

An Examination of the Viability of Perception as an Epistemic Foundation

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, epistemology as a branch of philosophy is fundamentally concerned with a critical and presupposition-less search for an indubitable foundation for knowledge that is certain, objective and universal. In this connection, this article is a critical analysis of perception in order to determine if it can serve as an indubitable foundation for knowledge that is objective, certain and universal. Using the method of critical analysis and evaluation to examine extant texts and arguments, this article discovers that perception cannot be the foundation of true knowledge. This is because perception is the act of acquiring knowledge via the sense organs and our sense organs lack the ability to mirror reality exactly as it is. Consequently, the article concludes that the controversy concerning the relationship between perception and reality is a strong evidence that perception cannot be an indubitable epistemic foundation.

Keywords: Epistemology, Foundationalism, Perception, Objective, Universal

INTRODUCTION

The human person is fundamentally a knowing being; a being that seeks to know, penetrate, explore and exploit nature to advantage. The historical evolution of human civilization is a product of the application of human knowledge. The human person as a rational being necessarily seeks knowledge in order to understand, explore, exploit, manipulate and transform nature towards the improvement of his well-being and the preservation of the human species. It is perhaps, in view of this fact that Aristotle choose to begin his monumental work, *Metaphysics* with the sentence: "All men by nature desire to know" (1).

However, in spite of the inherent nature of the desire to know, the question "what is knowledge?" is not an easy one. From the ancient period of philosophy till date, several erudite philosophers have in their attempt to explain the nature, source and criteria for knowledge proffer many conflicting arguments and theories. The question of knowledge is therefore by nature very complex, intricate and seemingly inconclusive. And it is this complex nature of knowledge and its indispensability for human progress that seems to make knowledge a perennial subject matter of philosophy. The branch of philosophy that is primarily concerned with the question of the nature, origin, source,

validity, scope and justification of human knowledge is known as epistemology. Concerning the meaning of epistemology as a philosophical specialism, Kehinde elucidates:

Epistemology in its simplest sense is known as the "theory of knowledge". It is so defined because it explores or attempts to expose the power or ability, or capacity of the human mind to know reality. The attempt to know reality (which is different from the search for reality i.e. metaphysics) is an attempt to acquire knowledge about the reality. However, in attempting to know reality, epistemology also attempts to evaluate or ascertain the "validity" as well as the limit of human knowledge. The attempt to ascertain the validity and limit of human knowledge, amounts to a search for absolute knowledge, of a kind of knowledge which is sure and certain. In this later sense, epistemology can be described as a "theory of truth". In the first place, to have knowledge of something is to be sure or certain of it, and certainty or sure knowledge of thing amounts to truth i.e. true knowledge about a thing (94). The point buttressed here is that epistemology is the traditional branch of philosophy that is mainly concerned with issues concerning the meaning and nature of this all important phenomenon called "knowledge". It fundamentally probes into the following interrelated questions: What

is it to know something? Can the human person has a kind of knowledge that is certain and objective? If yes, how? If no, why? What this comes to is that epistemology is a critical search for an indubitable foundation for knowledge that is true, certain, objective and universal. Against this backdrop, the major preoccupation of this short essay is to buttress the point that perception cannot serve as an objective and indubitable foundation for knowledge that is certain, true and universal. In other words, this essay is tailored to contend that perception cannot be a plausible epistemic foundation. However, before we proceed to buttress the thesis of this essay, certain questions ought to be address. These questions are two, namely; (1) what is perception? And (2) what is epistemic foundation?

WHAT IS PERCEPTION?

One of the fundamental trademarks of philosophical and even social concepts is their multifaceted and ambiguous nature. Perception is not an exception. Perception is a subject of interest in diverse disciplines such as physics, psychology and philosophy. In spite of this, it is important to note that our interest in perception is basically as used in philosophy. But even in philosophy, perception can be seen as the subject matter of metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of science and epistemology. (Mand, ix). In this connection, it is important we further note that our approach and interest is basically epistemological. As an epistemological concept, perception refers to: “The faculty of being aware of the world, the contents of sensory experience and what is perceived” (Bunnin and Yu, 508). What this mean is that perception refers to the act of acquiring knowledge about the world through any of the five sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. Pap as cited by Bunnin and Yu buttresses this point: “Perception is a generic term which may be defined disjunctively as either seeing or hearing or touching or... etc. perception, in short is awareness of the external world through the senses” (509).

