Descartes and Foundationalism:

A Definitive Explanation for Knowledge Possession?

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that this project represents my own work and has not been submitted, in whole or in part, by me or by another person, for the purpose of obtaining any credit/grade. I agree that this project may be made available to future students of the College.

Signed: Paul Deasy Date: 9/11/2004

Abstract

This thesis attempts to investigate whether Descartes's epistemology as presented in the *Meditations* should be interpreted in the traditional way, as an example of strong classical foundationalism or whether this traditional account needs to be revised. I will argue not only that the traditional account of Descartes's epistemology should be revised, but that there is a particular interpretation that may provide compelling reasons to adopt foundationalism.

Foundationalism is presented as a theory of epistemic justification. In other words, foundationalism attempts to answer the question: how can we *justify* what we claim to 'know'? On the foundationalist account, there are basic beliefs whose justification does not depend on any other beliefs. Then there are beliefs whose justification does seem to depend on other beliefs, these are the non-basic beliefs. Foundationalist theories propose that the basic beliefs provide a solid foundation upon which the rest of our knowledge can be built upon. The attraction of a foundationalist theory is that if it is true, then it may provide a solution to the infinite regress problem. When we claim to know something, the sceptic can ask: how do you know? When we provide an answer to that question, once again the sceptic may ask, and how do you know that? This process could continue indefinitely, in other words an infinite regress of justification is set up. The foundationalist view is that at some point we must reach a base of knowledge which is not in need of further justification.

There are two main divisions within foundationalism: Classical foundationalism and moderate foundationalism. There are several differences between the two types, but in relation to the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs: classical foundationalism advocates strict deduction as the only way to build knowledge. The more moderate forms of foundationalism are open to alternative methods of justification transfer and therefore do not rely solely on deduction.

I propose that although Descartes's epistemology has been characterised as classical foundationalism, there seems to be traces of non-deductive argumentation within the *Meditations*. I will suggest that although Descartes identifies strong foundations for building knowledge upon, he does not *exclusively* rely on deduction in progressing beyond those foundations. For example: there are traces of hypothetico-deductive style argumentation within the *Meditations*. Descartes develops an epistemic principle: the clarity and distinctness rule and it seems possible to use this rule in an 'exemplary' way. The clarity and distinctness rule could be used as an exemplar or standard against which other beliefs can be judged. This method of building upon the foundations is a more moderate form of foundationalism.

The conclusion I reach is that if the *Meditations* are interpreted in an exemplary foundationalist fashion, then Descartes's epistemology may be capable of at least weakening the kinds of sceptical attacks levelled against foundationalism and although it may not provide a definitive account of knowledge possession as Descartes surely intended, it may still provide a viable account of knowledge possession.

Abbreviations

All references to Descartes will be given in the following two forms:

(1) AT followed by a volume number and a page number, refers to the standard French critical edition of Descartes's works, Oeuvres de Descartes, ed. by Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, 11 vols (Paris: Vrin/C.N.S.R., 1964-76). Thus AT VII, 18-19 refers to a passage on pages 18-19 of volume seven of that work. The original Latin text of the *Meditations* is given in vol. VII of AT.

(2) CSM followed by a volume number and page number, refers to *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A. Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-91). Thus CSM II 12-13 refers to a passage on pages 12-13 of the second volume of that work. The *Meditations* appears in vol.II of CSM.

Introduction

A central concern within epistemology, or theory of knowledge, is the issue of justification. A question that is often asked is: how are we justified in what we claim to know? One of the theories of justification that attempts to provide an answer to this question is foundationalism. The foundationalist position is that there are beliefs that are justified and their justification does not depend on other beliefs that we may hold. These foundational beliefs are often referred to as basic beliefs. We also seem to possess beliefs whose justification does depend on other beliefs, these are often referred to as non-basic beliefs. The foundational picture consists of basic beliefs that somehow provide the support for everything else that we may claim to know. Our knowledge is built upon these foundations. Traditionally, the epistemology of Descartes, especially the ideas expressed in his *Meditations*, have been regarded as foundational in nature. I will examine whether Descartes is a foundationalist and if so what kind of foundationalism best describes his views.

In chapter one, I will look at foundationalism in general. I will identify the variations that have developed within the foundationalist movement. I will also look at the issues that foundationalism must address as an epistemic justification theory. My first chapter will also include a key anti-foundationalist argument that critics often use against foundationalism.

My second chapter will focus on those elements of Descartes's epistemological project that are relevant to the foundationalist debate. I will present the standard interpretation of Descartes's project in the *Meditations*, but I will suggest that there are traces of evidence to show that the traditional account may need to be revised.

Chapter three will present in detail the challenges that a foundationalist theory faces in general, and the kind of attacks often directed at Descartes's views in particular. Among the challenges that a foundationalist theory must face are the following: is it possible to have basic beliefs at all? Secondly, even if there are basic beliefs, how does the transfer of justification from those basic beliefs to the rest of what we claim to know take place? Another key question is whether foundationalism can provide a solution to the seemingly endless cycle of justification that occurs when one tries to justify why particular beliefs are to be regarded as true. This is the problem of infinite regress, a problem that any epistemic theory must address.

My final chapter will attempt to construct a defence against the challenges to foundationalism identified in chapter three. I will argue, drawing on the work of some recent supporters of Cartesian style foundationalism, that it may be possible to read Descartes's project in a way that facilitates a reasonable response to the sceptics. I will present the case that there can be basic beliefs, that the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs can take place via the mechanism of Descartes's clarity and distinctness rule and that the result may provide a credible solution to the epistemic regress problem.

Chapter One: Foundationalism

In this chapter my goal is to present a general account of the main features of epistemological foundationalism. To achieve this I will define foundationalism, distinguish between some of the main varieties of foundationalism and examine some of the issues it must address as an epistemic justification theory. I will also offer a preliminary account of a new classification of foundationalism that will form the basis of my subsequent discussion of Descartes's epistemology in the *Meditations*.

A Definition of Foundationalism

The central claims of foundationalism are (1) that there are beliefs / propositions[1] that can be justified without appeal to further beliefs / propositions, these are the foundational or basic beliefs / propositions, and (2) that there are beliefs / propositions whose justification is by reference to the basic beliefs / propositions. The foundationalist structure was first identified by Aristotle in the *Posterior Analytics* when he examined scientific knowledge and stated that:

> 'A principle of a demonstration is an immediate proposition, and an immediate proposition is one to which there is no other prior.'[2]

An example of a contemporary formulation can be found with Alston:

> 'Our justified beliefs form a structure, in that some beliefs (the foundations) are justified by something other than their relation to other justified beliefs; beliefs that are justified by their relation to other beliefs all depend for their justification on the foundations.'[3]

An important element in Alston's definition is that the foundations are justified by 'something other' than their relation to other justified beliefs. This leaves the

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[1] It is a debated issue as to whether the basics are beliefs, propositions or mental states.
[2] Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 72a 7-9, trans. by Jonathan Barnes, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.3.
[3] William P. Alston, 'Two Types of Foundationalism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73 (1976), 165-84 (p.165).

way clear for further philosophical investigation into what that 'something other' could be. Bonjour provides a similar account of foundationalism:

> 'Some empirical beliefs possess immediate, intrinsic justification, not dependent upon other beliefs. These basic beliefs are the ultimate source of justification for all empirical knowledge'. [4]

So the foundationalist picture can be presented as follows:

S's belief in P is justified if and only if, either

(a) S's belief in P is foundational or

(b) S's belief in P rests on foundational beliefs.

The two central questions that foundationalism must answer as an epistemic justificatory theory are: firstly, what is the nature of foundational beliefs? In other words, what does it mean to say that some of our beliefs are 'basic' in the sense that their justification is without appeal to other beliefs that we hold? The second question is: even if we manage to establish that we can and do have some foundational beliefs, how do the other beliefs that we have, the non-basic or non-foundational beliefs 'rest' on the foundations? In order to illuminate the issues concerning foundationalism, at this stage I will refer to the foundations as beliefs, but it should be noted that whether the foundations of our empirical knowledge are beliefs, is itself a debated issue within epistemology. An example of the controversy of the nature of the foundations can be seen in this statement by Michael Huemer:

> 'For some persons S and some propositions P, S is justified in believing P, and some of S's justification for believing P does not depend upon S's having a reason or reasons for believing P.'[5]

Huemer's suggestion seems to be that part of the justification for a belief may be simply the act of having an experience or sensation rather than articulating reasons. Huemer

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[4] Bonjour, Laurence, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, 1985, p.17.
[5] Michael Huemer, 'Arbitrary Foundations?', *The Philosophical Forum*, 34 (2003), 141-152 (p.141).

then gives an example: when someone is in pain they do not require any reasons for believing they are in pain to be justified in believing that they are. The sensation itself is the justification. This issue of the nature of the foundations of empirical knowledge will be analysed in greater detail throughout my thesis. The debate concerning the nature of epistemological foundations has resulted in the emergence of different strands within foundationalism. I will now examine the distinctive features that define the main types of foundationalist theories.

Classical versus Moderate foundationalism

To provide answers to the main epistemological questions concerning the nature of the foundations of knowledge and the connection between those foundations and the beliefs that rest upon them, two brands of foundationalism have emerged: Classical and Moderate.

Classical foundationalism

Classical foundationalism is a theory that involves advocating the following:[6]

1. S has some basic (i.e. non-inferentially) justified empirical beliefs.
2. S has some justified non-basic empirical beliefs.
3. Every branch of an evidence tree supporting any of S's non-basic empirical beliefs ends in a basic empirical belief.
4. The basic beliefs are certain.[7]

The questions that naturally arise from this are: is it necessary to have *certain* foundations? Is it possible to have such strong foundations? Even if such strong foundations are necessary and possible, are they enough to form a structure that we can

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[6] I am using a slightly modified display of Timothy Mc Grew's 'A Defense of Classical Foundationalism', in *Knowledge: Classical & Contemporary Readings*, 2nd edn, ed. by Louis Pojman, New York: Wadsworth, 1999, p.225.

[7] I use the word "certain" here but other epistemic terms such as "incorrigible", "indubitable" and "infallible" are often used. See pages 17 and 79-80 for a more detailed analysis of these terms.

build our empirical knowledge upon? It would seem that to answer the sceptic we need strong foundations that do not require justification from other propositions. The sceptic can continually press the question how do you know? If we appeal to other propositions, the sceptic will ask: how do you know those propositions are true? One possible solution is to suggest that there could be some sort of epistemic principle that connects the premises to what I infer from those premises. The problem is that for basic beliefs, the principle will have to somehow be part of the way in which the belief is formed. If any epistemic principle is external to how an allegedly basic belief is formed, then justification is needed for the epistemic principle. The sceptic can then continue the line of questioning demanding to know what justifies the epistemic principle.

The epistemic principle could be something like: whenever a belief is formed in manner X, it is a justified belief. The individual does not have to know what the principle is, but the principle has to be true. The other factor is that the epistemic principle must not be arbitrary and it must show why the basic belief is justified without any inferential support.

Moderate foundationalism

Moderate foundationalism holds that the basic beliefs do not need to be certain, only that they must have some level of initial plausibility. The moderate foundationalist position involves the following:

1. S has some basic (non-inferentially justified) empirical beliefs.
2. S has some justified non-basic empirical beliefs.
3. Every branch of an evidence tree supporting any of S's non-basic empirical beliefs terminates in a basic empirical belief.
4. Some of S's basic empirical beliefs are less than certain for S.

The difficulty that a moderate foundationalist theory faces is that if the basic beliefs are less than certain, what else props them up for justification? It seems hard to avoid admitting that there are supporting beliefs involved, but then the beliefs are not truly basic and we are back at square one trying to identify what justifies the supporting beliefs. The sceptic would see moderate foundationalism as unlikely to meet the strong sceptical challenge because of the lack of certainty of the foundations.

The distinctions between classic and moderate foundationalism are not confined to differences over the nature of the foundations of knowledge. The issue of transmission i.e. how to get from the foundations to the other beliefs or propositions that we hold, is also a debated topic. For the classical foundationalist, the transmission is by deduction only, for the moderate foundationalist, non-deductive inference mechanisms can be used. Both the classical and moderate camps within foundationalism attempt to provide a solution to a difficult problem: the problem of epistemic regress.

Epistemic Regress

Foundationalist theories, as well as other theories of epistemic justification, are concerned with the problem of epistemic regress. The problem is that we seem to possess epistemic chains of beliefs: beliefs that are based on knowledge of other beliefs. The possibilities for such an epistemic chain are:

1. The chain might be infinite.
2. The chain might be circular.
3. The chain might terminate with a belief that is not knowledge.
4. The chain terminates with a belief which is direct knowledge.

The foundationalist position is that not only are there non-inferential justified beliefs, but the inferential beliefs that are based on them can be traced back to the non-inferential beliefs. There are alternative theories to foundationalism used to counter the

epistemic regress problem,[8] but the advantage of a foundationalist approach, if true, is that there is a definite stopping point to epistemic regress with basic beliefs.

The classical foundationalist response to epistemic regress

Traditional classical foundationalism is commonly attributed to Descartes[9]. For the Cartesian style foundationalist the foundations must be indubitable, or self-evident. The implication being that if I can rationally doubt that p, my belief is not strong enough for p to be a strong foundation. This requirement for certainty appears as early as the *First Meditation* where Descartes states:

> 'Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false.'[10]

The classical foundationalist view is that the move from foundational propositions to the non-foundational superstructure of beliefs built upon them is by deduction only. The inferential beliefs have to be validly deduced from the non-inferential beliefs. It is not enough, by the classical account, that the inferential belief is somehow inductively supported by the foundational belief, as this would allow the inferential belief to be false even if foundational belief were true.

Descartes seems to have favoured the deductive, mathematical, approach to building knowledge. In the *Fifth Meditation* he states:

'For example, when I consider the nature of a triangle, it appears most evident to me, steeped as I am in the principles of geometry, that its three angles are equal to two right angles; and so long as I attend to the proof, I cannot but believe this to be true.'[11]

The key point about mathematical proofs is that the conclusions follow deductively from the premises. In the *Discourse on the Method* Descartes states:

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[8] Coherence and Reliabilism are examples of alternatives to the foundationalist view on epistemic regress.
[9] I will be challenging this position in chapter two.
[10] First Meditation: AT V11 18: CSM II 12.
[11] Fifth Meditation: AT V11 69-70: CSM II 48.

> 'Those long chains composed of very simple and easy reasonings, which geometers customarily use to arrive at their most difficult demonstrations, had given me occasion to suppose that all the things which can fall under human knowledge are interconnected in the same way. And I thought that, provided we refrain from accepting anything as true which is not, and always keep to the order required for deducing one thing from another, then there can be nothing too remote to be reached in the end or too well hidden to be discovered.'[12]

I think it is easy to see the appeal of a geometrical account of the accumulation of knowledge. If the foundations are certain and every move beyond the foundations can be traced deductively, then one can proceed without fear of error. The problem, however, is that the geometrical account seems to make knowledge too difficult to obtain. It is difficult to see how empirical knowledge or indeed anything outside of the mathematical or logical arena can satisfy the stringent demand of deduction being the only valid way to build systematic knowledge. So what does the weaker, moderate foundational position have to offer?

The moderate foundationalist response to epistemic regress

Audi presents a version of moderate foundationalism referred to as fallibilist foundationalism. This position can be stated as:

> 'For any S and any time, t, the structure of S's body of justified beliefs is at t, foundational. The justification of S's foundational beliefs is at least typically defeasible, the inferential transmission of justification need not be deductive, and non-foundationally justified beliefs need not derive all of their justification from foundational beliefs, they only need enough justification that they would remain justified (if other things being equal), if any other justification they have (maybe from coherence) were eliminated.' [13]

Audi's brand of foundationalism is fallibilist for several reasons: Foundational beliefs could turn out to be unjustified, false, or both. The superstructure beliefs may be only inductively and thereby fallibly justified by the foundational beliefs. A consequence of

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[12] *Discourse on the Method:* AT V1 19: CSM I 120.

[13] Robert Audi, 'Contemporary Foundationalism', in *Knowledge: Classical & Contemporary Readings,* 2nd edn, ed. by Louis Pojman, New York: Wadsworth, 1999., p.208.

this could be that the superstructure beliefs could be false, while the foundational beliefs are true. Audi's moderate foundationalism leaves the possibility of error or lack of justification, even with the foundational beliefs, open. He argues that foundationalism does not entail that a person's grounds for knowledge must be indefeasible. Perceptual grounds may be changed, and we can cease to know a proposition, not because it is false, but because we cease to be justified in believing it.

As Audi sees it, his theory provides a solution to the epistemic regress problem. It does not make knowledge impossible to have as the sceptic would hold, nor too easy to achieve. The theory also seems to support common sense in that the kinds of beliefs that it takes to be non-inferentially justified are those which on reflection, we think people are justified in holding, by the evidence of the senses or intuition. An example is the fact that we do not normally ask people for reasons why they think it is raining when they can see clearly from an unobstructed window and they say they can see the rain.

Audi also argues that moderate foundationalism leads to cognitive pluralism. Different people have different experiences and anyone's experiences can change over time, so it is not surprising that people differ from one another in their non-inferentially held beliefs. With inductive inference being part of the moderate foundationalist system we may be able to explain strange events with reference to the best explanation.

The difficulty with moderate foundationalism is that it may make knowledge too easy to obtain. If the foundations do not have to be certain, how else are they justified? Also, if the move from the foundational beliefs to the non-foundational beliefs is through other mechanisms than deduction, then the possibility of error becomes a significant threat. Apart from the classical versus moderate debate, there is also the issue of how far foundationalist justification needs to go. The next task is to look at this issue.

Simple Foundationalism and Iterative Foundationalism

The terms 'simple' and 'iterative' as applied to foundationalism come from Alston. He defines simple foundationalism as:

> 'For any epistemic subject, S, there are p's such that S is immediately justified in believing that p'. [14]

Iterative Foundationalism is defined as:

> 'For any epistemic subject, S, there are p's such that S is immediately justified in believing that p and S is immediately justified in believing that he is immediately justified in believing that p'. [15]

Essentially what Alston is proposing is that simple foundationalism just claims that there are immediately justified foundations, whereas Iterative foundationalism claims not only that there are such foundations, but also that these foundations themselves can be known immediately, without appeal to further propositions.

Simple foundationalism does not set out to *prove* the higher level claim that foundational beliefs are themselves immediately justified. The simple foundationalist account only goes as far as to say that it *may be possible* to find adequate reasons for the higher level belief that someone is immediately justified in believing a foundational belief.

Alston leaves open the possibility that a foundational belief may be immediately justified because of some epistemic principle[16] that sets out the conditions for that justification. These conditions do not include the believer having to have other justified beliefs. But for this strategy to work the epistemic principle has to be valid and the foundational belief has to somehow fall under the principle.

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[14]William P. Alston, 'Two Types of Foundationalism', *The Journal of Philosophy,* 73 (1976), 165-84 (p.171).

[15] Ibid, p.171.
[16] Ibid., p.183.

One of the main reasons for adopting foundationalism is the apparent impossibility of a belief being mediately justified without resting ultimately on immediately justified foundations. There is an intuitive appeal in the idea that there can be a definite starting point to knowledge. This is what foundationalism, if true, offers. On the other hand critics of foundationalism may argue that a dogmatism charge can be levelled against foundationalism as it involves a commitment to adopting beliefs without any reasons for regarding them as acceptable. The adoption of foundational beliefs may seem to be arbitrary. To avoid the perceived dogmatism of foundationalism, coherence and contextualist theories have been adopted: theories in which no belief is considered to be acceptable unless it is backed by other, reinforcing reasons. But whatever epistemic theory one subscribes to, it is normally a response to the challenge of scepticism.

Meeting the sceptical challenge

The extreme sceptic, it seems, can be answered with a reductio ad absurdum argument. Such a sceptic uses reason to 'know' that there cannot be knowledge, the stronger their assertion, the more they contradict their own position. But it is the more moderate sceptical position attacking limited targets of knowledge, which presents the greatest challenge. A successful response might be to demonstrate that we can have some knowledge.

Unger[17] argues that it is reasonable to hold a sceptical view, and he feels it is not necessary to prove that the sceptical thesis is true. Rather than dogmatically insisting on the truth of a sceptical thesis, which would be counter productive, Unger simply argues that there is no powerful reason to dismiss scepticism. There are some important points about scepticism that need to be clarified. It may not be necessary for a person to show that they are justified in their beliefs in order for those beliefs to be justified.

[17] Peter Unger, 'A Defense of Skepticism', in *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, ed. by George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, Cornell University Press, 1978., pp.317-36.

Some forms of scepticism demand to be shown justification. Another assumption is the idea that justification is always propositional, that it always involves inferences from premises. Some epistemic theories of justification dispute this.

