

## **SCEPTICISM AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONALISM: A REFLECTION**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to explain the challenges of epistemological scepticism, which questions the nature of knowledge and reality. It examines the ideas of prominent philosophers like Hume and Kant, who argued that knowledge is limited or subjective. The paper investigates different approaches to knowledge - rationalism (reason), empiricism (experience), and constructivism (social context) - to develop a strong response to sceptical doubts. The key areas explored in this paper include the limits of knowledge, perception, and the relationship between belief and justification. Thus, the paper provides a comprehensive critique of sceptical arguments and offers new strategies to address them. The findings have implications for science, ethics, and philosophy, informing methodologies and advancing understanding of knowledge and reality.*

### **Keywords**

*Epistemology, Knowledge, Scepticism*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Received: 08-02-26**

**Approved: 11-03-26**

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**Article No. 21**

*RJPSS Oct.-Mar. 2026,*

*Vol. LI No. 1,*

*Pg. 182-188*

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[https://doi.org/10.31995/  
rjpss.2026.v51i01.21](https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2026.v51i01.21)

## Introduction

Traditional epistemology has long struggled to comprehend the intricacies of the universe, acknowledging the profound, intrinsic bond between human cognition and reality. This complex relationship has sparked intense scrutiny among analytic philosophers, prompting them to investigate the fundamental nature of human knowledge. Recognizing that language, semantic explorations, and everyday activities presuppose a basic understanding of the world, philosophers seek to unravel the underlying mechanisms of knowledge acquisition. It is noteworthy that, on the basis of the foundational inquiries of Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant, analytic philosophers have shifted their focus from constructing exhaustive epistemological frameworks to critically examining the concept of knowledge itself.

Analytic philosophers' inquiry into human knowledge delves into the elemental question: *what precisely enables human knowledge?* This subtle approach fosters an evolving, self-reflective exploration, yielding a dynamic comprehension of human knowledge intertwined with existence. Through this lens, they redefine epistemology's objectives, prioritizing four key areas: unravelling knowledge's underlying structures, exploring cognition's interplay with reality, investigating language's role in shaping understanding, and probing the boundaries of human knowledge. Thus, this refined perspective culminates in critical studies probing epistemology's very nature, ensuring a rich, pluralistic understanding of human knowledge.

**Objectives:** This paper focuses on:

- (i) To examine the nature of scepticism stemming from wholesale doubt about knowledge.
- (ii) To explore the interplay between cognition and reality.
- (iii) To explore how anti-foundationalism reshapes epistemology, focusing on context and human experience.

**Methodology:** This paper on human knowledge adopts a qualitative, empirical, and descriptive methodology, integrating literature review, conceptual analysis, philosophical inquiry, and conceptual mapping.

**Discussion and Findings:** Skepticism's revitalized presence has revolutionized critical epistemology, transforming it from a quest for certainty to a nuanced exploration of knowledge's intricacies. Historically, skepticism sparked intellectual fervour, inspiring giants like Descartes and Kant. David Hume's provocative skepticism, in particular, shattered Kant's "dogmatic slumber,"<sup>1</sup> awakening him to new perspectives and underscoring the imperative for rigorous

inquiry. Today, analytic philosophers embrace a sophisticated approach; acknowledging skepticism's enduring relevance and seeking to unravel its implications. Building on Robert Nozick's philosophical legacy, they recognize skepticism's role extends beyond refutation to illuminating knowledge's underlying mechanisms. This paradigm shift redirects epistemology's focus from affirming possibility to grasping the dynamics of knowledge acquisition, despite skepticism's lingering presence. By embracing this nuanced stance, epistemology redefines its objectives, venturing into uncharted territories of comprehension.

