "a is F"? This question is important if one is to avoid an infinite regress or a vicious circularity. Chisholm considered this question and come to the conclusion that what justifies me in thinking that I know that "a is F" is simply the fact that "a is F". This is so for him, because "a is F" is directly evident. But, one can simply ask, what does "directly evident" mean for Chisholm? The "directly evident" in this sense is not different from the "self-presenting" state of affair. So, Chisholm contended, "a is F" is self-presenting; it is

the last point from which you cannot go further. It serves as the basis for other propositions that are indirectly evident. But the problem now is: does the basic proposition, the "self-presenting" state of affair really provide the basis for the indirectly evident propositions?

On Chisholm's account, if S believes without doubt that he perceives something to be "F" and "F" is a member of a set which is beyond reasonable doubt for "S" then it is evident for "S" that he perceives something to be "F". One can counterpoised that on the basis of this one could still not claim knowledge. To prove this, all one needs to do is to formulate another propositions (b): "S is perceiving something which appears or looks F". This proposition would satisfy three conditions: (a) it is beyond reasonable doubt for S, (b) it is more reasonable for S to accept proposition (B) than that "S is perceiving something to be F", and (c) proposition (b) is not certain for S (that is, S considers the probability of illusion; or for (b), one is less likely to be mistaken). Thus, one can conclude, we can't be certain that we know that we are perceiving something to be F. If this is so, the objection continues, then, we are not clear whether the basic proposition can provide the basis for justifying the indirectly evident propositions.

Let us consider an example again which would seem to follow from Chisholm's principle. If we accept (a) S believes without doubt that he perceives something to be white, then he argued, it would seem to be the case that (a) provides the basis for justifying the indirectly evidence proposition (b): S does perceives something which is white. In other words, if (a) is true, (b) is evident for S. but in this case, if (a) is not certain, that is, if it is beyond reasonable doubt for S

to believe the proposition (b) above, then (a) does not entail (b). Thus, if (b) is indirectly evident, it does not follow that it must be true. So, since the relationship between the self-presenting and the indirectly evident is not one of entailment and since relationship can't hold it is devoid of reason, then Chisholm's claim fails.

Critique of Chisholm's position

From the discussion so far, it could be deduced that Chisholm relied heavily on logic to explain the basic criterion for foundationalism. Logic is the philosophical tool used in clearing ambiguities and uncertainties in discourses, yet it is not sufficient to establish the foundation for knowledge. Chisholm's logic applies to explicit propositions which are "self-presenting" and analytical, but, does our everyday conversation not go beyond these kinds of propositions? How do we know or determine the truth of our everyday inter-personal discussions? Do we not have other criteria which are more viable and simpler than the criterion Chisholm offers? All the eight logical principles discussed by Chisholm have their assurances in the truth of the logical biconditional principle; yet, the concurrent principle does not cohere with the rest of the principles proposed.

It could further be argued that Chisholm's conditions for knowledge: that S knows that P is true if and only if (i) S accepts P, (ii) S has adequate evidence for P and (iii) P is true; are repetitive and just saying the same thing. In fact, they all amount to tautology in the sense that they all assert that P is true. Conditions i & ii are just part of the consideration for reaching the conclusion that P is true. Chisholm's conditions are not quite different in any special way from the classi-

cal conditions of knowledge. The mark of difference, as mentioned above, is in his reliance on logical explanation of the conditions and in projecting self-presenting as fallible. The classical foundationalist's conditions are: S knows that P is true if and only if (i) P is true (ii) S believes that P and (iii) S is justified in believing that P. Of course, it is because a person believes in a thing that makes him accepts that thing. If one does not have adequate evidence for something, it will be difficult for one to accept that thing and once this situation arises, one is tempted not to believe that such a thing is true. This is the basis of its rejection. If Chisholm's version is not included in the classical version, then it could simply be classified as one. This assertion is true just in the sense of the statement of the conditions but, in terms of explanation, Chisholm is more difficult to understand than the classical foundationalist considering his logical inference.

If Chisholm had actually believed in comprehensiveness which of course, his eight principles entails, then his explanation of the condition for knowledge should not have been so restrictive as demonstrated. Because he had put all his explanation in logical formulations, he had consciously eliminated some other vital condition for knowledge. This has not really helped him in his lofty reasonability and reliability project. Reasonability connotes common-sense but the cumbersomeness of his explanation is far away from what common-sense can easily grasp.

CONCLUSION

However both Chisholm and Descartes (our example of the classical foundationalist) are co-travelers in the same boat. Chisholm, just like Descartes had come into the philosophical scene to solve some problems. The duo and many others before and after them have

come to resuscitate the traditional analysis of knowledge in different modes of foundationalism. Chisholm has neither completely solved the problem of epistemic foundation rather his solution has created further problems for philosophers and scholars to solve just as we are doing in this paper. Neither Descartes nor other classical foundationalists have been able to resolve the problem. After all, *phenomenalism, epiphenomenalism, idealism,* etc., are variants of foundationalism.

However, Chisholm's version of foundationalism is of a more veritable development over the Cartesian's version in the sense that the foundation of knowledge conceived as self-presenting is adjustable in the face of other evidence preferable to the former. Notwithstanding, as long as research remains germane to human development foundationalism will always be relevant to knowledge development. In every attempt by every philosopher to say something new makes him a researcher and relevant to human knowledge development. Since this attitude remains an intellectual activity then such an activity will remain a *continuum,* and this is what keeps any academic endeavours, including philosophy, going. This is the reason why there are different theories and theorists.

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