Scepticism sometimes takes the form of a lack of confidence in our reasoning process itself. An example of this is the notion of historical conditioning where the argument is put in the following manner: how can I hope to evaluate your argument rationally when we are both just historically conditioned products of our culture? But this line of argumentation is self defeating because if rationality is rejected on the grounds of a claim about the human situation, then the assumption is that reason is capable of detecting this. If we cannot know empirical facts, then we cannot know the facts that are supposed to make us sceptical about empirical knowledge.

It is the scepticism regarding empirical justification that is of real concern. The attack here is that although we may have empirical beliefs, they are not justified by our own standards. Given that theories of epistemic justification must address scepticism, what exactly has the traditional epistemological project been about?

The traditional epistemological project

Timothy McGrew[18] neatly summarises the task that epistemology has traditionally set itself to examine: the starting point is to take commonsense beliefs, attempt to answer the sceptic regarding the possibility of knowledge and in answering the sceptic to work with a particular concept of justification.

In relation to justification, whether one subscribes to classic or moderate foundationalism, simple or iterative, an adequate theory of knowledge needs to

[18] Mc Grew, Timothy, J., *The Foundations of Knowledge*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, inc.,1995, p.2.

recognise the following:

1. Justification is internal[19]: to do with one's cognition.
2. Justification is truth-directed: If S is justified in believing that p, he has some reason to think that p is true, rather than convenient or useful for example.
3. Justifying reasons are not arbitrary: A justifier cannot simply be inserted.

In order to face up to the sceptical challenge, an epistemic justification theory will need to deal with the issue of certainty. I will now examine the key issues of epistemic certainty.

Certainty

As we have seen, the main distinction that is drawn between classical and moderate foundationalism centres on whether basic beliefs are certain. But at a more fundamental level, the connection between certainty and knowledge itself is a debated issue.

Wittgenstein held that 'knowledge' and 'certainty' do not belong to the same category[20] because knowing requires justification, but a proposition is certain only if it does not require justification. This view does not necessarily preclude strong foundationalism as it claims that basic propositions are certain and not themselves justified in the same manner as non-basic propositions. The crucial detail here of course is the admittedly problematic nature of how justification works. Unger's view is that 'a person knows something to be so only if he is certain of it.'[21] Unger's focus is on the meaning we attach to words like certain. A distinction is drawn between absolute and relative terms. An absolute term would be a word such as "flat".

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[19] I am summarising points made by McGrew in his *Foundations of Knowledge* (1995), p.8. Mc Grew does not mention though that there is vigorous epistemological debate concerning the issue of whether justification is internal or external. On the externalist side: Alvin Goldman offers a reliability account of knowledge, where the importance of the reliability of belief formation is stressed. But I will focus on the internalist account as it is more relevant to Descartes's project.

[20] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1969, paragraph 308, p.39e.

[21] Peter Unger, 'A Defense of Skepticism', in *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, ed. by George S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, Cornell University Press, 1978., p.318.

To say that something is flat is to say that it is absolutely or perfectly flat. A flat surface is not bumpy or curved. The terms "bumpy" or "curved" are relative terms, there can be grades: a table's surface could be described as "very bumpy" for example. Something is flat only if it is absolutely flat. But as Unger points out, the term 'absolutely' never gives us a standard for any of our relative terms: nothing which is bumpy is absolutely bumpy.

Unger argues that "certain" is an absolute term, while "confident", "doubtful", and "uncertain" are relative terms. Certainty has two important contexts: the 'impersonal' context, as expressed in the sentence: "It is certain that it is raining", the term "it" here has no apparent reference. The other context for "certain" is the 'personal' context[22]: "he is certain that it is raining".

For Unger, "certain" must mean the same thing in both contexts. This meaning is the complete absence of doubt. "It is certain that P" means "it is not at all doubtful that P". When applied to personal certainty: "he is certain that P", means "in his mind, it is not at all doubtful that P".

Another distinction is drawn between being "confident" and being "certain". If we take the sentence: "He is more certain that p than he is that q", we might take from this that he is either certain that p while not being certain of q, or else he is more nearly certain that p than he is that q. But if we amend the example to be: "He is more confident that p than he is that q", we cannot take from this he is either confident that p while not confident that q, or else he is more nearly confident that p than he is that q. The reason that we cannot take these options is because he may well already be confident of both things. As I mentioned earlier, Unger's goal is merely to show that scepticism is a

[22] Unger uses the terms 'impersonal contexts' and 'personal context', op.cit., pp.327-28.

reasonable position to adopt, not to definitively prove the sceptical thesis. The conclusion drawn is that we should at least suspend judgement, if not accept the sceptical position:

> 'That in the case of every human being, there is hardly anything, if anything at all, which the person knows to be so.'[23]

When Unger refers to two contexts of certainty: impersonal and personal, he is identifying two distinct types of certainty: propositional certainty and psychological certainty. I will now focus on these types of certainty.

Propositional and Psychological certainty

Propositional certainty is a claim about the status of a proposition itself. Psychological certainty is an attitude a person has in relation to a proposition. For example: the statement 'it is certain that p' is an example of propositional certainty, whereas the statement 'I am certain that p' is an example of psychological certainty.

Propositional certainty and psychological certainty are logically independent of each other. A person could have ideal grounds for believing a proposition P and have no basis for doubt, and yet still fail to believe P maybe out of shyness. For example: I could have a great singing voice and a good musical ear for picking up melodies, and this could be supported with evidence of people confirming this to me, but I could still fail to believe that I am a good singer because I am shy.

If the preceding analysis is correct, then propositional certainty is stronger than psychological certainty. The notion of psychological certainty plays an important role in the foundationalist debate in general, and to Descartes's epistemology in particular. I will be exploring this idea further in chapter two, but for now I think it is important to

[23] See Unger, op.cit.,p.336.

identify some of the additional epistemic terms that are used in the foundationalist debate.

Privileged Access

Alston uses the phrase 'privileged access'[24] to refer to the knowledge one has of one's own mental states. The idea is that on the privileged access thesis, one's own knowledge of one's own mental states is superior to anyone else's knowledge of those states. Alston also uses the phrase 'first-person-current-mental-state-belief (FPCMSB)'.[25] This will be crucial, as it is these first person reports that seem to form part of the foundations in Descartes's epistemic scheme. Some of the varieties of privileged access that Alston refers to are:

> 'Infallibility – FPCMSB's are in fact, never mistaken.
>
> Indubitability – No one, in fact, ever has grounds for doubting a FPCMSB.
>
> Incorrigibility – No one else ever, in fact, succeeds in showing that a FPCMSB is mistaken.'[26]

I will be investigating how Descartes works with some of these concepts in chapter two, but for now I think it is important to identify the kind of argument that is often used against foundationalism.

Bonjour dismisses strong foundationalism as being an untenable position.[27] To demonstrate this he uses the following argument[28]:

> Suppose person A has a basic (infallible), empirical belief B. This state is S_1.
>
> The content of belief B is the proposition that some empirical situation exists, this situation is S_2. S_1 and S_2 are separate states. (Bonjour notes that although

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[24] William Alston, 'Varieties of Privileged Access', in *Empirical Knowledge*, ed. by Roderick M. Chisholm and Robert J. Swartz, Prentice Hall, Inc., 1973, pp.376-410.
[25] Ibid.,p.402.
[26] Ibid.,p.407. I am quoting the terms that are most relevant to Descartes's project.
[27] It is important to note that Bonjour has since switched from being an opponent of foundationalism, to one of foundationalism's strongest advocates.
[28] Bonjour, Laurence, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, 1985, p.27.

beliefs can be about other beliefs, beliefs cannot be directly about themselves. Another way of stating this is that my belief that I believe that P is distinct from my belief that P.

It seems to be possible for S_1 to occur in the absence of S_2 (i.e. it seems possible to have a belief about an empirical situation and for the empirical situation not to exist). In this case belief B would be false, because one's belief is about an empirical situation that does not exist.

Bonjour feels that basic beliefs need only be adequately justified, nothing stronger is required. Bonjour's assault is directed at moderate foundationalism, but he does mention that there is a form of 'weak' foundationalism where the basic beliefs possess a very low degree of epistemic justification, a justification which in itself is insufficient to satisfy the adequate justification condition or to allow those beliefs be acceptable as justifiers of further beliefs. 'Weak' foundationalism becomes a kind of hybrid between moderate foundationalism and coherence theories.

Even if we set aside the issue of what brand of foundationalism has the best chance of adequately explaining how things are, the fundamental question still remains: where does the non-inferential justification for basic empirical beliefs come from? What would it take to make it reasonable to accept a belief as basic and to use it to justify other beliefs? Bonjour[29] identifies one of the foundationalist responses to that question as consisting of the following:

An empirical belief B has a certain feature.

Beliefs that have this feature are highly likely to be true.

Therefore belief B is highly likely to be true.

[29] I am presenting this in a slightly modified version, see Bonjour, op.cit., p.31.

It does not seem possible that both premises could be justified on an a priori basis because belief B is an empirical belief. The conclusion Bonjour draws is that at least one of the two premises of the justifying argument will be empirical.

The other requirement seems to be that the person be in cognitive possession of the justification. If this is not the case, he has no reason for thinking that the belief is true. By combining the various strands of his argument together Bonjour presents the following anti-foundationalist argument:

(1) 'There are basic, empirical beliefs which are justified and their justification does not depend on any further empirical beliefs.

(2) For a belief to be justified there needs to be a reason why it is likely to be true.

(3) For a belief to be justified for a particular person, requires that this person be in cognitive possession of such a reason.

(4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe with justification the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.

(5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely a priori; at least one of the premises must be empirical.

Therefore the justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows therefore that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.' [30]

A key question is: how has foundationalism responded to the kind of detailed attack that Bonjour makes? A major response has been by appeal to what has become known as the doctrine of the given.

The Doctrine of the Given

A response to the anti-foundationalist argument is to use what is empirically given in experience as a solution to the epistemic regress problem. The central theme of the doctrine of the given is that the justification of basic empirical beliefs is not by appeal to

[30] I quote this argument in full as it will provide a focus for subsequent arguments. See Bonjour op.cit., p.32.

other beliefs but to states of immediate awareness or intuition. These states have the power to confer justification without themselves requiring justification.

The notion involves what Bonjour calls a 'confrontation'[31] where an object is simply given or 'thrust' upon the mind. The mind is described as an 'immaterial eye' and the immediately experienced object is open to the gaze of the eye. In analysing accounts offered by supporters of the 'given' theory, such as Schlick[32] and Quinton[33], Bonjour identifies the issue that they must face: if intuitions or direct awareness are cognitive or judgmental in any way, they may be able to provide justification for other cognitive states but they are in need of justification themselves. If on the other hand they are not cognitive or judgmental in nature, then although they might not need justification themselves, they will not be capable of conferring justification. This is why for Bonjour, the given is a myth.[34]

Lewis refers to the 'expressive language'[35] used to describe experiences. But the strategy of Bonjour is to separate the experience from the grasping of the experience. Even if it is argued that elements of experience are 'self-apprehending'[36], Bonjour will still reply with the question: is the apprehension cognitive or non-cognitive, judgmental or non-judgmental? If the apprehension is non-cognitive and non-judgmental then it cannot provide justification for a basic belief.

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[31] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.60.
[32] Moritz Schlick, 'The Foundation of Knowledge', in *Empirical Knowledge*, ed. by Roderick M. Chisholm and Robert J. Swartz, Prentice Hall, 1973, pp. 413-30.
[33] Anthony Quinton, 'The Foundations of Knowledge', in *Empirical Knowledge*, ed. by Roderick M. Chisholm and Robert J. Swartz, Prentice Hall, 1973, pp. 542-70.
[34] It is interesting to note that Bonjour's position now is that the given is not a myth! I will return to this issue in chapter four of my thesis.
[35] Lewis, C.I., *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, La Salle, III.: Open Court, 1946, p. 179.
[36] Bonjour uses this phrase on page 75 of his book: *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (1985).

'Exemplary' Foundationalism

As I mentioned previously, the two key questions that face foundationalism are: what can be taken to be foundational? And even if foundations can be established, what is the bridging principle that allows us to get from the foundations to the mediate beliefs that are connected to those foundations? The difficulty with answering the second question is that on most accounts it seems impossible to avoid the infinite regress argument in attempting to justify any beliefs that we may hold. Perhaps we need to create a new category of 'Exemplary'[37] foundationalism that uses a principle that can be used as a blueprint or template for similar experiences: we may have a way of justifying beliefs by reference to this standard.

Perhaps we could use a method that is often used in the legal arena, where a test case provides the reference or standard against which other cases can be judged. The idea would be that reference could be made to this principle, which would be outside of any deductive analysis, thereby avoiding the epistemic regress problem. This new 'Exemplary Foundationalism' as we shall discover, has interesting implications when applied to Descartes's epistemological project in the *Meditations*.

Conclusion

The two questions that any foundationalist theory must address are: can there be foundations to our knowledge that do not depend on any other beliefs or propositions for justification? Secondly, even if there are such foundations, how do we build the rest of our knowledge upon those foundations? In an attempt to answer these questions, two main divisions are noticeable within the foundationalist movement, there are those who advocate strong, classical foundationalism with it's insistence that the foundations are

[37] Michelle Beyssade uses the term 'exemplary truth' in referring to the cogito in her article: 'The cogito: Privileged truth or Exemplary Truth?', in *Essays on the Philosophy and Science of René Descartes*, ed. by Stephen Voss, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.31-9.

certain, beyond doubt, infallible. There are also the proponents of the weaker, moderate foundationalism which advocates that the foundations are something less than certain.

The issue that all brands of foundationalism must confront is the epistemic regress problem. The epistemological project is an attempt to answer the sceptic's claim that we cannot have real knowledge. Most of the emphasis in analysing foundationalism seems to be targeted on the nature of the foundations. The concept of the 'given' element of experience developed out of the need to provide self-justifying foundations. But as I have suggested, it is in relation to the other question of how to bridge the gap between the foundations of our knowledge and the beliefs or propositions that are somehow connected to the foundations, that our attention should now be drawn. This is the task that exemplary foundationalism sets itself. In this chapter I wanted to identify the foundationalist epistemological framework. The next task is to investigate how this framework can be applied to Descartes's epistemological project in the *Meditations*.

Chapter Two: Descartes's Epistemological Project

In this chapter I will examine some key issues of Descartes's epistemology in the *Meditations* to determine whether his project is foundationalist in nature, and if it is what kind of foundationalism is involved. To accomplish this task I will look at Descartes's general approach, examine the role of scepticism, establish what Descartes seems to take as foundational and identify how he moves beyond the basics. I will attempt to show that although Descartes is normally portrayed as a strong, classical foundationalist, it may be appropriate to revise this view.

Descartes's Task

Descartes's quest in the *Meditations* is the timeless quest of the philosopher: the search for truth. In the *First Meditation* the goal of his project is identified: to 'establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last'.[1] The method Descartes employs is to 'demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations.'[2] Descartes wants to establish epistemological foundations that are secure and upon which additional knowledge can be built up.

The seeds of Descartes's method for building knowledge emerge in his writing of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* where in Rule Five he states:

> 'The whole method consists entirely in the ordering and arranging of the objects on which we must concentrate our mind's eye if we are to discover some truth. We shall be following this method exactly if we first reduce complicated and obscure propositions step by step by simpler ones, and then, starting with the intuition of the simplest ones of all, try to ascend through the same steps to knowledge of all the rest.'[3]

It is the emergence of this initial foundational approach that is more fully developed in the *Meditations*. The foundational stance that Descartes seems to adopt is psychological.

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[1] First Meditation: AT V11 17: CSM II 12.
[2] First Meditation: AT V11 17: CSM II 12.
[3] Rules for the Direction of the Mind: AT X 379: CSM I 20.

If we apply modern classifications to Descartes, then he is part of what Triplett calls 'Psychological foundationalism'.[4] This is the view that basic propositions are propositions about one's current mental states. In the *Second Meditation* the following observation is noted:

> 'I certainly seem to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.'[5]

The direction that Descartes's enquiry takes is to start from within, the psychological position, and to eventually move outwards to examine the external. It is not until the *Fifth and Sixth Meditation* that a detailed account of the existence and essence of material objects is provided.

At the beginning of the *Fifth Meditation,* Descartes informs the reader of his approach:

> 'But before I inquire whether any such things exist outside me, I must consider the ideas of these things, in so far as they exist in my thought, and see which of them are distinct, and which confused.'[6]

On Descartes's account the source of knowledge ultimately involves ideas, and the source of ideas is in the mind of the person who has them. Having identified the psychological approach that Descartes takes, the next question that arises is what is the starting point in the search for foundations of knowledge? To establish this starting point an issue that must be addressed is scepticism.

Scepticism in Descartes's system

As I mentioned in chapter one[7], part of the traditional epistemological project is to attempt to answer the sceptic regarding the possibility of knowledge possession.

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[4] Timm Triplett, 'Recent Work On Foundationalism', *American Philosophical Quarterly,* 27 (1990), 93-116 (p.97).
[5] Second Meditation: AT V11 29: CSM II 19.
[6] Fifth Meditation: AT V11 63: CSM II 44.
[7] See chapter one, page 13.

Descartes uses scepticism as a tool to get rid of uncertainty and replace it with knowledge. As Williams[8] observes, there are three levels of doubt employed by Descartes in the *Meditations*:

1. Illusions of the senses
2. Phenomenon of dreaming
3. Malicious demon.

The first level of doubt: the illusions of the senses, is the one that is real to our everyday experiences. It is not unreasonable to take the data from our sense experience as being foundational, unproblematic. But as Descartes discovers, the senses cannot be trusted. In the *First Meditation* Descartes states:

> 'Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.'[9]

An example of the illusory capability of the senses is provided in the *Sixth Meditation*:

> 'Sometimes towers which had looked round from a distance appeared square from close up; and enormous statues standing on their pediments did not seem large when observed from the ground. In these and countless other such cases, I found that the judgements of the external senses were mistaken.'[10]

Even the intensity of our experiences does not seem to contribute to their certainty. It is possible to have vivid and real sensory experiences, and yet we can be dreaming. Although the possibility of dreams leading us into error because of their convincing reality is ultimately dismissed by Descartes because of the lack of continuity that we experience while dreaming, the phenomenon of dreaming is still a strong attack on sensory knowledge foundations. As Descartes observes in the *First Meditation*:

> 'How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this

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[8] Bernard Williams, 'Descartes's use of Scepticism', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Vol.1, Routledge, 1991, pp.475-76.
[9] First Meditation: AT V11 18: CSM II 12.
[10] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 76: CSM II 53.

> would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.[11]

The strongest form of sceptical attack is the malicious demon or deceiving God hypothesis. Even the relative security of a priori knowledge claims could be threatened. Mathematical truths which are not subject to the same doubts as sensory experiences could be subjected to this form of sceptical attack:

> 'What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made.'[12]

Even when the existence of a deceitful God is questioned, the possibility of a malicious demon still remains:

> 'I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.'[13]

Descartes uses the malicious demon as a thought experiment to take scepticism to the extreme: he calls it a 'slight...metaphysical'[14] doubt. The counter attack to the malicious demon is by appeal to the existence of a benevolent God. Taken together, the sceptical challenges cast doubt on all of the kinds of propositions that could function as foundations for knowledge. External world claims of both the distant (illusions) and close (dreams) types can be doubted, and even a priori knowledge claims are threatened by the possibility of a malicious demon or deceiving God form of attack. The question

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[11] First Meditation: AT V11 19: CSM II 13.
[12] First Meditation: AT V11 21: CSM II 14.
[13] First Meditation: AT V11 22: CSM II 15.
[14] Third Meditation: AT V11 36: CSM II 25.

is: where else can Descartes turn in search of certain foundations? The answer to this question is: inward, it is a psychological turn that leads Descartes to the first certainty: the Cogito and to the first person mental state reports that seem to form the basis of Descartes's epistemology.