Skepticism, a profound philosophical stance, challenges the notion of knowledge, questioning its very feasibility and our claims to understanding. At its core, skepticism seeks to expose the limitations and uncertainties inherent in knowledge acquisition, arguing that absolute certainty remains elusive. By scrutinizing the standards of knowledge, sceptics reveal vulnerabilities in epistemological frameworks, demonstrating that purported truths can be logically contested. This nuanced perspective hinges the provisional nature of knowledge, highlighting the tension between our confidence in beliefs and the inevitability of doubt. Through logical inquiry, sceptics challenge the notion of objective truth, encouraging critical examination of assumptions and fostering intellectual humility. In his seminal work, *The Problem of Knowledge*, A.J. Ayer eloquently articulates the sceptical perspective: "What the sceptic contends is that our markings are too higher; that the grounds on which we are normally ready to concede the right to be sure are more worthless than we think; he may even go so far as to say that they are not worth anything at all. The attack is directed, not against the way in which we apply our standard of proof, but against those standards themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Philosopher A.J. Ayer highlights the sceptic's stance: "All that he requires is that errors should be possible, not that they should actually occur. For this charge against our standards of proof is not that they work badly; he does not suggest that there are others which would work better. The ground on which he attacks is they are logically defective; or if not defective, at any rate logically questionable."<sup>3</sup> This skepticism underlies the relentless questioning of knowledge-claims, disputing foundational proof existence and possibility.

The sceptic argues human knowledge lacks logical foundations, rendering guarantees for knowledge unattainable. Robert Nozick's philosophical inquiry illustrates this: "Consider the nature of your perception: can you truly verify that you're reading these words in reality, or could your mind be tricked into this experience through hallucination, dreams, or neural manipulation, creating an illusion of seeing text that isn't actually there?"<sup>4</sup> This challenge prompts epistemologists to

scrutinize the accuracy of perception, ensuring it reliably represents reality, rather than deceiving us with illusions, such as hallucinations or simulated environments, like mistakenly perceiving oneself as being on Earth, surrounded by familiar sights, when in fact, one is floating in a tank in Alfa Centauri.

There is no question of doubt that sceptical philosophers pose a formidable challenge, questioning the nature of knowledge and reality, leaving us unable to prove whether we are dreaming or deceived by the Cartesian demon. Non-sceptical thinkers, however, remain optimistic about defending knowledge's possibility. They counter skepticism in two ways: (1) arguing that knowledge rests on cognitive capacities and sensory experience, providing a solid foundation; and (2) contending that universal skepticism is self-defeating, meaningless and logically inconsistent. Analytic philosophers echo these responses, divided between strengthening knowledge foundations and dismissing skepticism as irrational, viewing global doubt as unwarranted speculation. This dichotomy reflects fundamental debates about knowledge's nature, pitting foundationalism against pragmatic refutations.

Skepticism occupies an important place in philosophy, distinct from genuine inquiries into the universe and humanity's place within it. Sceptics challenge the fundamental possibility of understanding, adopting a contrarian stance that unsettles epistemologists. This discomfort stems from skepticism's wholesale doubt on knowledge, prompting scholars in classical epistemology and analytic philosophy to develop foundational principles ensuring certainty. Consequently, skepticism fuels philosophical debate, driving thinkers to reconcile doubts with the quest for understanding.

In response to skepticism's enduring challenges, foundationalists contend that human knowledge rests on self-evident truths, providing an indispensable foundation. This confidence in reason's capacity fuels rationalists' inquiries into knowledge's underpinnings, while empiricists seek to establish sense experience as the basis for scientific understanding. It is worthy to note here that Kant's alternative foundationalist approach, discovering a priori principles underlying human knowledge, offers a nuanced solution to skepticism, bridging doubt and understanding. This interplay reflects humanity's innate conviction that knowledge is attainable, deeply rooted in human nature. Thus, classical epistemology countered skepticism through foundationalism, whereas analytic philosophy's response has been diverse, with modern foundationalism emphasizing empiricism to justify knowledge through primary or basic beliefs, sense-experience-based beliefs.<sup>5</sup> Proponents like Rudolf Carnap<sup>6</sup> and A.J. Ayer<sup>7</sup> argue empirical knowledge requires basic beliefs, experience-derived beliefs as its foundation, shaping analytic

epistemology's pursuit of scientific knowledge's fundamental principles within sensory experience.