The foundational elements in Descartes's epistemology

Descartes takes direct, intuitive awareness of his own existence to be foundational. In the *Second Meditation* he states:

> 'I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind'.[15]

This statement is foundational as it does not depend on any other proposition for justification. When Descartes goes further to probe what is meant by 'I' he discovers that he is a thinking thing, this is what the essence of 'I' is. The next question that Descartes sets out to answer is: what is meant by thinking? A list of cognitive powers is given in response to that question:

> 'But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions'.[16]

Thinking, on the Cartesian account, is at the core of our sensory experiences. An example of this is in the *Second Meditation* where Descartes comments:

> 'I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking'.[17]

There is a class of ideas that seem to be innate within us, ideas that we do not necessarily have any empirical experience of. Mathematical truths, for example are within this a priori category. In the *First Meditation* Descartes comments:

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[15] Second Meditation: AT V11 25: CSM II 17.
[16] Second Meditation: AT V11 28: CSM II 19.
[17] Second Meditation : AT V11 29: CSM II 19

> 'disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.'[18]

A central theme alluded to in the above passage is the certainty of geometric principles, irrespective of whether the objects that those principles refer to, exist or not. Descartes expands this theme more explicitly in his references to the nature of triangular shapes. In the *Fifth Meditation* we have the following:

> 'When, for example, I imagine a triangle, even if perhaps no such figure exists, or has ever existed, anywhere outside my thought, there is still a determinate nature, or essence, or form of the triangle which is immutable and eternal, and not invented by me or dependent on my mind.'[19]

The ideas of shape, number and motion seem to be innate in that when we discover them it is not as if we are learning something new, we remember what we knew before. Mathematical shapes are not necessarily experienced through the senses, indeed some mathematical figures are never encountered through sense experience. In his reply to Gassendi, Descartes rejects the idea that mathematical figures come to our mind via the senses, in fact Descartes suggests that the mind imposes structure on what is observed through sense experience:

> 'Geometrical figures are composed for the most part of straight lines; yet no part of a line that was really straight could ever affect our senses, since when we examine through a magnifying glass those lines which appear most straight we find they are quite irregular and always form wavy curves. Hence when in our childhood we first happened to see a triangular figure drawn on paper, it cannot have been this figure that showed us how we should conceive of the true triangle studied by geometers, since the true triangle is contained in the figure only in the way in which a statue of Mercury is contained in a rough block of wood. But since the idea of the true triangle was already in us, and could be conceived by our mind more easily than the more composite figure of the triangle drawn on paper, when we saw the composite figure we did not apprehend the figure we

[18] First Meditation: AT V11 21: CSM II 14.
[19] Fifth Meditation: AT V11 64: CSM II 44-45.

> saw, but rather the true triangle.....Thus we would not recognise the geometrical triangle from the diagram on the paper unless our mind already possessed the idea of it from some other source.'[20]

As Van De Pitte notes about the reply to Gassendi:

> 'The figure of Mercury is only there if the skill of an artist is brought to bear on the wood to make it appear; and the idea of a triangle is only there if the powers of the mind are employed to formulate it'.[21]

Having identified the propositions that are foundational in Descartes's system, a question that can be asked is: what kind of foundationalism does this imply? Given the certainty of the Cogito and the apparent certainty of first person current mental state reports that Descartes subscribes to, the basic propositions seem to fit into a strong, classical foundationalist structure. The advantage of such a classical foundationalist stance is that if it is successful, the sceptic can be answered because the foundations would not require justification from other propositions as they would be self-evident and immediately justified.

The strong classical foundationalist position avoids the difficulty that the weaker, moderate foundationalist theory faces, that if the basic beliefs are less than certain, what else supports them for justification? It would be useful to take a closer look now at the foundations, the Cogito in particular, to see if it provides the secure foundation Descartes needs.

The Cogito

The Cogito is the first truth that Descartes discovers in the *Meditations*. In the *Second Meditation* Descartes states:

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[20] Replies to Objections V: AT V11 382: CSM 262.
[21] Frederick P. Van De Pitte, 'Descartes's Innate Ideas', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments,* vol.1, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Routledge, 1991, p.143.

> 'this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.'[22]

The Cogito is indubitable: doubting it confirms its truth. Other propositions do not have the same status as the Cogito. Ayer[23] gives the example of doubting that the battle of Waterloo was fought in 1815 and doubting whether two plus two equals four. In both cases the proposition being doubted is true. In the case of two plus two equalling four, the proposition is necessarily true. But in neither case does the truth of the proposition that is doubted follow from the truth of the proposition that I doubt it. In other words, it is not because I doubt it that its truth is established.

The truth of the proposition that I am thinking does follow from the truth of the proposition that I am doubting that I think, and so does the truth of the proposition that I exist. What makes the Cogito indubitable is that its truth follows from the fact that it is doubted, and the same applies to 'I exist' or 'sum'.

Ayer asks the question: can 'I am not thinking' ever be true. Yes, if I am unconscious I am not thinking, If I do not exist, I am not thinking. The uniqueness of the Cogito is that the denial of it by an individual has to be false. But it is not formally self-contradictory. What makes it appear self-contradictory is the use of the personal pronoun 'I'. If this pronoun is replaced with a name or description, if Descartes had stated that Descartes is not thinking, what he stated would have been false, by his very act of stating it, but the proposition 'Descartes is not thinking' is not self-contradictory. As an indexical word, 'I' can be understood as pointing to someone who is thinking. In this sense, the proposition 'I am not thinking therefore I do not exist' cannot state a truth. This inability to state a truth is not because it is self-contradictory, it is because the subject

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[22] Second Meditation: AT V11 25: CSM II 17.
[23] Sir Alfred J. Ayer, 'Cogito Ergo Sum', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Vol. II, Routledge, 1991, p.220.

word 'I' points to something which according to the predicate does not exist. An important point though is, it is a contingent rather than a necessary fact that there is something for the indexical 'I' to refer to, my existence is not necessary.

The Cogito may be unique, but what is its purpose? It would seem strange to merely want to prove one's existence. Frankfurt[24] comments that Descartes is less concerned with proving his existence, than with establishing that his existence is certain or indubitable. The relevant passage in this regard is the following from the *Second Meditation*:

> 'In that case am not I, at least something? But I have just said that I have no senses and no body. This is the sticking point: what follows from this? Am not I so bound up with a body and with senses that I cannot exist without them? But I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it not follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.'[25]

Descartes does regard his existence as something inferred. Frankfurt's point is that the purpose of the inference is not to prove that his existence is true. I think Frankfurt's interpretation goes too far, after all, the last line in the passage quoted mentions truth. It is probably more accurate to state that Descartes is not *merely* proving his existence, he wants to establish that the proposition that he exists is *certain* or indubitable as well as being true.

The first doubt that Descartes uses to question the certainty of his existence is that he does not have senses or a body. At this point, in the *Second Meditation* the result is undecided. Descartes, at this stage, only thinks of himself as something, he is unable to

[24] Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Descartes's Discussion of his Existence in the Second Meditation', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J. D. Moyal, Vol. II, Routledge, 1991, pp.185-206.
[25] Second Meditation: AT V11 25: CSM II 16-17.

work out the logical relation between the proposition that he exists and the possibility that he has no body or senses.

The next step that Descartes takes is to remember that he was persuaded from the *First Meditation* that maybe there are no real things at all: does this mean he does not exist? Descartes answers this question with an emphatic no. His view is that if he convinced himself of something then he certainly existed.

Even if we accept the idea that Descartes's goal is to establish the certainty of his own existence, why does he use thinking to infer his existence? This is a question that Gassendi put to Descartes:

> 'You could have made the same inference from any one of your other actions, since it is known by the natural light that whatever acts exists.'[26]

Descartes, in his reply, denies that other actions such as walking, would suffice to infer the same degree of certainty as thinking. Using thinking instead of walking is superior because walking does not have the metaphysical certitude that characterises the Cogito. 'I walk, therefore I exist' would be unsatisfactory because the motion of the body sometimes does not exist, as in dreams where I may appear to walk. The superiority of the Cogito is that we can be certain of it, whereas the dream argument undermines the certainty of inferring existence from walking. But even if the Cogito is unique, what epistemic status does it have?

The Epistemic Status of the Cogito

Descartes's intention is for the Cogito to deliver both truth and certainty. But this role is not as straightforward as it may initially appear. The truth of the proposition 'I am, I exist' is confirmed by the act of thinking about it. The Cogito seems to be the source of the criterion for truth and certainty: clarity and distinctness. A key point is that clarity

[26] Replies to Objections V: AT V11 259: CSM 180.

and distinctness is an intrinsic feature of the Cogito, it is not separate from it. As Descartes states in the *Third Meditation*:

> 'In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting.....So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.[27]

The difficulty is that one detects a cautious rather than a confident revealing of clarity and distinctness as the criterion for truth and certainty[28]. Why can Descartes only "seem" to be able to formulate the clarity and distinctness rule? The answer is that even clear and distinct perceptions can still be subject to doubt when the deceiving God or malicious demon hypotheses are applied to them. As Descartes comments only a couple of paragraphs after revealing the criterion for truth and certainty:

> 'But what about when I was considering something very simple and straightforward in arithmetic or geometry, for example that two and three added together make five, and so on?....perhaps some God could have given me a nature such that I was deceived even in matters which seemed most evident.'[29]

Even though this is only what Descartes refers to as a 'slight...metaphysical'[30] doubt it still drives him to attempt to prove the existence of a benevolent God to securely establish clarity and distinctness as the criterion for truth and certainty.

Aside from that 'slight...metaphysical' doubt, Descartes's project looks promising at this stage. The first foundational truth, the Cogito, has been identified. The Cogito seems to be unassailable because the very act of doubting it confirms its truth. The truth of the Cogito also seems to be something that is clearly and distinctly perceived. So the Cogito reveals the criterion for truth and certainty: that whatever is as clearly and distinctly perceived as the Cogito is true. The key question now is: how can we proceed

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[27] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.
[28] I am presenting here a summary of some observations made by Harry McCauley in his paper: 'Circling Descartes' in *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, 2 (2004), 70-83 (pp.71-73).
[29] Third Meditation: AT V11 35-36: CSM II 25.
[30] Third Meditation: AT V11 36: CSM II 25.

beyond the epistemic security of the Cogito?

Moving beyond the Cogito

The status of the basic propositions is only one aspect of the foundationalist theory, the other aspect is the issue of how to get beyond the basic propositions. The classical foundationalist view is that deduction is the only valid method of transmission from basic to non-basic propositions. But does Descartes confine himself exclusively to deductive reasoning in the *Meditations*? The first step in answering this question is to make some general observations about Descartes's use of reason.

Reason

Descartes holds the view that we cannot doubt the truth of what we intuit while we are perceiving clearly and distinctly. An example of this is in the *Third Meditation*:

> 'Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light – for example from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on – cannot in any way be open to doubt.'[31]

While the intuition lasts, we are irresistibly drawn to what is intuited, but doubt may arise at other times, if God's existence is not known. In a reply to Bourdin Descartes states:

> 'Again, until we know that God exists, we have reason to doubt everything (i.e. everything such that we do not have a clear and distinct perception of it before our minds, as I have often explained).'[32]

Descartes view is that if we know that God exists, we can accept the fact that something that was once intuited, conclusively establishes its truth. The recollection is sufficient to establish the truth of what we remember intuiting. If God's existence is not known, we must accept that what we remember intuiting may be false, despite the fact that we clearly and distinctly perceived it and at that time could not doubt it.

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[31] Third Meditation: AT V11 38: CSM II 27.
[32] Replies to Objections VII: AT V11 546: CSM 373.

The same doubts apply to composite mathematical knowledge. Descartes, referring to the geometrical principles of triangles states:

> 'But as soon as I turn my mind's eye away from the proof, then in spite of still remembering that I perceived it very clearly, I can easily fall into doubt about its truth, if I am unaware of God. For I can convince myself that I have a natural disposition to go wrong from time to time in matters which I think I perceive as evidently as can be.'[33]

In the preceding passage we can see that the finding of a proof indubitable and perceiving it with the greatest certainty is not by itself sufficient for truth. So long as we do not know God's existence, our certainty could be the work of a malicious deceiver whose power forces us to be drawn irresistibly towards error. It is Descartes's determination to defeat even the ultimate sceptical challenge of the deceiving God and malicious demon hypotheses, a challenge that even the sceptics themselves did not think of, that leads Descartes into a potential minefield of circular argumentation.

Circularity in Descartes's reasoning

By the early part of the *Third Meditation* several things have been established: the Cogito, which is the first certain truth, and the criterion for establishing truth and certainty, clarity and distinctness. Clarity and distinctness seems to be an intrinsic feature of the Cogito. One would imagine that from the solid foundational truth of the Cogito, combined with the method of establishing truth: clarity and distinctness, Descartes now has the tools that he needs to build up knowledge. As McCauley comments:

> 'we would confidently have expected that Descartes would now get down to the exciting business of rebuilding the edifice of knowledge on secure foundations, and that he would henceforth simply deploy his C+D criterion in order to make substantial philosophical progress. The sceptic had been defeated, the first certainty had been found, the criterion of truth and certainty had been revealed.'[34]

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[33] Fifth Meditation: AT V11 70: CSM II 48.
[34] Harry McCauley, 'Circling Descartes', in *Maynooth Philosophical Papers*, 2 (2004), 70-83 (p.71).

The problem is that Descartes did not proceed directly to build knowledge from the secure foundation of the Cogito. Perhaps haunted by the sceptical challenges that he had raised in the *First Meditation*, Descartes felt the clarity and distinctness rule had to be vindicated by proving the existence of a benevolent God who would not deceive us. The existence of a benevolent God who is not a deceiver is necessary to counter the claim that we could have been created by God in such a way that even our clear and distinct perceptions are untrue; we could be deceived into thinking that they are true. Unfortunately, the attempt to prove God's existence opens up a charge of circularity in Descartes's reasoning. Arnauld is concerned with circularity in Descartes's method when he writes:

> 'I have one further worry, namely how the author avoids reasoning in a circle when he says that we are sure that what we clearly and distinctly perceive is true only because God exists. But we can be sure that God exists only because we clearly and distinctly perceive this. Hence, before we can be sure that God exists, we ought to be able to be sure that whatever we perceive clearly and evidently is true.'[35]

As a response to the charge of circularity Descartes suggests that there are two different kinds of clear and distinct perceptions. In reply to Arnauld, Descartes states that he 'made a distinction between what we in fact perceive clearly and what we remember having perceived clearly on a previous occasion.'[36] So the first kind of clear and distinct perception applies to situations when we are paying direct attention to whatever is allegedly being clearly and distinctly perceived.

The second kind of clear and distinct perception refers to situations where we are remembering what was clearly and distinctly perceived in the past, but we are no longer paying direct attention to it. Descartes's view is that clear and distinct perceptions, as we are currently having them, do not require God's existence to support them. It is only

[35] Replies to Objections IV: AT V11 214: CSM 150.
[36] Replies to Objections IV: ATVII 246: CSM II 171.

clear and distinct perceptions that are recalled that require divine support. So if Descartes's argument for the proof of the existence of God in the *Third Meditation* only relies on clear and distinct perceptions that are being directly attended to then perhaps the circularity charge can be avoided. As McCauley[37] points out though: the problem is that in arguing for the existence of God, Descartes seems to depend on both current clear and distinct perception and clear and distinct perceptions that he is not directly attending to. If this is the case, then the circle has not been broken.

Even if we set aside the circular argumentation charge, can we rely on reason itself? Frankfurt raises a difficulty concerning Descartes's reasoning[38]: Given that the correct use of reason seems to lead to the conclusion that reason is reliable because of the existence of a veracious God, may it not also lead to the conclusion that there is an omnipotent demon whose existence renders reason unreliable? Both of these conclusions together are incompatible, if the proper use of reason establishes both of them, then reason is unreliable. Descartes cannot take for granted that this is not the case.

In response to Frankfurt's claim, I am not so sure that one can talk of an omnipotent demon in the same way that Descartes refers to God being omnipotent. For Descartes, God is infinite perfection, lacking nothing. The omnipotent demon would lack goodness, and if goodness were outside of the demon's power, then the demon would not be truly omnipotent.

In the *Second Meditation* Descartes is searching for a secure starting point of knowledge: 'this proposition, I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward

[37] See McCauley's 'Circling Descartes' especially pages 78-79 for analysis of this issue.
[38] Harry G. Frankfurt, 'Descartes's Validation of Reason', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Vol I, Routledge, 1991, pp.475-76. This comment is endnote no. 22 on page 275.

by me or conceived in my mind.'[39] Descartes reaches this point before he proves the existence of God, in spite of the presence of the malicious demon that employs 'all his energies in order to deceive me.'[40]

If the malicious demon hypothesis applied to all exercise of reason, then it is a meaningless hypothesis, because it cannot be tested as we would have to use reason to test it. Also the hypothesis could not be rejected. Descartes believed that he could reject the malicious demon hypothesis. The rejection involves the certainty of the Cogito itself and proving from the Cogito the existence of a veracious God. We can only arrive at a veracious God through the use of reason. If every use of reason cannot be trusted, then the proof of the existence of a veracious God cannot be trusted either.

I think that it is reasonable to suggest that Descartes could have avoided getting into a position where he left himself open to the charge of circular argumentation. After all, it was only to silence the 'slight...metaphysical'[41] doubt that Descartes embarked on his perilous proof of God's existence. It seems to me that Descartes's project still has a lot to offer with the foundational truth of the Cogito and the clarity and distinctness rule as a method for building knowledge. So perhaps reason as a process remains intact, but the question then becomes: where does the use of reason lead us? I will now address this issue.

Reason as a bridge to the external world

Descartes's analysis of the piece of wax has been generally interpreted as demonstrating that the mind is better known than the body and also that the primary quality of material bodies is their extension in space. When the wax melts, every sensory quality that it had disappears, and yet we would still say that the same wax remains. The only

[39] First Meditation: AT V11 18: CSM II 12.
[40] First Meditation: AT V11 22: CSM II 15.
[41] Third Meditation: AT V11 36: CSM II 25.

characteristic that remains unchanged is that of the wax being an extended body. However, Ben Mijuskovic[42] offers an interesting alternative explanation of the wax passage in the *Second Meditation*. Mijuskovic claims that Descartes is attempting to show that the human mind has a power to make inferences and judgments to arrive at truths indirectly or mediately, as opposed to directly or immediately which is intuition. This then enables Descartes to argue to the existence of an external world.

Descartes's use of the example of the wax shows that we do not know an object by its changing, secondary qualities, but through a grasp of its quality of extension, a property which is conceived intellectually, in the understanding. What Mijuskovic objects to is the notion that Descartes's aim in the *Second Meditation* is to show that the essential nature of matter is extension. The order of events in the *Meditations* is used by Mijuskovic to lend credence to his theory. Descartes cannot prove the existence of the external world until he has first demonstrated the existence and goodness of God. This is because the malicious demon could just as easily deceive him about the nature of material bodies as he could about mathematical truths. But the existence of God is not proven until the *Third Meditation*. On this basis, it would not make sense to attempt to prove that the essence of material bodies is extension in the *Second Meditation*.

Apart from the wax passage, Mijuskovic also refers to the 'hats and coats' example in the *Second Meditation* as additional evidence to support his view. A comparison between the wax and 'hats and coats' example yields the following: Descartes knows the wax by 'scrutiny of the mind alone'[43]. In the same way, Descartes knows that he sees men, not merely machines covered with hats and coats, through mental focus:

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[42] Ben Mijuskovic, 'Descartes's Bridge to the External World: The Piece of Wax', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Vol. II, Routledge, 1991, pp.312-28.
[43] Second Meditation: AT V11 32: CSM II 21.

> 'I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind.'[44]

If Descartes's purpose in the *Second Meditation* was to show that the essence of material bodies is extension, then on that basis, wax and men would be indistinguishable. The wax passage and the men on the street can be viewed as indicating the difference between direct, immediate knowledge and indirect inference.

On this view, Descartes is concerned to show that the mind has an innate power of inference, of going beyond what is directly presented to consciousness. In this sense, it is the power of inference in the mind that forms a bridge to the external world. This enables Descartes to escape the charge of solipsism. If God, in his goodness, has given man a faculty of inference, he must have given it for a reason, this reason can only be to use it in knowing the external world. The *Fifth Meditation* begins with the question of the essence or nature of material things, while it is not until the *Sixth Mediation* that their independent existence arises. If this interpretation is correct, then it would seem to be premature for Descartes to take up the problem of extension of material bodies, before all of the implications of the idea of the self, God and the faculties of the mind are worked out. At the stage of the *Second Meditation* the deceiving power of a malicious demon is still a possibility. If the mind is to make inferences, it seems to depend on a key notion: the clarity and distinctness of what it perceives. The next task is to examine clarity and distinctness.

Clarity and Distinctness

Descartes's theory of sense perception is what Ashworth calls a 'representative theory'[45] in which the ideas are intermediary between the mind and what is external to

[44] Second Meditation: AT V11 32: CSM II 21.
[45] E.J. Ashworth, 'Descartes' Theory of Clear and Distinct Ideas', in *Cartesian Studies,* ed. by R.J. Butler, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1972, pp.89-105.

it. The first certain truth: 'I think, I exist' is the foundation stone, when Descartes examines this statement he finds that he has a clear and distinct perception of it. It is from this starting point that Descartes is eventually able to establish the general rule:

'Whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'[46]

The only possible reason to doubt this clarity and distinctness rule is if we, as humans, were created in such a way that our clear and distinct perceptions were false. The existence of God dispels this doubt. As Ashworth notes, Descartes, in using the word 'idea' rather than 'concept' to discuss cognition, breaks away from the scholastic tradition. In classic scholastic terms, concepts had sense perceptions as their origin. There was a relationship between concepts and external objects. Descartes wanted to examine the mind and ideas in isolation, without bringing any assumptions about the external world to the analysis. The meaning of 'idea' for Descartes has a broad application. It is taken to be anything the mind perceives, 'perceive' referring to any cognitive activity: sensing, imagining, and conceiving.

Is there a procedure for ensuring the clarity and distinctness of perception? Humber[47] believes there is. In order to perceive clearly, we should attend to things themselves, thoughts then spring to mind, essences and natures become apparent. But to perceive clearly is not necessarily to perceive distinctly. The will is capable of acting independently and the will may judge that clearly perceived essences are related in ways not perceived by the intellect.

It may initially appear that Descartes's method for determining clarity and distinctness is subjective, but this may not be the case. Humber gives the example of summing up a

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[46] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.
[47] James M. Humber, 'Recognising Clear and Distinct Perceptions', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments,* ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, vol.1, Routledge, 1991, pp.204-21.

column of numbers on a piece of paper:[48] It is possible to not pay enough attention and to misread the numbers and come up with an incorrect total. This mistake is corrected by going back over the numbers, with due care. Similarly, Descartes knows that clear and distinct perceptions are assured when he is attentive and refuses to affirm that essences are related when his understanding does not perceive a connection between those essences.

So it seems that Descartes's method of clarity and distinctness is as objective as the method we use to sum up numbers, but even a person who has an objective method for ensuring truth, does not have a guarantee that he will never make a mistake.

Building upon the foundations

Any standard interpretation of Descartes's project in the *Meditations* has assumed that strict deduction is the only secure way of establishing any further knowledge beyond the foundations. Indeed, this has resulted in Descartes's epistemology being classified as strong classical foundationalism. Robert Audi characterises Descartes's epistemology in the following way:

> 'Cartesian foundationalism is widely taken to imply (as for present purposes I shall assume it does) the following three principles: that (i) only beliefs (or other cognitions) that, owing to, say, their basis in the clarity and distinctness of their propositional contents, achieve epistemic certainty are admissible for the foundational level – call this axiomatism about foundations; (ii) only deductive inferences can transmit justification to superstructure elements – call this deductivism about transmission; and (iii) if one has these strong foundations, one can (or even does) know that one has the relevant kind of certainty (whatever that is) – call this second-order foundationalism. This triad yields a very strong view; but, however famous, it is clearly not the only kind of foundationalism.'[49]

Is Audi correct in stating that only deductive inferences can justify non-basic propositions in the Cartesian scheme? I will be challenging this view. But for the

[48] See Humber, op.cit., pp.218-19.
[49] Audi, Robert, *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.361-62.

moment I think it will be useful to look at the other signs that seem to require a classical, deductive interpretation of Descartes's project.

Deductive Reasoning: The argument for the existence of God

Descartes's argument for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation* can be read as a deductive argument. It is important to mention the relevant background information that is in place before Descartes argues for the existence of God. Descartes has already established his first, certain piece of knowledge: the Cogito. The key feature of the Cogito is that it is clearly and distinctly perceived. The criterion for truth (the clarity and distinctness rule) is then derived from the clarity and distinctness of the Cogito: that whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true. The problem, as Descartes sees it, then becomes: how can we be certain that whatever we perceive clearly and distinctly is true? There could be a deceiving God who ensures that even our clear and distinct perceptions are false. This is why Descartes feels that he has to prove the existence of a benevolent God who would not deceive us. Cottingham[50] breaks down Descartes's argument for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation* into four phases as follows:

1. Descartes examines the ideas he has within himself. One of these ideas is the idea of an infinite, all powerful God. This is the first premise of the argument.
2. The second premise is an allegedly self-evident principle: 'Now it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause.'[51] Cottingham calls this principle the 'Causal Adequacy Principle'.[52] The Causal Adequacy Principle implies that if there is some item X, having the property F, then the cause which produced X must possess at least as much F-ness as is to be found in X itself.

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[50] Cottingham, John, *Descartes*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 1986, pp.48-50. I am summarising the key points that Cottingham makes.
[51] Third Meditation: AT V11 40: CSM II 28.
[52] Cottingham, ibid., p.49.

3. The Causal Adequacy Principle can be applied to ideas, as well as ordinary objects. If an idea A represents some object which is F, then the cause of the idea must itself contain as much reality as is to be found representatively in the idea.
4. Given that I have an idea of God which represents him as a being who is infinite, all powerful, etc., it follows from the results of points 2 and 3 that the cause of this idea must be something which really contains in itself all the features that are in the idea representatively. Since I am a finite and imperfect being, then by the Causal Adequacy Principle I cannot be the cause of this idea. Also the idea cannot simply be a combination of other ideas that I have because: 'although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally and in fact all the reality or perfection which is present only objectively or representatively in the idea'.[53] So the ultimate cause of my idea of God must be something that possesses all the perfections represented in the idea. As Descartes states: 'So from what has been said it must be concluded that God necessarily exists.'[54]

Although the weak point of Descartes's argument may be his reliance on the Causal Adequacy Principle itself[55], the key point is that the argument proceeds deductively. Another deductive argument is the proof of the world in the *Sixth Meditation*. Descartes presents the argument in the following way:

> 'Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use

[53] Third Meditation: AT V11 42: CSM II 29.
[54] Third Meditation: AT V11 45: CSM II 31.
[55] For some comments on Descartes's use of the causal adequacy Principle, see Dicker, Georges, *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.100-102. Also Cottingham raises some concerns on page 51 of his book *Descartes* (1986).

> of it unless there was also an active faculty, either in me or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas. But this faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me – a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty (as I have just noted). This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally and in fact everything which is to be found objectively or representatively in the ideas; or else it is God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently. For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist. They may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject-matter of pure mathematics.'[56]

Descartes's proof of the world argument can be divided into the following steps[57]:

1. I have sensory experiences that I do not seem to produce myself. There must be a cause of these experiences.
2. The cause of my sensory experiences cannot be within me, as a thinking thing, as it does not presuppose my thought and the sensory experiences are produced independently of my will.
3. The cause of my sensory experiences must be some substance independent of me. This substance must contain either formally or eminently all the reality that the ideas it produces contain objectively.
4. All the possible causes of my sensory experiences are: (a) a body (physical objects), (b) God himself or (c) some created thing 'more noble than a body'.

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[56] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 79-80: CSM II 55.

[57] The key points of my analysis are based on the comments that Georges Dicker makes in his book: *Descartes: An Analytical and Historical Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp.200-2.

5. The cause of my sensory experiences cannot be God or any created substance other than bodies, for God has not given me any way of recognising any of these options, what I do have is a powerful inclination to believe that sensory experiences come from material objects.

So God would be a deceiver if sensory experiences were produced in any other way. But God is not a deceiver.

6. Therefore material (corporeal) things exist.

Although there may be problematic aspects to this argument, one chief concern being that it depends on the acceptance of Descartes's arguments for the existence of God; nonetheless, it is an example where strict deduction is used. If each of the premises is accepted then the conclusion follows from those premises.

If the *Third Meditation* argument for the existence of God is read deductively along with the proof of the world argument in the *Sixth Meditation*, then we can perhaps see why Descartes's project has been characterised as strong, classical foundationalism. Scepticism is defeated by the certainty of the Cogito, which is clearly and distinctly perceived, the proof of the existence of a benevolent God ensures that our clear and distinct perceptions can be trusted, and we can then proceed to the proof of the world. As Cottingham puts it: Descartes's project moves in the following direction: 'From Self to God to Knowledge of the World.'[58]

The traditional, deductive interpretation of Descartes's project does seem to be supported by the more mathematical or geometrical display of the key concepts of the *Meditations* that Descartes provides in the *Objections and Replies* to the *Meditations*.[59]

[58] Cottingham uses the phrase as a chapter heading in his book: *Descartes* (1986), p.47.
[59] I will be challenging this view as it does not tell the whole story.

In the *Second Set of Replies*[60] Descartes lists ten definitions covering what he means by thought, idea and so on. The reader is then guided through seven steps and various demonstrations are provided. So is Audi right when he states that 'only deductive inferences can transmit justification to superstructure elements'[61] in the Cartesian scheme? I think the Cartesian picture may be more subtle than Audi suggests.

Non-deductive reasoning?

I think there are hints of alternative methods of reasoning other than strict deduction being employed in the *Meditations.* One of these alternative methods of reasoning is hypothetico-deduction. The process is as follows:

> Step 1 – a general hypothesis is formulated.
>
> Step 2 – a particular statement is deduced from the hypothesis.
>
> Step 3 – The statement is checked by experiments or observations.

An example of a possible hypothetico-deductive[62] reading is Descartes's argument for the existence of body in the *Sixth Meditation*:

> 'I can, as I say, easily understand, that this is how imagination comes about, if the body exists; and since there is no other equally suitable way of explaining imagination that comes to mind, I can make a probable conjecture that the body exists. But this is only a probability; and despite a careful and comprehensive investigation, I do not yet see how the distinct idea of corporeal nature which I find in my imagination can provide any basis for a necessary inference that some body exists.'[63]

The structure of the proceeding argument can be sketched in the following way: If body exists, imagination is made up as follows... There is no better or as good an explanation of the makeup of imagination, therefore body exists. So the existence of body is the hypothesis from which our experience of imagination is deduced, as it is the best hypothesis, we have to accept the existence of body. This is a hypothetico-deductive

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[60] The geometrical display is to be found in: AT VII 160-170: CSM: 113-120.
[61] See Audi's *The Structure of Justification* (1993), pp.361-62.
[62] Descartes's use of this type of argumentation is suggested by Frederick F. Schmitt in his essay: 'Why Was Descartes a Foundationalist?', in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, University of California Press, 1986, pp.491-512. See especially pages 493-98.
[63] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 73: CSM II 51.

argument and my suggestion is that it is reasonable to read Descartes's argument in this way.

Are there any other traces of non-deductive inferences in the *Meditations*? In chapter one[64] I mentioned the idea of 'exemplary' foundationalism where an epistemic principle is used as a reference or standard against which propositions can be tested. The appeal to an exemplar or standard is not part of any deductive analysis. Perhaps the argument for the existence of God in the *Third Meditation* can be read this way? The details of an exemplary analysis would consist of the following:

1. The idea of God comes from the self.
2. The idea of God is not deduced from the Cogito.
3. The key component is the causal adequacy principle: that if there is some item X, having the property F, then the cause which produced X must possess at least as much F-ness as is to be found in X itself.
4. The causal adequacy principle is not deduced from the Cogito, it is seen as certain because it shares the clarity and distinctness feature that makes the Cogito certain. So clarity and distinctness is used as an exemplar or standard against which propositions can be tested.
5. Given that I have an idea of God representing him as an infinite being, and since I am a finite being, then by the causal adequacy principle I cannot be the cause of my idea of God. Also the idea I have of God cannot be simply a combination of the other ideas that I have because: 'although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains

[64] See chapter one, p.21.

formally and in fact all the reality or perfection which is present only objectively or representatively in the idea.'[65]

6. So the ultimate cause of my idea of God must be something that possesses all the perfections represented in the idea. Therefore God exists.

Even if there are traces of non-deductive inferences being made in the *Meditations*, is there any evidence to suggest that Descartes may have agreed with the use of such non-deductive methods? I think there is. Although, as I mentioned earlier, Descartes sets out a deductive, geometrical display in the *Replies* to the *Meditations*, this is done *after* the discoveries of the *Meditations* have been made. This might suggest that it is possible to set out one's knowledge deductively, in a step by step fashion after the knowledge has been obtained.

Descartes seems to favour the more analytic style of the *Meditations*. In the *Replies*, just before Descartes sets out his discoveries in a geometrical or mathematical fashion, he comments:

> 'But I know that even those who do concentrate, and earnestly pursue the truth, will find it very difficult to take in the entire structure of my *Meditations*, while at the same time having a distinct grasp of the individual parts that make it up. Yet I reckon that both the overall and the detailed scrutiny is necessary if the reader is to derive the full benefit from my work. I shall therefore append here a short exposition in the synthetic style, which will, I hope, assist my readers a little.....yet I am convinced that it is the *Meditations* which will yield by far the greater benefit.'[66]

Although Descartes may not have explicitly placed any great emphasis on non-deductive inferences, if there are any traces of them at all, then this does not strictly fit into the strong, classical foundationalist picture. The classical foundationalist reading requires strict deduction *only* with no exceptions. My suggestion is that there may be

[65] Third Meditation: AT V11 42: CSM II 29.
[66] Second Set of Replies: AT V11 159: CSM II 113.

some exceptions in the *Meditations*.

Conclusion

I have proposed that Descartes employs a psychological approach to examine the origin and structure of knowledge. Descartes confronts scepticism, taking it to extreme limits in an attempt to establish secure foundations for knowledge. The Cogito is that secure foundation, clearly and distinctly perceived. The clarity and distinctness of perception becomes a method that can be employed to ensure certainty. As I mentioned in my first chapter foundationalism attempts to address two key concerns: to establish what the foundations of knowledge are, but also, how the transmission from the foundations to the rest of what we know, takes place. I have suggested in this chapter that there may be traces of non-deductive reasoning in the *Meditations*. If this is the case, then we may have to revise the commonly accepted theory that Descartes is a strong classical foundationalist. My next chapter will examine critical attacks on foundationalism.

Chapter Three: Challenges to Foundationalism

In the previous chapter I identified Descartes's epistemology as presented in the *Meditations* as being foundational in structure. In this chapter I will examine some important critical attacks on foundationalism in general, but my main focus will be specifically on the critical attacks that target the kind of foundationalism that traditionally has been attributed to Descartes. The general issues that are raised in relation to foundationalism are: firstly: is it possible to have basic beliefs at all? Secondly: is it possible for such beliefs to be incorrigible, as the stronger forms of foundationalism require? Perhaps basic beliefs that are less than certain, a feature of the weaker forms of foundationalism, have a more realistic chance in answering the sceptical challenge? Thirdly: even if it is possible to have basic beliefs, how do we get from the basics to the non-basics, in other words how does the transfer of justification take place? Finally: does foundationalism successfully defeat the problem of the infinite regress of justification, a task which is seen to be foundationalism's raison d'être?

The problem of Basic Beliefs

In Chapter One I identified Bonjour's view of foundationalism as:

> 'Some empirical beliefs possess immediate, intrinsic justification, not dependent upon other beliefs. These basic beliefs are the ultimate source of justification for all empirical knowledge'.[1]

Before investigating the nature of basic beliefs, I think it is important to place the debate in context. Traditionally, a neat, epistemological division has been presented between rationalism on the one hand and empiricism on the other. On a strict, rationalist account, reason alone is regarded as sufficient to establish that a set of beliefs are indubitable.

On the empiricist side, basic beliefs and the justification they provide for other beliefs are verified by experience alone. The difficulty is that this neat classification may be too

[1] Bonjour, Laurence, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, 1985, p.17.

simple. Descartes is often placed in the camp of the strict rationalist, yet there is evidence that he regards experimentation as a valid method to decide between competing hypotheses.[2] Indeed, it would seem that a mixture of both rationalism and empiricism is needed. As Lehrer puts it, if we were deprived of reason, we would not be justified in believing any conclusion to be a logical consequence of a premise, and if we were deprived of our senses, we would not be justified in believing there to be any objects of sense experience. So in the analysis of basic beliefs, I think more progress may be possible if epistemology is not viewed, to use Lehrer's phrase, as a 'battleground between rationalism and empiricism'.[3]

Having identified the need for flexibility between strict rationalism and strict empiricism, an important question is: where should the search for beliefs that are self-justified begin? The notion of incorrigibility[4] is of paramount importance here. An incorrigible belief is a belief such that one cannot be mistaken in believing what one believes. More formally, Lehrer presents incorrigibility in the following way:

> 'S has an incorrigible belief that P if and only if it is logically impossible that S believes P and P is false.'[5]

The question that arises is: do we have any incorrigible beliefs? Lehrer does concede that the Cogito is an example of a contingent, incorrigible belief. My existence is contingent as my existence is not necessary, my belief that I exist is an incorrigible belief because the very act of my believing I exist entails my existence. Another incorrigible belief is the belief that I believe something. But is incorrigibility sufficient for justification? The logical impossibility of being mistaken, on its own, does not seem to be sufficient for justification.

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[2] An example of this is in *Discourse on the Method*, part vi, p.41-2.
[3] Lehrer, Keith, *Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1974, p.78.
[4] I will present further analysis of incorrigibility in chapter four, pp.79-80.
[5] Lehrer, ibid., p.81.

A mathematical example will demonstrate this point: it is logically impossible that two plus seven should not equal nine. So it is logically necessary that two plus seven equals nine. It is logically impossible for someone to believe that two plus seven equals nine and be mistaken in their belief. But it is possible to believe a necessary truth without knowing that the belief is true, or it is possible not to be justified in such a belief. A necessary truth can be believed for the wrong reason. The example that Lehrer gives[6] is that of someone who believes that there is a one-to-one correspondence between the set of natural numbers and the set of even natural numbers. This is a logically necessary truth and the person's belief in this truth is incorrigible. But the person could believe this truth for the wrong reason, for example, if the person believes that after a certain point in the series of natural numbers that there are no more odd ones, then the person's original belief is unjustified.

The main focal point of Lehrer's criticism of incorrigibility is targeted at the content of what one believes. Someone may be convinced that he is convinced of what he says, but subsequently realise that he was not convinced of what he originally said. An example that Lehrer uses is[7]: a man is asked what he believes Pi to be when rounded off to four decimal places. He replies from memory that Pi is 3.1417. He then immediately recalls that Pi equals 3.1415 and corrects himself. Such a man might be said to have believed that he believed that Pi was 3.1417 when he first answered, but then realised that in fact he did not believe that Pi is 3.1417, but rather believed it to be 3.1415.

Lehrer concludes that this example shows that someone can come to recognise that he does not believe what he says, and believes what he believes. This example seems to demonstrate that allegedly incorrigible beliefs about mental processes might be

[6] See Lehrer, op.cit., p.82.
[7] Ibid., pp.86-7.

corrigible after all. Doubts about the incorrigibility of beliefs may not even be the strongest challenge that foundationalism faces, doubts about the reliability of thinking as a process have been raised by Lehrer. The argument is that it is possible to be mistaken in one's beliefs about thinking as an ongoing process. This is an attack on the view that thinking as a process is incorrigible.

The example that Lehrer uses involves thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet.[8] The details are as follows: I am thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet. Secondly, I believe that Bacon is identical with Shakespeare. But this belief is not before my mind. I am asked what am I thinking. I might conclude that I was thinking that Shakespeare was the author of Hamlet, because believing that Bacon is Shakespeare, I also believe that thinking that Bacon is such and such is the same as thinking that Shakespeare is such and such. I believe that thinking of something of a subject is the same thing as thinking the same thing of anything identical to the subject. Am I correct in this? Lehrer's reply is: no.

Lehrer explains this by stating that sometimes when we think we talk to ourselves. When I was thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet, my thinking consisted of me saying to myself: 'Bacon is the author of Hamlet'. To say Bacon is the author of Hamlet is one thing, to say Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet is another thing. Thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet is not necessarily the same thing as thinking that Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet. We may therefore imagine that I was not thinking the latter when I was thinking the former. When I reported that I was thinking that Shakespeare was the author of Hamlet, and believed what I said, I was quite mistaken. Thus believing that one is thinking such and such does not logically imply that one is

[8] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.88.

thinking that. Lehrer's point is that when I or anyone else has a belief about what is presently going on in our minds, this does not mean that my belief cannot possibly be false. I may believe that I am thinking one thing while thinking another. As Lehrer puts it: 'The reason is that belief is not an action or even an occurrence'.[9]

It is possible that I might have been thinking what I was thinking without believing what I was thinking was true. When people talk to themselves, they do not necessarily believe what they say. If my belief that I am thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet can exist at the same time as my thinking that, then obviously my belief that I am thinking Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet can exist at the same time as my thinking Bacon is the author of Hamlet. Lehrer concludes that all kinds of mistakes are possible regarding what may be presently going on in someone's mind. Lehrer also feels that the preceding argument can be extended to include surmising, doubting or pondering. Lehrer comments that 'any state that involves conscious consideration of a statement is a state about which one can be mistaken'.[10]

It would seem that beliefs about sensations would be likely candidates for incorrigibility. It is these beliefs about sensations that form the backbone of Descartes's epistemology when he states in the *Second Meditation*:

> 'For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep, so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.' [11]

The problem is though, that it is logically possible to confuse almost any sensation with some other sensation. Descartes was certainly aware of the confusing nature of sensations. In the *Third Meditation* Descartes comments:

> 'But as for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused

[9] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.90.
[10] Ibid., p.91.
[11] Second Meditation: AT V11 29: CSM II 19.