The foundation theory of knowledge proposes a hierarchical framework, where knowledge is structured into *base and apex* components, with fundamental beliefs forming the foundation and supporting higher-level understanding. At the core, primary beliefs are accepted without extensive justification, serving as primitive assumptions that underpin the entire system. These basic beliefs provide the bedrock for introducing secondary, super-structural beliefs, establishing the foundational structure of knowledge. This hierarchical arrangement, characterized by basic beliefs, underlies foundational theories, providing a framework for understanding the relationships between fundamental and derived knowledge.

Foundational theories, as distinguished from coherence theories, rely on epistemologically basic beliefs, according to John Pollock. He emphasizes, "It is the existence of epistemologically basic beliefs that distinguishes foundations theories from coherence theories. Basic beliefs must be justified independently of reasoning; if a belief can only be justified through reasoning, its justification is dependent on the justification of the beliefs from which the reasoning proceeds, and hence, by definition, it is not a basic belief."<sup>8</sup> Moreover, foundational theories ground knowledge in non-inferentially justified basic beliefs, serving as the bedrock for subsequent beliefs, which lie beyond justification. Conversely, coherence theories weave beliefs into an interconnected web through reasoning, underscoring the distinct roles of basic beliefs in foundational and coherence theories.

It is important to note here that basic beliefs, far from being arbitrary or accidental, form the epistemic foundation of a belief system, grounding the justification of subsequent beliefs. They are accepted as self-evidently true, transcending justification and considered *incorrigible*. A.J. Ayer terms these "basic propositions,"<sup>9</sup> representing immediate, indubitable knowledge through sense-datum statements like "I see a red patch" or "That appears brownish." These fundamental propositions are inherently trustworthy, immune to doubt regarding their truth, and provide the bedrock for further knowledge.

Accordingly, it follows that foundationalists epistemology pivots on the concept of *self-evident truth*, providing a robust foundation for human knowledge. This approach effectively addresses sceptical doubts by identifying basic propositions, grounded in sense experience, as the initial points of epistemic inquiry into knowledge structure. These directly evident beliefs about the external world neutralize sceptical challenges, rendering futile attempts to question our understanding of reality or suspect massive illusion. By establishing indubitable

foundations, foundationalism confidently asserts the possibility of genuine knowledge, bridging the gap between doubt and certainty.

However, foundationalism faces formidable criticisms, as scholars argue that its core tenet – the existence of self-evident basic beliefs – is fundamentally flawed. They contend that knowledge systems operate through coherence, not hierarchical structures. The primary reason foundationalism falters is the *absence of self-evident truths in both external world knowledge and logico-mathematical domains*. Traditional thinkers like Descartes, Locke and Kant, and analytic philosophers such as Carnap, Russell and Ayer, posited secure foundations in self-evident truths. However, this notion remains an unattained philosophical ideal, rather than a reality in human knowledge. No knowledge system has been built on unequivocal, unjustified axioms, exposing foundationalism's theoretical shortcomings.

Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>10</sup> pioneered the rejection of foundational truths in logic, mathematics and empirical sciences. In his early work, Wittgenstein argued that logical propositions share equal status<sup>11</sup>, precluding self-evident truths. Furthermore, he contended that scientific knowledge operates as an interconnected system, rather than relying on foundational truths. Simple and complex sentences coexist, but no hierarchical foundation underpins science. Wittgenstein's later philosophy elaborates on this concept, emphasizing language and knowledge as holistic, interdependent frameworks.<sup>12</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In view of the above, it can be said that anti-foundationalism has emerged as a pivotal stance in contemporary discourse on language and knowledge, with prominent thinkers like W.V.O. Quine and Strawson challenging the notion of foundational truths. They contend that foundationalism is inherently flawed, as human knowledge lacks self-justifying truths. Quine criticises classical epistemology's quest for transcendental norms as a philosophical prejudice, labelling it "the first philosophy."<sup>13</sup> This approach fails, as ideal knowledge conditions are elusive, existing only within ongoing scientific practices and human activities. Epistemology must, therefore, abandon its foundationalism and transcendental outlook, embracing a *naturalized* framework rooted in everyday life and human experience. Thus, in a nutshell, by recognizing knowledge as an integral aspect of human activity, epistemology can redefine its scope, focusing on contextualized understanding rather than abstract, universal principles.

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