> and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things.....the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is.'[12]

The possibility of confusing one sensation with another sensation is examined by Lehrer who uses the example of a doctor telling a patient that itches are really pains[13]. Because of the eminent reputation of the doctor, the patient never doubts him. When the patient itches, she incorrectly believes that she is in pain. So, the belief that she is in pain does not logically imply that she is in pain. This apparent corrigibility of beliefs leads Lehrer to one of the most devastating aspects of his argument:

> 'If a belief is corrigible, then it can be false...if a belief can be false, then any justification of the belief guaranteeing its truth must be supplied by independent information. It is then concluded that if a belief is corrigible it must be justified by such information, and, therefore, cannot be basic. If this argument is decisive, then either we must abandon the foundation theory or conclude that we are ignorant of almost all we suppose we know.'[14]

The search for incorrigible beliefs that could potentially act as foundations to knowledge, has taken Lehrer in a circle back to where he started. Doubts have been cast over the incorrigibility of beliefs, in fact, more fundamentally damaging: doubts have been cast over our knowledge of the thinking process itself. It would seem that beliefs about sensations cannot be trusted; confusion among sensations seems to be, at the very least, a possibility. If most of our beliefs are corrigible and need to be supported by independent information, then they cannot be basic. [15] The only chink of light for

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[12] Third Meditation: AT V11 43-44: CSM II 30.
[13] See Lehrer, op.cit., p.95.
[14] Ibid., p.101.
[15] Lehrer's use of the link between independent information and justification has its critics. Daniel Howard-Snyder is one such critic. Snyder argues that the justification of a basic belief might be derived from independent information that does not necessarily have to be accepted by the believer. The justification could be derived from independent information that a person is unaware of. A second possibility is that the justification of a basic belief might be derived from independent information that is accepted, but the basic belief might not owe its justification to the acceptance of that independent information. Snyder's view is that it is not possible to 'explain in a non-question-begging fashion why it is the case that, if S's belief owes its justification to some independent information and he accepts that information, then the justification of S's basic belief is derived from his acceptance of that information.' Snyder's view is in his paper entitled: 'Lehrer's Case Against Foundationalism', in *Erkenntnis*, 60 (2004), 51-73 (pp.60-1).

foundationalism in the bleak picture that Lehrer paints would be if there were any beliefs that were self-justified: not in need of any independent information to prop them up. For a belief to qualify as a basic belief, its justification has to be intrinsic to the belief. In this search for an intrinsic feature that provides justificatory support, Lehrer thinks of product guarantees[16] as an example. If a company guarantees a product against defects in manufacture, this guarantee of soundness is not proof that the individual product in question is sound. In a similar manner, the guarantee of truth intrinsic to some beliefs may not be proof that an individual belief in question is true. The manufactured item may be defective and the belief may be erroneous, but it is still reasonable to attach some value to such guarantees.

The task is now to see if any beliefs whose justification does not depend on independent information can be found. Lehrer examines the belief that I see something red[17]. It could be argued that it is not necessary in this situation to have any independent information, all that is needed is standard conditions and a normal observer.

Lehrer's reply is that one needs to know more than that red things look red in standard conditions to normal observers, one must also be able to tell when conditions are standard and when an observer is normal. Independent information is therefore required for the justification of this perceptual belief.

Another option is to reduce perceptual belief so as to end up with the belief that I see something, without specifying what sort of thing it is that I see. At first glance, this kind of belief does not seem to require any independent information for it to be justified. But Lehrer argues that there is reason to doubt this kind of belief, if the implication is that the 'something' is a real thing and not hallucinated or dreamt of.

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[16] See Lehrer's *Knowledge*(1974), p.102.
[17] Ibid., pp.103-4.

There is need of independent information that would enable the person in question to decide if this is a case of seeing something, and not merely dreaming. It is possible for someone to hallucinate, so we cannot justifiably conclude that we see something as opposed to hallucinate something, unless we possess information enabling us to distinguish hallucination from the real thing.

Another possibility that may avoid the need for information for justification is a skill of some kind. It could be argued that, once a person has learned to respond to certain types of experience nothing more is required for the justification of that experience. Someone may learn to distinguish whether or not they are seeing something, without appealing to any premises or making any conscious inferences.

The kind of argument that appeals to skills is compelling as it does seem to be the case that someone can have information that he cannot present verbally, and yet be able to use this information in various ways. Lehrer uses the example of knowing the shortest route between two locations, although not being able to tell someone the number of the road[18]. A person may have the information they need to get from one location to another, and yet they may be poor at giving directions. The person has the skill needed to make the trip, but the crucial point is that the possession of that skill involves the ability to use information about the route.

The requirement for independent information to justify experiences seems to extend even to the sorts of experiences that Descartes took to be basic, as Lehrer states:

> 'Even the very subjective belief, that it seems to me that I am seeing something, is justified only if I have the information needed to tell whether it seems to me that I am seeing something; or whether I am having some quite different experience, for example, the experience of wondering whether I am seeing something. I may wonder whether I am seeing something when it does not especially seem to me that I am seeing something, and unless I have the

[18] See Lehrer, op.cit., p.107.

> information required to tell the difference, I am not completely justified in my belief. The most modest beliefs turn out to be the ones requiring independent information for their justification. The preceding argument uncovers a ubiquitous need for independent information to justify belief, and in so doing it undermines the foundation theory.'[19]

Perhaps the solution to locating basic beliefs is in our use of language? Lehrer refers to Chisholm's distinction[20] between the comparative and non-comparative use of words. Normally when we apply a word to either our own mental states or to things, the application is based on a comparison we make. If we say something appears red, we may be comparing the way this thing appears with the way other things appear. In using words in a comparative way, we do seem to need independent information to justify their application.

When words are used in a non-comparative manner though, we may not need independent information to justify them. Someone may believe that they are being 'appeared-to-redly' or that they are 'sensing-redly'.

To say that someone is sensing-redly does not entail that someone is sensing in the way that normal observers sense in normal conditions when they are sensing a red object. It may well be that one is sensing in that way, but it is not an analytic consequence of the term 'sensing-redly' used non-comparatively.

But for someone to be completely justified in believing that he is sensing in a certain way, he must have information necessary to distinguish this way of appearing from all others. Perhaps the belief that one is appeared-to-redly does not entail any comparison of one's present state to any other, but it does entail that one's present state is of a certain kind, and to be completely justified in believing it to be of that kind, one must have the information needed to distinguish that state from other states.

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[19] Lehrer, Ibid., p.107.
[20] Chisholm, Roderick, M., *Theory of Knowledge*, Prentice-Hall, 1966, pp.34-7.

Lehrer's conclusion is:

> 'To be completely justified in believing anything about a state or object or whatnot one always requires independent information.'[21]

If the arguments that Lehrer uses against basic beliefs are correct, then the proponent of foundationalism is left with a very slim base from which to build knowledge. If any belief about what I think or believe about any sensation or feeling is open to correction, then there are only two beliefs that have an incorrigible status: the Cogito, and the belief that I believe. So from such a small set of merely two incorrigible beliefs, it would seem to be impossible to justify all of the beliefs that we regard as being justified so as to constitute knowledge.

One of the key problems with empirical beliefs is that they do not seem to live up to the standard of incorrigibility. Following Lehrer, Williams[22] notes: One can 'seem' to see an object with such and such properties, without actually seeing the object, and 'seeming to see' cannot be distinguished from the true experience of perceiving an object as it really is.

Even if there was some standard for measuring a true experience from a false experience, it would have to be established empirically that experiences of such and such a character were of that type. The criterion would be independent and non-immediate, and so would give us inferential rather than immediate knowledge. For Williams, a belief can be a priori and still be open to revision on empirical grounds. The foundational project breaks down on this account when relatively a priori beliefs are taken to be absolutely a priori. No belief is worthy of credence simply in virtue of someone holding the belief.

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[21] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.110.
[22] Williams, Michael, *Groundless Belief*, Oxford Basil Blackwell, 1977, p.74.

It seems that nothing can be cited as a special justification for a first person current mental state report. The credibility of a person's observation statements cannot be established by appeal to the reliability of human perceivers – some of us are simply better than others at observation. Williams in identifying the subjective nature of the reporting of mental states, puts his finger on their inherent weakness.

If a proponent of foundationalism attempts to argue that it is simply the brute fact of being appeared to 'that way' is basic, it is hard to see how they can avoid the charge of arbitrariness. There would be constant revision of 'that way'. Every observation would be unique with no guiding standard for its verification. What is needed is consistency, 'that way' has to be the same every time.

What about the view that justification terminates not with beliefs about experiences, but with the experiences themselves? Williams argues that this then makes a perceptual foundation for knowledge unintelligible. If we cannot express the content of an experience in a perceptual judgement then there is no way for experiences to serve as a check on anything, to back up one hypothesis rather than another. If empirical knowledge is non-propositional then as Williams puts it we are:

> 'Left completely in the dark as to how the alleged foundation of knowledge is supposed to perform the task demanded of it.'[23]

Williams's position is that knowledge cannot rest on 'fixed and immutable foundations'[24]. Although at any given time we will have a solid core of perceptual reports, this core can be subjected to drastic revision, due to deeper insights or theoretical advances. This is also a view that Aune advocates. Aune argues that knowledge cannot possibly be developed from a given set of basic concepts, as we

[23] See Williams's *Groundless Belief* (1977), p.178.
[24] Ibid., p.180.

increase our knowledge, we generate new concepts. Basic claims involve what Aune refers to as 'background assumptions'. [25]

If the basic claims are observational in nature then the background assumptions involve the nature of the observer, the character of the objects observed, and the particular means of observation. The problem is that all observation claims cannot be directly justified by observation alone; there must be at least one reliable observer.

To summarise the key points made in this section: the issue that I addressed was the problem of basic beliefs. It is generally accepted that there are two incorrigible beliefs: I am, I exist (the Cogito), and the belief that I believe. Lehrer raises doubts over whether the process of thinking can be trusted and he also feels that all kinds of mistakes are possible regarding current events taking place in someone's mind. Lehrer attempts, and fails, to find any beliefs that do not require independent information to support their justification. This view is similar to Aune, who refers to the 'background assumptions' that he feels allegedly basic beliefs must have. The main focus of Williams's attack is directed at what he feels is the subjective nature of first person current mental state reports. As if things could not get worse for foundationalism, basic beliefs are only one area of critical attack, another problematic area is the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs.

The Transfer of Justification

Even if the difficulties concerning basic beliefs are set aside, serious problems remain for any foundationalist theory to provide an adequate explanation of how to build upon the foundations, justifying the rest of what we know. By what process or mechanism do basic beliefs justify non-basic beliefs? Descartes identifies the need to avoid an infinite

[25] Aune, Bruce, *Knowledge, Mind, and Nature*, Random House, New York, 1967, p.266.

regress, when he states in the *Third Meditation*:

> 'And although one idea may perhaps originate from another, there cannot be an infinite regress here; eventually one must reach a primary idea, the cause of which will be like an archetype which contains formally and in fact all the reality or perfection which is present only objectively or representatively in the idea.'[26]

For advocates of strong, classical foundationalism, deduction is the only acceptable method of transmission of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs. Those who advocate a moderate form of foundationalism would allow the use of non-deductive inference mechanisms. There are substantial challenges to both strands of foundationalism concerning the transfer of justification.

The use of deduction as a method of building knowledge from secure foundations is traditionally associated with Descartes. But as Cornman[27] states it seems that no deductive argument will enable us to get from basic to non-basic beliefs. The following example is used by Cornman to demonstrate the implausibility of a non-basic statement being entailed by a basic statement:

(1) I am now seeing a yellow object.

The question is asked: what is the basic report most likely to yield (1)?

(2) I am now having an experience of something yellow, and I am now believing I am now seeing something yellow.

The problem is that (2) does not entail (1). This can be demonstrated by using a sentence from which it is clear that (2) does not entail (1). An example of this is:

(3) I am hallucinating in a room containing nothing that is yellow.

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[26] Third Meditation: AT V11 42: CSM II 29.
[27] Cornman, James, W., *Skepticism, Justification, and Explanation*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980, pp.80-2.

Hallucinations and illusory experiences are possible, so no statement about present experience and belief is sufficient, on its own, to ensure the truth of a perception. So it is of no help to support (2) with:

(4) I fully believe that I am a normal perceiver in normal conditions who is not hallucinating but rather is having a veridical visual experience.

It is clear that the conjunction of (2) and (4) with (3) does not entail (1), because they are consistent with my now seeing nothing at all.

It seems that no basic reports entail (1). Even the following:

(5) I am now having an experience of something yellow, and I am now a normal perceiver in conditions optimal for seeing the colour of things.

Once again, as was stated earlier, it depends what is meant by 'normal' and 'optimal'. If we take the Cartesian scenario: if it is possible for a normal perceiver to be in an optimal position and yet be fooled by the malicious demon, then (5) fails to entail (1).

If it is not possible to be a normal perceiver in optimal conditions and be fooled by a malicious demon, perhaps because conditions are not optimal when the malicious demon is at work, then it seems that (5) would entail (1). In other words if you could be absolutely sure that you are a normal perceiver in optimal conditions and if optimal conditions meant that it was impossible for a malicious demon to be at work, then you could be sure of (1) I am now seeing a yellow object. But there does not seem to be any way of using basic reports in such a way that 'makes it impossible that (5) is true and a Cartesian demon is at work'[28]. So it seems it is always possible to be in optimal conditions and yet be fooled by a malicious demon. Cornman's conclusion is that: 'It is extremely unlikely that any basic report, no matter how complicated, entails (1).'[29]

[28] See Cornman, op.cit., p.82.
[29] Ibid.

Cornman then looks at the possibility of using classical probability theory in examining basic reports. On this theory, if one is completely convinced of something, the measure of one's belief has the number 1 assigned to it. If one is completely certain that a specified event cannot possibly happen, one's belief that it will happen is assigned the number 0. The following example is presented:[30]

> L = 'A sheet of paper lies before me.'
>
> S = 'I just had a visual experience of a sheet of paper.'
>
> A = 'I tried to tear and believe I succeeded in tearing paper just now.'
>
> E = 'I am now having a visual experience of torn paper.'

Although Cornman does not do it, it is easy to see how the preceding statements can be applied to the wax passage in the *Meditations*:

> L = 'A piece of wax lies before me.'
>
> S = 'I just had a visual experience of a piece of wax.'
>
> A = 'I tried to melt the wax by bringing it to the fire and believe I succeeded in melting the wax just now.'
>
> E = 'I am now having a visual experience of melted wax.'

It might be argued that the probability of E, given S and A is almost 1, entails L. Cornman argues though, that even if we allow that E, S, and A are basic reports, and that a probability statement consisting only of basic reports is itself a basic report, this attempt fails. The entailment claim is false. The probability statement in its antecedent does not entail that anything exists, and so does not entail L. This argument could be viewed as a fatal attack on Cartesian foundationalism:

> 'The failure of the thesis that basic reports entail non-basic statements shows why what I have called the Cartesian species of traditional foundationalism leads to scepticism...of empirical sentences, only basic reports are initially certain, and that the extension of knowledge beyond the foundation is by deductive

[30] Ibid., p.83.

> inference alone. This last requirement is made in order to guarantee inferential certainty of what is known. Thus, on the Cartesian view, each of us must begin only with his own basic reports and 'conceptual' truths as initial premises and try to extend his knowledge by deductive derivation.'[31]

As I commented in chapter one[32], it is only the strong, classical foundationalism that insists on deduction being the only valid method of progressing from basic to non-basic beliefs, the weaker, moderate forms of foundationalism would allow non-deductive inference mechanisms to be used. The next question to address is: does inductive argument enable us to transfer justification from basic to non-basic beliefs?

Induction as a method for the transfer of Justification

Plantinga defines a direct, inductive argument as follows:

> 'A direct inductive argument for S is an ordered pair of arguments of which the first member is a simple inductive argument a for S, and the second is a valid deductive argument one premise of which is the conclusion of a, the other premise being drawn from S's total evidence.'[33]

And Plantinga also states:

> A simple inductive argument for S is an argument of the following form:
>
> Every A such that S has determined by observation whether or not A is B is such that S has determined by observation that A is B. Therefore, probably every A is a B.

Cornman's view is that the enumerative induction that Plantinga is referring to will not work. When we look again at the observation report:

> (1) 'I am now seeing a yellow object.'

To use a direct, inductive argument to show that (1) is probable, we would need something like the following as a conclusion of a simple inductive argument:

> (6) Probably, every (almost every) time when I have an experience of something yellow is a time when I am seeing something yellow.

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[31] See Cornman's *Skepticism, Justification, and Explanation* (1980), p.83.
[32] See chapter one, p.7.
[33] Plantinga, Alvin, *God and other Minds*, Cornell University Press, 1967, p.251.

Then with the basic report (2): I am now having an experience of something yellow, and I am now believing that I am now seeing something yellow. I can then infer that it is probable that I am now seeing something yellow, i.e. (1). But in order to warrant the inference to (6) by a simple inductive argument, the following premise is needed:

(7) 'Every (almost every) time when I have an experience of something yellow, such that I have determined by observation whether or not it is a time when I am seeing something yellow, is such that I have determined by observation that this, which is a time when I am having an experience of something yellow, is also a time when I am seeing something yellow.'

(7) is justified by a series of statements about me at present and in the past which are of the form:

(8) 'The present time is a time when I am having an experience of something yellow and have determined by observation that this, which is such a time, is also a time when I am seeing something yellow.'

The problem is that (8) is not a basic report, because observation is used to work out that the present time is a time that I am seeing something yellow.

Once again, the preceding argument would equally apply to Descartes's description of his sensory experiences with the piece of wax, the difficulty is that observation seems to be required to verify the experience.

Another form of induction is induction by analogy. But the same difficulty that applied to enumerative induction applies to induction by analogy. The structure of an analogical form of argument is presented by Cornman[34] as:

(i) Entities 0_1, 0_2....., 0_n have properties P_1, P_2,....P_m in common.
(ii) Entities 0_2, 0_3,....0_n have property P_{m+1}.

Therefore, it is probable that entity 0_1 has property P_{m+1}.

[34] See Cornman, op.cit., p.86.

The general idea of an analogical argument is that the more something is like a group of other things in certain known respects, the more probable it is that it is also like them in some additional, unknown respect.

To make the analogical style of argument relevant to (1) I am now seeing a yellow object, Cornman suggests rephrasing 1 as:[35]

(1a) The present moment (0_1) is a time when I see something yellow (P_{m+1}).

The first premise, (i) is not a problem, as the properties P_1 through to P_m can be regarded as basic reports. It is premise (ii) that causes problems because it is not a basic report. Premise (ii) ascribes the property P_{m+1} to moments of time, 0_2 through to 0_n, but no sentence stating that a moment has property P_{m+1} is basic, because additional evidence is required to prove that the moment has that property.

Given the apparent difficulty with attempting to use induction by analogy in the transfer of justification, are there any other possibilities? In Chapter two[36], I indicated that Descartes seems to use hypothetico-deductive argumentation. Maybe this form of argument would enable the inference from basic to non-basic beliefs?

Cornman presents the structure of a hypothetico-deductive argument as follows:[37]

(1) Basic reports, b_1, b_2,...b_n are to be explained for s at t.

(2) Hypothesis, T, explains b_1, b_2,....b_n better at t than any hypothesis that conflicts with T.

Therefore

(3) It is probable, for s at t, that T is true.

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[35] Cornman, ibid., p.87.
[36] See chapter two, pp.47-48.
[37] Cornman, ibid., pp.89-90.

The only way for the hypothetico-deductive style of argument to enable the move from basic beliefs to non-basic beliefs is for the better hypothesis to be analytical in nature; anything else would be an appeal to evidence, which in turn would have to be justified, taking us back to epistemological square one. What can we conclude from all of this? As Cornman states:

> 'So we have some reason to think that hypothetical induction, combined with deduction, enumerative induction, and induction by analogy, fails to provide the desired inferences.'[38]

Perhaps there is one more avenue still open for the foundationalist: the use of some sort of epistemic principle that could be employed in two ways: (1) that whenever a belief is formed in a particular way it is automatically justified or basic and (2) the principle could be used to facilitate the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs. I will be investigating the use of an epistemic principle in the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs in chapter four, for now I will look at the issues surrounding epistemic principles used to justify basic beliefs.

Epistemic Principles

As I identified in chapter one[39]: the sceptic can continually press the question: how do you know? If we appeal to further propositions to justify what we claim to know, the sceptic can then question the basis for our knowing that those propositions are true.

This process can continue indefinitely with no resolution. Foundationalists have used epistemic principles as a way of addressing the problem of infinite regress of justification. Epistemic principles usually involve the idea that if a belief is formed in a particular way or under specified conditions then the belief is justified. An epistemic

[38] Cornman, ibid., pp.90-1.
[39] See chapter one, p.6.

principle has to be somehow part of how the belief is formed, because if the epistemic principle is external to how the belief is formed then the principle is then in need of justification and the regress of justification continues. An epistemic principle could take the following form: whenever a belief is formed in manner X, it is a justified belief. An individual does not have to know what the principle is, but the principle has to be true. The principle of course cannot be arbitrarily chosen and it must show why the basic belief is justified without any inferential support.

Among contemporary foundationalists, the "epistemic principles" approach is perhaps most clearly evident in the work of Chisholm. In his book: *Theory of Knowledge* Chisholm presents the following epistemic principle which he refers to as principle B:

> 'If S believes that he perceives something to have a certain property F, then the proposition that he does perceive something to be F, as well as the proposition that there is something that is F, is one which is reasonable for S.'[40]

Despite the initial plausibility of Chisholm's epistemic principle B, a serious flaw has been detected by Herbert Heidelberger[41]. The flaw involves the possibility that S might have other knowledge which, when added to B would be inconsistent with what S believes thereby disallowing the conclusions of B. Chisholm presents the central component of Heidelberger's criticism as follows:

> 'As applied to a particular case, principle (B) tells us that if a man believes that he perceives a certain object to be yellow then the proposition that he does perceive that object to be yellow and the proposition that that object is yellow are reasonable for him. But let us suppose that the following facts are known by that man: there is a yellow light shining on the object, he remembers having perceived a moment ago that the object was white, and at that time there was no colored light shining on the object. Suppose that, in spite of this evidence, he believes that he perceives that the object is yellow. It would not be correct to say that for our man the proposition that the object is yellow is a reasonable one. Merely from the fact that a man believes that he perceives something to have a certain property *F*, it does not follow, accordingly, that the proposition that that something is *F* is a reasonable one for him; for, as in our example, he may have other evidence which, when combined with the evidence that he believes that he

[40] Chisholm, Roderick, *Theory of Knowledge*, Prentice-Hall, 1966, p.43.
[41] Herbert Heidelberger, 'Chisholm's Epistemic Principles', in *Nous,* 3 (1969), 73-82.

> perceives something to have *F*, may make the proposition that something is *F* highly unreasonable.[42]

Heidelberger's criticism is also echoed by Cornman, who refers to an observer who knows about the yellow light shining on the perceived object causing it to appear yellow. Cornman notes:

> 'Surely, given that s knows all this, it is at least not reasonable for him that he is perceiving something yellow, regardless of whether he now believes that he is now perceiving something to be yellow. So B must either be amended or abandoned.'[43]

Chisholm did revise principle B in response to Heidelberger's criticism. One such revision of the principle is as follows:

> 'Necessarily, for any S and any *t*, if (i) S at *t* believes himself to perceive something to be *F*, and if (ii) there is no proposition i such that i is evident to S and such that the conjunction of i and the proposition that S believes himself to perceive something to be *F* does not confirm the proposition that he does then perceive something to be *F*, as well as the proposition that something is, or was, *F*, is one that is beyond reasonable doubt for S at *t*.'[44]

Cornman explores a number of revisions that Chisholm makes to his epistemic principles and his final verdict is that no matter how many revisions of these principles Chisholm might come up with, it will always be possible to put together counter examples which will show that the principles will allow conclusions about the epistemic status of what S believes he perceives which are in fact mistaken.

To support his case against Chisholm's amended epistemic principles, Cornman presents some well known scenarios[45] where coloured lights are shining on white objects causing an observer to wrongly believe that the object is yellow, or in which a malicious demon is operating causing the perceiver to have false perceptual beliefs.

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[42] Roderick M. Chisholm, 'On the Nature of Empirical Evidence', in *Essays on Knowledge and Justification*, ed. by Georges S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, Cornell University Press, 1978, pp. 253-278 (pp.270-1).
[43] In Cornman's *Skepticism, Justification and Explanation* (1980), p.93.
[44] Chisholm, ibid., p.272.
[45] See Cornman, ibid., pp.94-96.

The most devastating scenario employed by Cornman is where a person might refuse to take note of countervailing evidence even though that evidence is readily available to him. Cornman's conclusion is that if someone avoids what would make some relevant proposition reasonable for him, an observer would be able to infer, by means of an epistemic principle, that he is perceiving something to be *F*, and this Cornman says would surely be incorrect in such a case.[46]

The advantage of an appeal to epistemic principles as a way of justifying basic beliefs is that if successful, then basic beliefs could be justified without further inferential support. But if Cornman's analysis of the failure of epistemic principles is correct[47], then it seems that there is no end to the cycle of justification of beliefs. The foundationalist theory would still be threatened by an infinite regress of justification. I will now look at this in more detail.

The Infinite Regress Argument

All theories of epistemic justification attempt to solve the problem of an infinite regress of justification. The regress is set up because we seem to have chains of beliefs, that is beliefs that are based on other beliefs, and if we refer to a proposition to justify another proposition, the question arises again as to how that proposition is justified, this kind of questioning could continue indefinitely. As I indicated in my first chapter the possibilities for an epistemic chain are:

1. The chain might be infinite.
2. The chain might be circular.
3. The chain might terminate with a belief which is not knowledge.
4. The chain terminates with a belief which is direct knowledge.

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[46] I am paraphrasing here what Cornman states on p.97.

[47] I will be challenging Cornman's analysis in my next chapter (pp.105-6) where I will take issue with the idea of someone avoiding reasonable evidence to arrive at a perceptual belief.

In relation to the first possibility, that an epistemic chain might be infinite, there is a view that having an infinite set of beliefs is not possible. Audi expresses doubts that humans can have infinite sets of beliefs. Audi gives an example of the claim that we have an infinite set of arithmetical beliefs, say two is twice one, four is twice two, and so on. Audi comments:

> 'Surely for a finite mind there will be some point or other at which the relevant proposition cannot be grasped. The required formulation (or entertaining of the proposition) would, on the way "toward" infinity, become too lengthy to permit understanding it.'[48]

Audi is not suggesting that we cannot believe that the mathematical formulation expresses a truth; he is saying that the believing of a truth is not sufficient for believing the actual truth that it expresses. As he puts it:

> 'Since we cannot understand the formulation as a whole, we cannot grasp that truth; and what we cannot grasp, we cannot believe.'[49]

The second possibility for an epistemic chain is that it is circular. Audi is an opponent of the view that justification could be circular, he states:

> 'The possibility of a circular epistemic chain as a basis of knowledge has been taken much more seriously. The standard objection has been that such circularity is vicious, because one would ultimately have to know something on the basis of itself – say p on the basis of q, q on the basis of r, and r on the basis of p.'[50]

The third option: that an epistemic chain terminates in a belief that is not knowledge is seen as not very viable by Audi. However this is a view that seems to have been held by Wittgenstein:

> 'Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end;-but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.'[51]

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[48] Audi, Robert, *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.127.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., p.128.
[51] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *On Certainty*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. Von Wright, Basil Blackwell Oxford, 1969, paragraph 204., p.28e.

It would be hard to see how knowledge could originate through the belief of a proposition that S does not know. Despite the apparent difficulty in holding such a position, Audi does offer an account of circumstances where knowledge could originate through belief of a proposition that is not known. The example[52] involves the following: suppose that it seems that I hear music and on the basis of this partly justified belief that there is music playing, I believe that my daughter has come home and she has come home, can I be said to know this? The answer is not clear. It is unclear whether the belief that there is music playing is sufficiently reasonable to give me knowledge that music is playing. Audi points out that the stronger our tendency to say that I know my daughter is home, the stronger the inclination to say that I do after all know that there is music in the air. Audi states:

> 'If there can be an epistemic chain which ends with belief that is not knowledge, only because it ends, in this way, with justification, then we are apparently in the general vicinity of knowledge. We seem to be at most a few degrees of justification away. Knowledge is not emerging from nothing, as it were – the picture originally evoked by the third kind of epistemic chain – but from something characteristically much like it: justified true belief. There would thus be a foundation after all: not bedrock, but perhaps ground that is nonetheless firm enough to yield a foundation we can build upon.'[53]

The third option for the epistemic chain, even with Audi's qualified circumstances, still seems to me to be problematic. How can we be 'in the general vicinity' of knowledge? Surely one either knows something or one does not. The difficulty that modest foundationalism, to which Audi subscribes, faces, is because the foundations are not certain, extra justification is needed to prop them up. Another difficulty then arises as to how do you determine objectively when sufficiently reasonable grounds have been obtained for justifiably believing something? Who decides what "sufficient" means, and

[52] Audi, op.cit., p. 127.
[53] Ibid., pp.128-9.

what method do they use for deciding? It seems then, that the weaker forms of foundationalism have a difficult task in dealing with the epistemic regress problem.

This then brings me to the fourth possibility of an epistemic chain: that the chain terminates with a belief which is direct knowledge. This is knowledge not dependent on further beliefs. This knowledge could be grounded in experience, in Audi's example, his hearing of the music that led him to believe that his daughter was home. Another way that direct knowledge could be grounded is intuitively: If A is one mile from B, then B is one mile from A.

As Audi explains, beliefs that are grounded in experience are normally expected to be true, as experience seems to connect the beliefs it grounds to the reality that those beliefs are about. An example of this is when I know that there is music playing: it is just because I hear the music, not on the basis of some further belief of mine. The chain that grounds Audi's knowledge that his daughter is home, is anchored in his auditory perception, which in turn reflects the musical reality represented by his knowledge that there is music playing. This reality explains his perception, and it indirectly explains his believing the proposition that he knows on the basis of that evidence, that his daughter is home.

The stronger form of foundationalism, with basic beliefs that are certain, would seem to be the best candidate for addressing the epistemic regress problem. If there can be beliefs that do not depend on other beliefs for justification, it would seem that the regress of justification could be stopped. The justification of the basic beliefs could be provided by some sort of epistemic principle: beliefs that are formed under this principle would be regarded as justified. This kind of epistemological system seems to

be what Descartes had in mind. It is reasonable to view the clarity and distinctness rule as an epistemic principle, as Descartes states in the *Third Meditation*:

> 'I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'[54]

One of the difficulties that epistemic principles face, as I identified earlier in this chapter, is that their selection seems to be arbitrary. There does not seem to be anything special about choosing clarity and distinctness as a guiding principle. It might seem that it could be argued that Descartes could have just as easily said something like: whatever I perceive and have a good "feeling" about, or perceptions that my "instinct" tells me are true, are true. It might appear that the words "feeling" or "instinct" seem to make as much sense as a guiding principle as perceptions that are "clearly" and "distinctly" perceived. I will argue in chapter four though, that there is something special about clarity and distinctness as a guiding principle that makes it superior to mere feelings or instincts.

I think it would be useful at this stage to pull together the various strands of critical attack against foundationalism and present them in one, coherent argument. This is my next task.

Bonjour's Anti-foundationalist argument

Bonjour arguably presents one of the most concise forms of an anti-foundationalist argument[55]. Bonjour's comments neatly draw together some of the issues that I have raised in this chapter:

(1) 'There are basic, empirical beliefs which are justified and their justification does not depend on any further empirical beliefs.
(2) For a belief to be justified there needs to be a reason why it is likely to be true.

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[54] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.
[55] Once again, it is important to stress that Bonjour presented this argument before he joined the foundationalist camp.

(3) For a belief to be justified for a particular person, requires that this person be in cognitive possession of such a reason.
(4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe with justification the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.
(5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely a priori; at least one of the premises must be empirical.

Therefore the justification of a supposed empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows therefore that that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.' [56]

Bonjour's position is that justification ultimately depends on additional empirical beliefs which need to be justified themselves. If Bonjour's assessment is correct, then foundationalism does not successfully deal with the infinite regress problem, as basic beliefs turn out not to be self-justified after all.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified the key issues that any foundationalist theory must address: (1) is it possible to have basic beliefs or propositions; whose justification does not depend on references to other beliefs or propositions? (2) What is the nature of any basic beliefs, are they incorrigible or corrigible? (3) How does the transfer of justification take place from basic to non-basic beliefs? Is this transfer of justification restricted to strict deduction only, as the strong classical foundationalist theory would maintain, or can the transfer of justification occur by non-deductive mechanisms, such as induction by analogy, or hypothetico-deduction, as the more moderate strands of foundationalism would allow? (4) What are the challenges facing foundationalism's attempt to solve the infinite regress problem and what role do epistemic principles play in this solution?

In relation to incorrigible basic beliefs, it seems there are only two that are capable of resisting critical attack: the Cogito and my belief that I believe. If there are only two

[56] Bonjour presents this in his *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (1985), p.32.

incorrigible beliefs, how do we build the superstructure of knowledge on such a small foundation? A corollary to this is the problem that if most of our beliefs are corrigible, then how are they justified?

The transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs is particularly problematic. Although deduction may be successfully used in mathematical or other a priori disciplines, it does not seem to be sufficient when applied to empirical situations. An extra factor seems to be needed to ensure the truth of perceptions. A similar difficulty arises with inductive methods of inference, external observations seem to be required to verify true experiences. The hypothetico-deductive style of inference, if it is to have any chance at all of success, must be analytical in nature. If an appeal to evidence is needed, then that evidence has to be justified and we are back into a cycle of justification once more.

Epistemic principles, such as Descartes's clarity and distinctness rule, initially might appear to provide a method of dealing with the epistemic regress problem, but it has sometimes been argued that when we probe deeper we find that they are often arbitrarily chosen. As Lehrer comments:

> 'If a belief is corrigible, then it can be false...if a belief can be false, then any justification of the belief guaranteeing its truth must be supplied by independent information. It is then concluded that if a belief is corrigible it must be justified by such information, and, therefore, cannot be basic. If this argument is decisive, then either we must abandon the foundation theory or conclude that we are ignorant of almost all we suppose we know.'[57]

The key question now is: can Descartes's epistemology be read in such a way that it can put up a defence against the critical challenges presented in this chapter? My final chapter will address this question.

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[57] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.101.

Chapter Four: A Cartesian Defence

In chapter three I presented some strong challenges that foundationalism must face up to if it is to provide a credible alternative to epistemological scepticism. The task of this chapter is to assess whether a non-traditional interpretation of Descartes's project in the *Meditations* can withstand those challenges and therefore give us compelling reasons to adopt foundationalism. To make this assessment I will examine the following issues raised in chapter three: what is the nature and epistemic status of basic beliefs? How can the transfer of justification take place from basic to non-basic beliefs? If epistemic principles are used in the transfer of justification; what is their epistemic status, how are they justified? The answers to these questions will indicate whether Cartesian foundationalism can provide an adequate solution to the infinite regress problem and counter sceptical attacks on knowledge as Descartes intended.

The Nature and Status of Foundational Beliefs

Descartes's aim is clear from the very first page of the *First Meditation*:

> 'Reason now leads me to think that I should hold back my assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as I do from those which are patently false.'[1]

Descartes uses the terms 'indubitable' and 'certain' in the above passage. But the search for basic, foundational beliefs in contemporary epistemological debate is also closely linked with the notion of incorrigibility. Susan Haack draws a distinction between the terms 'indubitable', 'certain', 'infallible' and 'incorrigible' in the following way: indubitable suggests 'immunity to doubt'[2], certain and infallible suggests 'immunity to error' and incorrigible suggests 'immunity to correction'.

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[1] First Meditation: AT V11 18: CSM II 12.

[2] Haack presents definitions of incorrigible, indubitable, certain and infallible on page 38 of her book: *Evidence and Inquiry*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 1995.

While recognising the nuances of Haack's account, it is of interest to note a comment made by Robert Audi in this context. Audi observes that while incorrigibility does not entail infallibility or indubitability, the latter pair entail each other and both of them entail incorrigibility. Audi states that:

> 'Infallibility and indubitability each entail – though neither is entailed by – incorrigibility, if the latter doctrine is false, so are the other two.'[3]

Audi then goes on to employ the modus tollens that if incorrigibility can be shown to be false, then that will bring the falsity of infallibility or indubitability along with it. Descartes's commitment seems to be to indubitability and therefore, following Audi, he is committed to incorrigibility, so if incorrigibility falls to criticism, as recent critics of foundationalism think it does, then so does Descartes's position. In the discussion which follows it will be important to bear these interconnections between the various terms of epistemic appraisal in mind since much of what Descartes has to offer is couched in the language of indubitability while much recent discussion is couched in the language of incorrigibility.

In chapter three I made the point that it is widely accepted that the Cogito and the belief that I believe something are indubitable, hence incorrigible, and I will now examine the Cogito once again as it plays a crucial role in Descartes's epistemology.

The Cogito

The Cogito is the first truth that Descartes discovers. It is immune from all the varieties of doubt, even the extreme deceptions of the malicious demon cannot dent its authenticity:

> 'But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering

[3] Audi, Robert, *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.168.

> everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.'[4]

As I indicated in chapter two[5], the Cogito is special, it does have a unique status that other propositions do not have. As Cottingham observes:

> 'The proposition "I am thinking" is indubitable in a special way: doubting it confirms its truth.'[6]

Cottingham goes on to state that even premises such as "I am hoping" would not have the required indubitability. 'I doubt that I am hoping' is not indubitable, doubting that one is hoping does not entail that one is hoping, since doubting is not a case of hoping. Apart from the fact that "I am thinking" has a status of indubitability, my own existence necessarily follows from the indubitable awareness that I am at this moment thinking. For as long as I am engaged in the activity of thinking, I must exist.

Descartes had stated near the beginning of the *Second Meditation* that he was looking for an Archimedean point of certainty:

> 'Archimedes used to demand just one firm an immovable point in order to shift the entire earth; so I too can hope for great things if I manage to find just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshakeable.'[7]

With the Cogito, Descartes found that first certain and unshakeable thing, so what is the problem? The problem is that the Cogito provides a very slim foundation upon which systematic knowledge of the world can be built. As Cottingham observes:

> 'There is a risk that Descartes will remain isolated in the secure but unproductive arena of subjective self-awareness, unable to proceed any further without risk of error.'[8]

How can Descartes proceed any further beyond the security of the Cogito? When Descartes reflects on the Cogito at the beginning of the *Third Meditation* he discovers

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[4] Second Meditation: AT V11 25: CSM II 17.
[5] See chapter two, pp.30-1.
[6] Cottingham, John, *Descartes*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 1986, p.38.
[7] Second Meditation: AT V11 24: CSM II 16.
[8] Cottingham, ibid., p.47.

the key feature of the Cogito: it is clearly and distinctly perceived:

> 'I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'[9]

From the clarity and distinctness of the Cogito, Descartes derives the general principle that whatever else is perceived with clarity and distinctness is true. This is a monumental discovery, a method has been discovered that when applied correctly, enables us to construct systematic knowledge. I think that the key point here is not that the Cogito is merely one foundational belief that is almost trivially true, it is that the Cogito provides a template against which we can measure and test other propositions. Like any method or procedure, mistakes are possible in its application. When there is confusion, say in the case of sensory experiences, that confusion often arises because things are not clear and distinct. The clarity and distinctness rule is an objective method applied subjectively in each individual case. It is similar to what Humber[10] identified as the method for summing a column of numbers: the method itself is sound, but mistakes can be made in its application.

I believe that the clarity and distinctness rule can be used to counter Lehrer's attack on thinking as an incorrigible process. In chapter three I mentioned Lehrer's example of thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet.[11] A sketch of the main points of Lehrer's argument should be sufficient now[12]. Lehrer suggests that thinking as a process is an activity that cannot be trusted. The fact that someone believes that they are thinking of something does not imply that the person is actually thinking of that thing. Lehrer's

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[9] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.
[10] James M. Humber, 'Recognising Clear and Distinct Perceptions', in *René Descartes Critical Assessments*, ed. by Georges J.D. Moyal, Vol. 1, Routledge, 1991, pp.218-19.
[11] This example is in Lehrer, Keith, *Knowledge*, Oxford University Press, 1974, p.88.
[12] See above, pp.54-5 for the full details.

contention is that all kinds of mistakes are possible regarding what may be presently going on in someone's mind.

In fact, Lehrer feels that his argument can be extended to include mental processes such as surmising, doubting or pondering. He concludes that:

> 'any state that involves conscious consideration of a statement is a state about which one can be mistaken.'[13]

I think one can object to Lehrer's argument regarding holding the two beliefs that Bacon is the author of Hamlet and Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet, at the same time. Lehrer does reply to this kind of objection by saying I can believe that I am thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet at the very time at which I am thinking that. A belief can coexist with a thought and be quite distinct from the thinking. Up to this point I think Lehrer is correct, but, he goes on to argue if my belief that I am thinking that Bacon is the author of Hamlet can exist at the same time as my thinking that, then obviously my belief that I am thinking Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet can exist at the same time as my thinking Bacon is the author of Hamlet, therefore the objection fails.

It seems to me that Lehrer is guilty of level confusion. It is one thing to believe that you are believing something, but this is not the same thing as believing *at the same time* two contradictory beliefs such as Bacon is the author of Hamlet and Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet. If we apply a Cartesian approach to this issue I think we can say that if I have the two beliefs that Bacon is the author of Hamlet and Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet, then there is confusion, because they both cannot be true, I cannot clearly and distinctly believe both. In Cartesian terms, I should withhold my assent. It seems that the degree of confusion that Lehrer believes can be part of the cognitive

[13] See Lehrer, op.cit., p.91.

processes may not be present after all, or at least if the confusion is present we can respond. I believe that it is too hasty to cast doubts over our entire cognitive processes, as Lehrer appears to want us to do. Given that our cognitive processes in general may be cautiously trusted, the next issue is whether the content of our cognitions, particularly our beliefs about sensory experiences can enjoy the same trust.

Beliefs about Sensations

It is beliefs about sensations that Descartes seems to regard as being foundational:

> 'For example, I am now seeing light, hearing a noise, feeling heat. But I am asleep so all this is false. Yet I certainly *seem* to see, to hear, and to be warmed. This cannot be false; what is called 'having a sensory perception' is strictly just this, and in this restricted sense of the term it is simply thinking.'[14]

Lehrer uses the possibility of confusing sensations to demonstrate that such confusion is possible and therefore beliefs based on sensations cannot be completely trusted. Lehrer's line of thought seems to be that if most of our beliefs are corrigible in this way and need to be supported by independent information for justification, then the beliefs cannot be basic.

The example that Lehrer provides is that of a doctor informing a patient that itches are really pains and because of the reputation of the doctor, the patient never doubts him. When the patient experiences an itch, she incorrectly believes that she is in pain. So, the patient believing that she is in pain does not imply that she is in pain. The main point about this scenario is that the patient is not really justified in believing that itches are pains. She has no valid grounds for believing that she is in pain when she itches. It is not clear why itches should be regarded as pains. There is nothing intrinsic to the experience of pain or itches that justifies one in believing that itches are pains.

It is of course possible to experience confusion with sensations. This is something that Descartes was well aware of: in the *Third Meditation* Descartes states:

[14] Second Meditation: AT V11 29: CSM II 19.

> 'But as for all the rest, including light and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, heat and cold and the other tactile qualities, I think of these only in a very confused and obscure way, to the extent that I do not even know whether they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas I have of them are ideas of real things or of non-things.....the ideas which I have of heat and cold contain so little clarity and distinctness that they do not enable me to tell whether cold is merely the absence of heat or vice versa, or whether both of them are real qualities, or neither is.'[15]

Lehrer takes the apparent corrigibility of beliefs to deliver a seemingly fatal blow to foundationalism:

> 'If a belief is corrigible, then it can be false...if a belief can be false, then any justification of the belief guaranteeing its truth must be supplied by independent information. It is then concluded that if a belief is corrigible it must be justified by such information, and, therefore, cannot be basic. If this argument is decisive, then either we must abandon the foundation theory or conclude that we are ignorant of almost all we suppose we know.'

In the above passage, Lehrer regards the justification of a belief as being supplied by 'independent' information. It is because the belief needs to be propped up with this independent information, that it cannot be basic. This is presumably because a basic belief is either not in need of justification, or its justification must be intrinsic and not independent of the belief itself.

It is interesting to note that Lehrer does go on to identify that a belief could be regarded as being basic if the justification for believing it is intrinsic to the belief itself. Lehrer mentions the idea a product guarantee[16], guaranteeing the product against defects in manufacture. Such a guarantee is not proof that the individual product in question is free from defects. In a similar manner, the guarantee of truth intrinsic to some beliefs may not be proof that an individual belief in question is true. The manufactured item may be defective and the belief may be incorrect, but it may still be reasonable to attach some value to the product guarantee or the belief. Lehrer's main goal in examining sensations

[15] Third Meditation: AT V11 43-44: CSM II 30.
[16] See Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.102.

is to highlight their confusing nature and in so doing, to demonstrate that beliefs concerning sensations are corrigible. It seems that the only way for a basic belief to be justified is if that belief does not require independent information to prop it up. Lehrer then sets himself the task of searching for any beliefs that do not depend on independent information for their justification. I will now assess Lehrer's continued search for basic beliefs.

The Independent Information Obstacle

Lehrer attempts to determine whether any beliefs can be found whose justification does not depend on independent information. If an alleged basic belief depends on independent information for its justification, then the belief is not truly basic. The sensory belief that 'I see something red' is examined. It might be argued that no independent information is needed to justify the belief that 'I see something red', all that is needed is standard observational conditions and a normal observer. Lehrer's response to this claim is that one must be able to tell when conditions are standard and what is meant by a 'normal' observer. The conclusion drawn is that independent information is required for the justification of a perceptual belief.

Even if a perceptual belief is reduced to its minimal state, perhaps by saying something like: 'I believe that I see *something'* without specifying what that 'something' is, it seems that independent information is required. The 'something' has to be distinguished as a real thing, not the product of a dream or hallucination.

The idea here is that it is possible for someone to hallucinate, so we cannot justifiably conclude that we see something as opposed to hallucinate that we see something, unless we possess information enabling us to distinguish hallucination from the real thing.

On Lehrer's account, the necessity of possessing independent information for justification of beliefs seems to directly undermine the kinds of experiences that Descartes took to be basic:

> 'Even the very subjective belief, that it seems to me that I am seeing something, is justified only if I have the information needed to tell whether it seems to me that I am seeing something; or whether I am having some quite different experience, for example, the experience of wondering whether I am seeing something. I may wonder whether I am seeing something when it does not especially seem to me that I am seeing something, and unless I have the information required to tell the difference, I am not completely justified in my belief. The most modest beliefs turn out to be the ones requiring independent information for their justification. The preceding argument uncovers a ubiquitous need for independent information to justify belief, and in so doing it undermines the foundation theory.'[17]

Perhaps the confusion concerning beliefs and their justification is merely on a linguistic level? Lehrer does consider this possibility but he concludes that our use of language offers no escape from the need to possess independent information to justify basic beliefs. As was discussed in chapter three, when words are used comparatively it does seem that extra information is needed to justify them. For example: if I say something appears red, I may be comparing the way this thing appears with the way other things appear. However, when words are used in a non-comparative way, we may not need independent information for justification. The non-comparative use of words applies in cases like someone believing that they are being 'appeared-to-redly' or that they are 'sensing redly'. The notion involved here is that to say that someone is 'sensing redly' may allow one to sidestep the issue of normal observers in normal conditions. It may well be that one is sensing in normal conditions as a normal observer, but it is not an analytical consequence of the term 'sensing-redly' used non-comparatively.

Lehrer's response to the initially promising case of the non-comparative use of language not requiring independent information for justification is highly critical. The central

[17] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.107.

idea behind his objection is once again the need for independent verification of sensory experiences with additional information. Although Lehrer does concede that the belief that one is 'appeared to redly' does not entail any comparison of one's present state to any other state, it does entail though that one's present state is of a certain kind, and to be completely justified in believing it to be of that kind, one must have the information needed to distinguish the current state from other states. Lehrer's overall analysis is that:

> 'To be completely justified in believing anything about a state or object or whatnot one always requires independent information.'[18]

If Lehrer is correct in his analysis of the impossibility of any belief not needing independent information for its justification, then the outlook for foundationalism does seem to be bleak. The next stage is to identify whether foundationalism can respond to the serious attacks levelled against basic beliefs and to assess how effective that response is.

A Defence of Basic Beliefs

A defence of basic beliefs needs to involve the following elements: firstly, a resolution of the justification issue: can it be shown that justification is intrinsic to an allegedly basic belief or is independent information required? Secondly, can it be demonstrated that sensory experiences have a foundational aspect? I will examine each of these areas in turn, focusing first on the justification of basic beliefs.

The search for intrinsic justification within beliefs aspiring to be basic seems to be the correct path to follow. If the justification of a belief depends on external factors such as other beliefs, then the original belief cannot be considered as being truly basic. Lehrer does recognise that the justification would have to be an intrinsic feature of a belief, if

[18] Lehrer, op.cit., p.110.

that belief is to qualify as a basic belief. But I do not think that he really pursues that quest for an internal, intrinsic feature. When Lehrer examines the belief that 'I see something red' he does not mention anything internal to the content of that belief, he immediately shifts the focus outwards and discusses standard conditions and normal observers.

This outward or external focus is evident again in Lehrer's analysis of a perceptual belief reduced to its minimal content: the belief that I see *something* without specifying exactly what object is seen. The reason that Lehrer provides for doubting this kind of belief is that the *something* has to be distinguished from a hallucinatory experience or a dream. I think that it is correct to say that real experience has to be distinguished from hallucinations or dreams, but why assume that 'independent' information is required to decide if we are really seeing something or merely dreaming? This issue of the potential confusion between hallucinatory or dream experiences with reality was addressed by Descartes in the *Meditations*.

Descartes's treatment of the issue may provide some insight into the intrinsic justification versus independent information debate. Descartes was well aware of the potential damage that dreams could cause to any epistemological account: in the *First Meditation* the phenomenon of dreaming forms the basis of one of the strongest challenges to what we think we know:

> 'How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be

> distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.'[19]

Descartes seeks to resolve the dream argument in the *Sixth Meditation*:

> 'Accordingly, I should not have any further fears about the falsity of what my senses tell me every day; on the contrary, the exaggerated doubts of the last few days should be dismissed as laughable. This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are. If, while I am awake, anyone were suddenly to appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep, so that I could not see where he had come from or where he had gone to, it would not be unreasonable for me to judge that he was a ghost, or a vision created in my brain, rather than a real man. But when I distinctly see where things come from and where and when they come to me, and when I can connect my perceptions of them with the whole of the rest of my life without a break, then I am quite certain that when I encounter these things I am not asleep but awake. And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources.'[20]

The crucial point in Descartes's analysis of the dream argument is that the solution he proposes is arrived at by examining the internal, intrinsic structure of dreams compared to waking experience. There is no appeal to 'independent' information as Lehrer's account requires. The intrinsic feature of waking experience is its continuity. Although we can dream continuous dreams, the continuity does not last long before something else pops into our head. Schmitt notes in his analysis of the dream passage that there are two competing theories attempting to explain apparent waking experience: the dream hypothesis, and the body hypothesis (that the objects of apparent waking experience are currently perceived bodies). Descartes favours the body hypothesis because it more adequately explains apparent waking experience.

I think that Schmitt offers a reasonable analysis of the dream passage when he states:

> 'We can of course string two dream hypotheses together to account for two episodes of experience. But the body hypothesis concerning these episodes is superior to the dream hypothesis in its power to explain an additional fact. The

[19] First Meditation: AT V11 19: CSM II 13.
[20] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 89-90: CSM II 61-62.

> body hypothesis explains not just the two episodes, but also that the episodes bear a relation of continuity. The body hypothesis explains this fact because it has a component that remains constant across episodes, the component according to which particular bodies are perceived. The dream hypothesis, however, leaves the episodes unrelated and cannot explain the fact of continuity.'[21]

The analysis of the dream passage in the *Meditations* does not reveal that *no* information is needed for justification: it suggests that there is no need for *independent* information to explain certain kinds of phenomena. This distinction between information and independent information is crucial in responding to Lehrer's general attack on Cartesian style foundations that I referred to earlier:

> 'Even the very subjective belief, that it seems to me that I am seeing something, is justified only if I have the information needed to tell whether it seems to me that I am seeing something; or whether I am having some quite different experience, for example, the experience of wondering whether I am seeing something. I may wonder whether I am seeing something when it does not especially seem to me that I am seeing something, and unless I have the information required to tell the difference, I am not completely justified in my belief. The most modest beliefs turn out to be the ones requiring independent information for their justification. The preceding argument uncovers a ubiquitous need for independent information to justify belief, and in so doing undermines the foundation theory.'[22]

Notice how there is a subtle change that takes place in the passage just quoted. Lehrer moves from stating that subjective belief can only be justified 'if I have the *information* needed to tell whether it seems to me that I am seeing something; or whether I am having some quite different experience,.....', to his conclusion at the end of the passage which is that 'The preceding argument uncovers a ubiquitous need for *independent information* to justify belief, and in so doing it undermines the foundation theory.' Why make the jump from 'information' to 'independent information'? The distinction between the two is not just merely semantic: it is at the very heart of the issue in question. At this stage in Lehrer's argument he is allegedly looking for any belief whose justification is intrinsic to itself. It is perhaps not surprising that he does

[21] Frederick F. Schmitt, 'Why was Descartes a Foundationalist?', in *Essays on Descartes' Meditations*, ed. by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, University of California Press Ltd., 1986., p.495.
[22] In Lehrer's *Knowledge* (1974), p.107.

not find any intrinsic justification because he makes no distinction between 'information' and 'independent information'.

The lack of distinction between information and independent information is apparent in Lehrer's analysis of the belief that, someone may have, that they are being 'appeared-to-redly', or that they are 'sensing-redly'. Lehrer correctly points out that to be completely justified in believing that one is sensing in a particular way, one must have the information necessary to distinguish between that way of appearing from all other ways of appearing. But once more, Lehrer does not seem to consider the possibility that the information that is required could somehow be intrinsic to the belief itself. His conclusion concerning sensing in particular ways is:

> 'To be completely justified in believing anything about a state or object or whatnot one always requires independent information'.[23]

It is one of the key objections to the foundational project that beliefs about sensations require independent verification and are therefore not truly basic. What I have attempted to show in this section so far is that it may be possible for justification to be an intrinsic feature of sensory beliefs and therefore to focus on external reasons for justification may be misguided. But if that analysis is correct, then the task now becomes the rather daunting challenge of demonstrating *how* justification can be intrinsic to sensory beliefs. It is my contention that not only can justification be intrinsic to beliefs, but also that the *Meditations* can be interpreted in that way. The first step in showing how justification can be an intrinsic feature of foundational beliefs is to address the propositional / non-propositional dilemma.

[23] See Lehrer, op.cit., p.110.

The Propositional / Non-Propositional Dilemma

Foundationalism faces a serious dilemma regarding the sensory experiences that are alleged to ground the foundational beliefs: there is either some sense in which the sensory experiences are propositional, or such experiences are not propositional. If sensory experiences have no propositional status, then they cannot require justification, but it is difficult to see how they could then contribute to the justification of propositional beliefs. If sensory experiences are regarded as having a propositional facet, then there may not be any difficulty in thinking of them as relating to beliefs in such a way as to enable the justification of those beliefs, but questions could be raised about the epistemic status of the experiences themselves.

Bonjour[24], who now overtly defends a form of Cartesian foundationalism, presents the dilemma facing foundationalism by first identifying the structure of a foundational belief as consisting of the following two features, in addition to the sensory experience itself:

1. 'There is the allegedly basic or foundational belief whose content pertains to some aspect of that experience.
2. There is what appears to be a second, independent mental act, an act of direct apprehension of the relevant experiential feature. It is this second act that is supposed to supply the person's reason for thinking that the belief is true.'[25]

The key question is: what is the epistemic status of the second mental act? If it is cognitive and conceptual, having as its content the proposition or claim that the experience has the specific character indicated by the belief, then if this second mental act is itself justified, it is easy to see why this second mental act provides a reason for thinking that the belief is true.

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[24] Laurence Bonjour, 'Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism', in *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism,* ed. by Michael R. De Paul, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2001, pp.21-37.
[25] Ibid., p.23.

But it is difficult to see why this second mental act does not require justification of some sort, some reason for thinking that its propositional content is true. If, on the other hand, the second mental act of direct apprehension is non-cognitive and non-conceptual in character, not involving any propositional claim about the character of the experience, then although no issue of justification arises, it is difficult to see how such an act of direct apprehension can provide any reason for thinking the original supposedly foundational belief is true. If a person who is directly acquainted with an experience is not propositionally aware that it has such and such features, in what way is his belief that he has an experience with those features justified by the act of direct acquaintance? Bonjour regards this dilemma as the fundamental objection to foundationalism. It is through analysis of what Bonjour refers to as 'conscious experience'[26] that the solution to the foundational dilemma is to be found. I will now proceed to investigate Bonjour's claims to determine how effective they are.

The conscious experience of foundational beliefs

A metabelief is a belief about a belief or thought. As we saw earlier, Lehrer raised the possibility of doubting the reliability of metabeliefs. How can I justify the belief that it seems to me that I am seeing something, without being able to tell the difference between seeming to see something and wondering whether I am seeing something? As I noted in chapter three: Williams also expresses the same concern that 'seeming to see' cannot be distinguished from the true experience of perceiving an object as it really is. Bonjour feels that the answer to this problem lies in appealing to the 'conscious experience'[27] involved in having the belief that it seems to me that I am seeing

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[26] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.24. Bonjour does recognise that his theory hinges on a view of consciousness as an intrinsic property of a mental state. The alternative view, proposed by David Rosenthal is that one mental state becomes conscious only by being the object of a second mental state; a higher-order thought that one is in the first mental state. But I agree with Bonjour that this leads to a very unlikely infinite hierarchy of higher-order thoughts. See pp.26-28 of Bonjour's paper for more details on this debate.
[27] Ibid., P.24.

something. There are two intrinsic and essential aspects of having the belief that it seems to me that I see something, one aspect is the propositional content that it seems to me that I am seeing something, and the second aspect is the feature of my holding that belief. The crucial point is that these are two aspects of the one awareness. There is nothing reflective: there is no second order mental act with the propositional content that I have the belief in question. They are components of the first level state of the belief itself. They both contribute to make the belief what it is, rather than some other belief or a different sort of conscious state altogether.

On this account, the most fundamental experience involved in believing that I seem to see something is not a reflective awareness, nor is it a purely non-cognitive awareness that would not reflect the specific nature of the belief and its content. The 'built-in' awareness of content does not require justification. In fact the awareness of content is infallible. We cannot be mistaken in the awareness of content, as Bonjour states:

'there is no independent fact or situation for it to be mistaken about.'[28]

Bonjour views the metabelief as a description of the content involved in the awareness of content. By consciously having that built-in awareness, I am in a position to judge whether or not the description is correct. The epistemic status of such a metabelief is that it can be justified in the sense that there is an internally accessible reason for thinking that it is true, but the reason can avoid any appeal to further beliefs that would themselves be in need of justification. Indeed, I will argue later that Descartes's clarity and distinctness rule can go a long way towards providing a compelling case for thinking that a belief is true.

[28] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.25.

A vital point that Bonjour makes is that the metabelief is not itself infallible. It would be possible to have a belief about a belief that does not accurately reflect the content contained in the built-in awareness of the original belief. The possibility for error in beliefs about beliefs is still a very real threat. As Bonjour states:

> 'Such a mistake might be a case of mere inattention, or it might result from the complexity or obscurity of the belief content itself or from some further problem.'[29]

Bonjour's view that empirical experience has the two aspects of infallible, built-in awareness that then leads to a judgment of the correctness of any description of that experience, seems to reinforce Descartes's reference to the 'hats and coats' example in the *Second Meditation*:

> 'But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves, just as I say that I see the wax. Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.'[30]

Given that our sensory experience may have a built-in awareness and a judgmental aspect to that same awareness, the next issue to address is to offer an explanation of the relationship between the content of our experiences and the beliefs that we may hold concerning that content.

The relationship between the content of experience and belief

A key objection to Bonjour's view revolves around the idea that the content of a perceptual experience is non-propositional or non-conceptual in character. It is then argued that an awareness of that content cannot have any justificatory status to a belief that is formulated in conceptual or propositional terms. The relationship between the content and the belief is merely causal. As Davidson states:

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[29] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.25.
[30] Second Meditation: AT V11 32: CSM II 21.

> 'The relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs, or other propositional attitudes. What then is the relation? The answer is, I think, obvious: the relation is causal. Sensations cause some beliefs and in this sense are the basis or ground of those beliefs. But a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified.'[31]

The implication for the built-in awareness of sensory content, on Davidson's view, would be that even if it were true, it would not play any part in justification and therefore would have no real epistemological significance.

Bonjour agrees with the premise in the objection that sensory experience is essentially non-conceptual in character. The visual experiences we have seem to be far too detailed to capture them adequately in any conceptual or propositional formulation. The example that Bonjour offers is the scenario that even if we imagine an ideally complete conceptual description, very specific shades of colour for example, it is not the same thing as actually experiencing the pattern of colours itself. I think that this account has an intuitive appeal. It is common for people to describe experiences that they have had, but there is recognition that the experience itself is richer than any description of it. Although, the fact that the specific content of the experience is itself non-propositional and non-conceptual, does not mean that it cannot be described with various degrees of detail and precision.

It is possible that the relationship between the non-conceptual content and a conceptual description may not be a logical relationship, but it is not merely causal either, as Davidson argues. It could be what Bonjour calls a 'descriptive relation'.[32] The nature of the experiential content can form the basis for thinking that the description is true or correct, or, untrue and incorrect. When I have a conscious state of sensory experience, I

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[31] Bonjour quotes Davidson on p.29 of his 'Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism'.
[32] Ibid., p.30.

am aware of the specific sensory content of that state simply by virtue of having that experience. If I have a second-level, metabelief that attempts to describe that experience, and if I understand the descriptive content of that belief, I seem to be in an ideal position to judge whether the conceptual description is accurate, and to be justified in holding the belief. Viewed in this way, Bonjour observes that perhaps 'the given, is, after all, not a myth!'[33] It seems that a potential foundation for empirical justification exists, consisting of beliefs about the content of sensory experience.

Proposing a descriptive relationship between sensations and beliefs is not without its difficulties. There is a potential difficulty in suggesting that justification relies in some way on the descriptive capacity that people have to describe their experiences. The problem seems to be that any description that we provide will always fall short of a complete, ideal description. If this is the case, then do we have the capability to provide adequate descriptions? Even if we take the case of artists or wine-tasters[34], or anyone else who has a highly developed sensory awareness, it is still doubtful that such a person could provide a description detailed enough to capture all or even most of the content of physical world experiences. Even allowing for a moment that we did possess the necessary cognitive abilities for full descriptions, the time and effort required to formulate descriptions that are justified would not be practical. Common sense seems to indicate that people do not go around justifying every experience by exhaustively describing it either internally, to themselves, or externally to other people through language.

[33] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.31.
[34] Ibid., p.32.

Bonjour's suggestion is that we 'conceptually grasp'[35] the content of sensory experience in terms of the physical objects and situations, that we would be inclined, on the basis of experience, other things being equal, to think we are perceiving. Take the example of someone who has a visual belief about a physical object. The grasp of the character of this experience is that there is awareness that the perceptual claim is a result of vision, the person sees the object and this visual experience is such to make it look as though an object is present.

It is interesting that Bonjour's suggestion of grasping the content of sensory experience seems to echo Descartes's view that we can know something without *fully* grasping it:

> 'To grasp something is to embrace it in one's thought; to know something it suffices to touch it, just as we can touch a mountain but not put our arms around it.'[36]

Even if one accepts the view that there is a descriptive relation between the content of experience and the beliefs we hold concerning that content, a key question still remains: do we have any way of justifiably distinguishing appearance from reality. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

Appearance versus Reality

Bonjour poses the question: how does the appearance of a certain sort of physical object or situation contribute to the justification of the claim that such a physical object is actually present and being perceived?

The basis for the inference from sensory experience to physical reality may be found in the fundamental facts about such sensory experience. There is the spontaneous character of appearances and the fact that they fit together and reinforce each other in a coherent

[35] See Bonjour's 'Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism', (2001), p.33.
[36] Letter to Mersenne of 27 May 1630: AT I 152.

fashion, presenting in Bonjour's terms: 'a relatively seamless and complicated picture of an ongoing world.'[37]

It is the fundamental facts about sensory experience that Descartes seems to have been aware of in the dream passage in the *Sixth Meditation*:

> 'This applies especially to the principal reason for doubt, namely my inability to distinguish between being asleep and being awake. For I now notice that there is a vast difference between the two, in that dreams are never linked by memory with all the other actions of life as waking experiences are.'[38]

It is the same 'relatively seamless' feature of our waking experience that leads Descartes to favour our waking experience over our dream experience. Bonjour also mentions the coherent nature of experience where things fit together and reinforce each other. I think there is a remarkable similarity between this aspect of Bonjour's account and Descartes's account referring to perceptions in the closing lines of the *Sixth Meditation*:

> 'And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources.'[39]

Apart from the relatively seamless aspect of physical reality and the reinforcing experiences we have of that reality, Descartes seems to use the clarity and distinctness rule as an epistemic principle to add justificatory weight to beliefs. This is an issue that I will return to in a later section.

Summary

So far in this chapter I have examined the nature and status of foundational beliefs. This theme has occupied a relatively large section of this chapter. I think this reflects the fact that most of the debate concerning foundationalism is focused on the claim that there

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[37] See Bonjour, op.cit., p.36.
[38] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 89: CSM II 61.
[39] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 90: CSM II 62.

can be epistemological foundations. A summary of some of the key points may be helpful at this stage. The Cogito is the first certainty in Descartes's epistemological account. Part of the significance of the Cogito is that it is clearly and distinctly perceived. This clarity and distinctness may be able to assist in the justification of other beliefs, a claim that I will be returning to later. It seems that on any account, information is needed to justify beliefs, but this information may be somehow intrinsic to the belief in question. The demonstration of *how* justification may be intrinsic led to Bonjour's account of conscious experience with a descriptive relationship between the content of a belief and the belief itself. Finally, it was suggested that the seamless and coherent experience that seems to characterise physical reality along with the clarity and distinctness of such experience may be what facilitates our distinction between appearance and reality. The next task is to look at the issue of how justification may be transferred from basic to non-basic beliefs.

The Transfer of Justification

Given that it seems reasonable to hold that beliefs about sensations may qualify as basic, how do we build upon these foundations? By what process or mechanism do basic beliefs justify non-basic beliefs? On the strong, classical foundationalist account deduction is the only method of building knowledge from the foundations. As I identified in chapter three[40]: it is hard to see how knowledge outside of mathematical or logical arenas could be constructed using deduction. I also noted that Cornman attacks what he regards as Cartesian foundationalism in the following way:

> 'The failure of the thesis that basic reports entail non-basic statements shows why what I have called the Cartesian species of traditional foundationalism leads to scepticism...of empirical sentences, only basic reports are initially certain, and that the extension of knowledge beyond the foundation is by deductive inference alone. This last requirement is made in order to guarantee inferential certainty of what is known. Thus, on the Cartesian view, each of us must begin

[40] See chapter three, p.78.

only with his own basic reports and 'conceptual' truths as initial premises and try to extend his knowledge by deductive derivation.'[41]

The assumption that Cornman is making is that Descartes relies exclusively on deductive inference. As I suggested in chapter two, there is evidence in the *Meditations* and elsewhere in Descartes's work that other methods of justification are used. The dream passage in the *Sixth Meditation* can be viewed as a hypothetico-deductive argument. The general form of the hypothetico-deductive argument is identified by Cornman[42] as:

(1) Basic reports, b_1, b_2,...b_n are to be explained for s at t.

(2) Hypothesis, T, explains b_1, b_2,...b_n better at t than any hypothesis that conflicts with T.

Therefore

(3) It is probable, for s at t, that T is true.

Cornman indicates that for a hypothetico-deductive style argument to succeed in the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs, the best hypothesis needs to be analytical in nature. If there is an appeal to evidence, this evidence would then have to be justified starting a spiral of justificatory claims.

At this stage an important question arises: is Descartes's use of the hypothetico-deductive argument in the dream passage analytical in nature? I think that it is. Descartes's appeal to the reality of our waking experience over the dream hypothesis is based on examining the intrinsic features of dreams with the intrinsic features of our waking experience. It is significant that in the dream passage Descartes refers to 'distinctly' seeing where things have come from and where they go to while awake,

[41] Cornman, James, W., *Skepticism, Justification, and Explanation*, D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1980, p.83.
[42] Ibid., pp.89-90.

compared to the sudden appearance and disappearance of things in dreams. There seems to be an implicit appeal to the clarity and distinctness principle to justify perceptual claims. It is important to stress that Descartes does not explicitly refer to hypothetico-deduction as a means of transferring justification, I am only suggesting that the seeds are there within the *Meditations* and that if the *Meditations* are read in this way then Descartes's epistemology may be in a better position to respond to sceptical attacks. If hypothetico-deduction is combined with the clarity and distinctness epistemic principle then reliability is added to inferences. I will now examine in more detail the use of epistemic principles.

Epistemic Principles

One of the functions of an epistemic principle is to provide justification for basic beliefs. The form that an epistemic principle could take is: whenever a belief is formed in manner X, it is a justified belief. If an epistemic principle is to be used for allegedly basic beliefs, it will have to be an internal or intrinsic feature of the belief itself, because if there is an appeal to any external factors or beliefs, those factors themselves will then require justification.

There are two requirements that any epistemic principle must satisfy: (1) the epistemic principle cannot be arbitrarily chosen, and (2) the epistemic principle must show why the basic belief is justified without any inferential support. In the *Meditations* Descartes seems to use the clarity and distinctness rule as an epistemic principle. I will now assess Descartes's use of the clarity and distinctness rule to determine whether it can withstand the kinds of critical attack that are often directed at epistemic principles.

The Clarity and Distinctness Rule as an Epistemic Principle

It is in the *Third Meditation* that Descartes first formulates the clarity and distinctness rule for establishing truth. The clarity and distinctness rule is stated as follows:

'So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'[43]

The task is now to see how the clarity and distinctness rule, as an epistemic principle, can withstand the objections that are levelled against such principles. One of the key criticisms of epistemic principles is that they seem to be arbitrarily chosen. At first glance, it may appear that there is nothing special about Descartes choosing clarity and distinctness as a yardstick against which to measure the truth of perception. But I think there is something special in Descartes's choice of clarity and distinctness. The special character of the clarity and distinctness rule is due to its source.

The source of the clarity and distinctness rule is in the Cogito. The key feature of the Cogito is that it is clearly and distinctly perceived. As Descartes notes in the *Third Meditation*:

> 'I am certain that I am a thinking thing. Do I not therefore also know what is required for my being certain about anything? In this first item of knowledge there is simply a clear and distinct perception of what I am asserting; this would not be enough to make me certain of the truth of the matter if it could ever turn out that something which I perceived with such clarity and distinctness was false. So I now seem to be able to lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true.'[44]

The significance of locating the Cogito itself as the source of the clarity and distinctness rule cannot be overstated. The Cogito is incorrigible, indubitable. Clarity and distinctness is an intrinsic, internal feature of the Cogito. So far from being arbitrary, the

[43] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.
[44] Third Meditation: AT V11 35: CSM II 24.

clarity and distinctness rule seems to enjoy a very special, unique, privileged status. The key question now is: how is the clarity and distinctness rule to be applied?

The application of the clarity and distinctness rule

The clarity and distinctness principle can be used as a template or blueprint against which we can test perceptual claims. Perceptions can be judged on the basis of whether they possess the same level of clarity and distinctness as the Cogito, with an affirmative answer to this question indicating the truth of the belief in question. The application of the clarity and distinctness rule is not infallible. It is an objective method applied subjectively. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Bonjour describes sensory experiences as conscious states. I am aware of the specific sensory content of that state simply by having the experience. If I have a second-level, metabelief that attempts to describe that experience, and if I understand the descriptive content of that belief, I seem to be in an ideal position to judge whether the conceptual description is accurate. This is perhaps where the clarity and distinctness principle comes in, facilitating our judging of conceptual descriptions.

In Chapter three[45] I identified that the epistemic principles approach has been challenged by Heidelberger and Cornman. Although Cornman did provide a number of traditional scenarios against the supporters of the epistemic principles strategy, the core of his challenge seemed in the end to rest on the claim that a person might seek to avoid relevant evidence even in cases where that evidence was readily available to him.

It seems to me that the curious part of Cornman's argument is the idea of someone avoiding relevant evidence to arrive at a perceptual claim. How can someone avoid evidence that makes it reasonable to judge that their perception may be mistaken? In Descartes's scheme such an inference would not be justified, because the original

[45] See chapter three, pp.70-2.

perception was not clear and distinct. If my analysis is correct, then clarity and distinctness may have a role in justification. The question that now arises is: if the clarity and distinctness rule is not arbitrarily chosen and it may play a role in justification, can it assist in providing a solution to the infinite regress argument? I will now address this question.

A Solution to the infinite regress argument?

As I identified in chapter three[46], it seems that the stronger form of foundationalism would have a better chance of providing a solution to the regress problem. If one can reach a point where there are beliefs that are justified without appeal to further beliefs or external evidence, the regress can be stopped. The clarity and distinctness rule may have a part to play in the termination of regress.

The early Bonjour, before switching to the foundationalist camp, presented a key anti-foundationalist argument:

(1) 'There are basic, empirical beliefs which are justified and their justification does not depend on any further empirical beliefs.

(2) For a belief to be justified there needs to be a reason why it is likely to be true.

(3) For a belief to be justified for a particular person, requires that this person be in cognitive possession of such a reason.

(4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe with justification the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.

(5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely a priori; at least one of the premises must be empirical.

Therefore the justification of a supposed empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows therefore that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.'[47]

Bonjour's analysis is that justification ultimately depends on additional empirical beliefs which in turn need to be justified, and if this is the case, the cycle of justification

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[46] See chapter three, pp.75-6.

[47] Bonjour, Laurence, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Harvard University Press, 1985, p.32.

continues. On this reading, there is no termination of justificatory regress. However, the clarity and distinctness rule is something that we can be in cognitive possession of and can provide a reason why a belief is likely to be true. Clarity and distinctness is not a separate belief, it is a feature of our empirical experience that may or may not be present, and is capable of ending the cycle of justification. At this stage I think it would be useful to identify where Descartes fits into the foundationalist picture.

Descartes's foundationalism

Descartes's epistemological project in the *Meditations* can be interpreted in the following way:

(1) The proposition 'I think, I am' is the solid, certain, foundation. The Cogito is not merely the 'certain and unshakeable' point of departure for knowledge acquisition that Descartes refers to in the *Second Meditation*: it is also the source of the epistemic principle of clarity and distinctness.

(2) The Cogito is something whose truth is clearly and distinctly perceived. The truth of anything else that is very clearly and distinctly perceived is ensured. From this observation we can derive the clarity and distinctness rule: whatever is perceived very clearly and distinctly is true.

(3) The role of God: there is no doubt that Descartes placed great importance on attempting to prove the existence of God to copper fasten his epistemology. The route that Descartes takes is, to borrow a chapter heading from Cottingham: 'from self to God to knowledge of the world'[48]. Descartes was probably, as Cottingham observes 'over-

[48] This is the heading of chapter three in Cottingham's *Descartes*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 1986, p.47.

ambitious'[49] in this aspect of his project. What is significant about Descartes's argument for God's existence is the way it is developed. As I identified in chapter two:

the causal adequacy principle, on which the proof depends, is seen as certain, not deductively but because it shares the same clarity and distinctness as the Cogito. So there does seem to be evidence here of Descartes using clarity and distinctness of the Cogito in an exemplary way, as a standard against which other propositions can be measured.

(4) In relation to empirical knowledge: beliefs about sensory experiences have a foundational *element* that is certain, indubitable.

(5) It is by application of the clarity and distinctness epistemic principle that we may be able to justify basic beliefs and facilitate the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs. The key factor concerning the clarity and distinctness rule as an epistemic principle is that it is internal. It is not something external, which then needs to be justified.

(6) It is due to the intrinsic nature of the clarity and distinctness principle and because of its secure source in the Cogito, that this perhaps provides a viable solution to the infinite regress problem. Justification can be traced back ultimately to sensory beliefs which can be justified internally, without appealing to external evidence.

If I am correct in my assessment, then we should not be too hasty in classifying Descartes as a strong, classical foundationalist. Although Descartes does insist on certain and indubitable foundation for knowledge, a certainty that the Cogito provides, he seems to employ alternative methods other than deduction to get beyond that

[49] See Cottingham, op.cit., p.73.

foundation. It is reasonable to view the clarity and distinctness of the Cogito as an exemplar or standard against which other propositions can be measured. It is for this reason that I feel it may be possible to interpret Descartes's foundationalism as showing 'exemplary' tendencies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have offered an account of Descartes's epistemological project in the *Meditations* that deviates from the traditional, classical account. With the Cogito, Descartes discovered the Archimedean point of certainty that he was searching for. It is the recognition of the clarity and distinctness that characterises the Cogito, that leads Descartes to the discovery of the clarity and distinctness rule. It is the application of the clarity and distinctness rule that, I feel, lifts Descartes's endeavours out of the 'isolated' and 'subjective self awareness' that Cottingham[50] speaks of. The clarity and distinctness rule is able to do this because it is an objective rule that is subjectively applied, just as a method for summing up a column of numbers is an objective method, subjectively applied.

As an epistemic principle, the clarity and distinctness rule seems to be of the right calibre to answer the sceptics: it is not arbitrarily chosen, as its source is the Cogito itself, and its employment is internal without the need of justificatory support. Descartes's apparent use of hypothetico-deductive style argumentation is significant. Descartes himself does not emphasise such argumentation, but if it is correct to claim that even traces of hypothetico-deductive argumentation are present in the *Meditations* then Descartes may not be a strictly strong classical foundationalist as previously thought. As I have already mentioned, strong classical foundationalism insists on standard deduction *exclusively* as a way of building knowledge.

[50] In Cottingham's *Descartes* (1986), p.47.

There is another vital ingredient that can be mentioned: the possibility of hypothetico-deductive argumentation *combined* with the clarity and distinctness rule. A hypothetico-deductive argument involves testing competing hypotheses to see which hypothesis offers the best explanation. A critic might argue that there is no standard in evaluating what is the best explanation. The clarity and distinctness rule used as an exemplar provides that standard and can ultimately provide justification. So therefore, justificatory weight is added to hypothetico-deduction.

Perhaps with the Cogito as the unshakeable foundation, the clarity and distinctness rule used to both justify basic beliefs and provide a mechanism for the transfer of justification from basic to non-basic beliefs, Cartesian foundationalism may provide a reasonable solution to the infinite regress problem and in so doing, at least weaken the arguments of the sceptics.

Conclusion

As identified in chapter one[1]: there are two crucial questions that a foundationalist theory of justification must address: firstly, can there be foundations to our knowledge? Secondly, even if epistemic foundations are possible, how do we build the rest of what we know upon those foundations? In relation to the first question: Descartes seems to have identified a secure, unassailable foundation in the Cogito. The key feature of the Cogito is that it is clearly and distinctly perceived. The clarity and distinctness rule is then derived from the Cogito, that whatever is very clearly and distinctly perceived is true. It is the use of the clarity and distinctness rule as an exemplar or standard against which our perceptions can be tested, that may facilitate the answer to the second question of how we build knowledge upon the foundations. As observed in chapter four[2]: the clarity and distinctness rule used as an epistemic principle, may be capable of weakening the sceptical attack, as the Cogito is not arbitrarily chosen (its source is the Cogito itself), and the deployment of the clarity and distinctness rule is internal, it is not independent, in need of justificatory support.

On the classical foundationalist account, deduction is the *only* acceptable means of building knowledge. As Audi states, referring to Cartesian foundationalism: 'only deductive inferences can transmit justification to superstructure elements.'[3] But as I have argued in chapters two and four, it is reasonable to propose that Descartes's epistemology does not rely *solely* on strict deductive inferences. In the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* Descartes indicates that science cannot be developed on a purely

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[1] See chapter one, p.4.
[2] See chapter four, p.109.
[3] Audi, Robert, *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.361-2.

a priori basis: he argues that it is unreasonable to 'expect truth to germinate from our heads like Minerva from the head of Jupiter.'[4]

The sequence of the *Meditations* is presented in what Cottingham calls the 'order of discovery'.[5] This sequence is the route that anyone thinking about the issues in the *Meditations* would probably take. Even though Descartes does present a more mathematical or geometrical display of the *Meditations* in the *Replies*, he does seem to favour the more analytical style of the *Meditations*. As I noted in chapter two[6]: before giving the geometrical layout Descartes states:

> 'yet I am convinced that it is the *Meditations* which will yield by far the greater benefit.'[7]

If Descartes really believed that strict deduction was the only way to build knowledge, then why did he not simply provide the geometrical display only? As suggested in chapter two: a reasonable interpretation may be that perhaps knowledge can be presented in a mathematical or deductive manner *after* it has been obtained. This may account for the geometrical display in the *Replies* after the discoveries of the *Meditations* had been made.

A final question that may be raised is: does all of this make it easy to obtain knowledge? The answer to that is an emphatic no! I believe Richard Fumerton summarises the situation well:

> 'In common place inquiries we simply assume knowledge of the past based on memory, the future based on inductive inference, the external world based on perception. The question is whether we can move from this data to other conclusions employing inferences we give ourselves as legitimate. When we

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[4] Rules for the Direction of the Mind: AT X 380: CSM I 21.
[5] Cottingham, John, *Descartes*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., Oxford, 1986, p.48.
[6] See chapter two, p.49.
[7] Second Set of Replies: AT VII 159: CSM II 113.

> start doing philosophy, we stop getting gifts. We must justify what we normally do not bother to justify and it may not be possible to do it'.[8]

Descartes was well aware of the difficulties in pursuing knowledge, as he states in the closing lines of the *Meditations*:

> 'But since the pressure of things to be done does not always allow us to stop and make such a meticulous check, it must be admitted that in this human life we are often liable to make mistakes about particular things, and we must acknowledge the weakness of our nature.'[9]

Perhaps Descartes's epistemological legacy is that he presented his ideas in the *Meditations* in a way that lends itself to philosophical exploration. Philosophy may not always offer solutions, but it should provide avenues of exploration. One such exploration, which I have attempted to illuminate, is the possible *exemplary* foundationalist tendencies within the *Meditations*. On this interpretation, Descartes provides a *viable*, if not a definitive account of knowledge possession, in spite of the complexity of the task and the fallibility of our human nature.

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[8] Richard Fumerton, 'Classical Foundationalism', in *Resurrecting Old-Fashioned Foundationalism*, ed. by Michael R. De Paul, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2001, p.19.
[9] Sixth Meditation: AT V11 90: CSM II 62.

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