The implication of the forgoing is that perception is the act of acquiring knowledge of the objective world using our sense organs. Through the organ of the eyes we have the sense of sight which enables us to identify colours, sense danger etc. The organ of tongue enables us to have the sense of taste; the organ of the nose enables us to perceive odour, smell; the

organ of ears, enable to perceive sound, organ of skin enables us to feel things. Seen in this perspective, “perception has never been a headache to most ordinary mortals” (Oguejiofor, 23). The common man generally takes what he perceives as real; existing independent of himself. Our daily activities, interactions and judgments are often based on what we perceive through the senses. This is perhaps why Aristotle argues that the natural desire of man to know is evident in the delight we take in our senses, especially the sense of sight. Accordingly, Aristotle writes:

All men by nature desire to know. And indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even a part from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others, the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything else. The reason is that this, most of all the sense, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things (1).

The point Aristotle is making here is that we know through the senses, especially the sense of sight enables us to know the differences between things. What this comes to is that sense perception is the source of knowledge, that perception is the act of acquiring knowledge using the sense organs. Thus, by perception in this short essay we mean sense perception or sense experience. Empiricism as an epistemological school is of the position that sense experience or sense perception is the “sole source of our knowledge about the world” (Lawhead, 50). Our major concern here is not whether perception is the sole source of knowledge. Rather, our concern is whether perception can be a plausible epistemic foundation. Before we consider this, it is pertinent we respond to the question, what is “epistemic foundation?”

EPISTEMIC FOUNDATION

The term “epistemic” as used here refer to epistemology construe as the theory of knowledge. And the term foundation connotes a solid, strong and reliable base for something. The concept epistemic foundation therefore refers to a solid, strong and reliable base upon which we can build a formidable theory of knowledge. In this sense, the terms “epistemic foundation”, “epistemic foundationalism”, “epistemological foundationalism” and “foundationalism” are often used interchangeably to refer to the idea of a secure, reliable or indubitable foundation for human

knowledge. In line with this view, Salami vividly explains:

Epistemic foundationalism expresses the thesis that (1) there are basic or privileged propositions, and (2) there are some non-basic propositions, which depend for their justification on the privileged propositions... foundationalism maintains an architectonic structure of knowledge.... [F]oundationalist... look for unshakable bedrock of knowledge (197).

The point envisaged here is that epistemic foundationalism upholds the view that every knowledge claim or theory of knowledge must be based and anchored on, or derived and float from a foundational proposition or belief that is true, and any proposition or belief that is true, must be objective, certain and indubitable. This conception of foundationalism is known as traditional or pure foundationalism. Traditional foundationalist program is highly restrictive. It rules out any proposition or belief that is not based on or derived from an indubitable proposition or belief as unjustified – hence mere opinion. Therefore, in a sense, traditional foundationalism is a response to the traditional account of knowledge in Plato's dialogue, *Theatetus* as justified true belief" (Akintona, 69).

The major implication of the traditional tripartite conception of knowledge is that every knowledge claim is a mere opinion or belief unless it is justifiable. Owing to this, it becomes more appropriate to describe epistemology as the theory of justification (Keke, 87). Although the traditional tripartite conception of knowledge has been faulted by Edmund Gettier's three-page article titled "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" but Gettier's article still retains the view that every knowledge claim or belief needs a justification. The point of Gettier is that the justification of knowledge must be more than "justified true belief". However, the attempt to justify knowledge – claims or beliefs must have a starting point. If not we end up in an infinite regress (Bonjour, 312).

Epistemic foundationalism claims that the starting point of every human knowledge must be a basic proposition or basic beliefs and the major characteristics of a basic proposition or basic beliefs according to the foundationalist are three: 1. Indubitable, 2. non-inferential, and 3. Self-justified. On this note, Akintona, further explains:

The argument of the foundationalist... rests on the fact that, if we can from our basic beliefs justify other beliefs, then, the demands of epistemology are satisfied. Basic propositions satisfy a justification condition in virtue of being immediately justified or self-evident: they are non-supported, they are the foundation upon which the person's belief structure stands and in this regards, they are supposed to stop the epistemic regress (71).

The major point buttressed in this section is that epistemic foundation refers to the view that knowledge must be based on an indubitable foundation that is non-inferential and self-evident. And that it is this non-inferential, indubitable and self-evident basic proposition that we can use to justify our non-foundational knowledge claims and beliefs through valid inference. Consequent upon the foregoing discussion, the ultimate question that stares us now is: "Can perception provide us with a basic proposition or belief?" In other words, can we acquire an indubitable, non-inferential and self-evident proposition or belief that is true, objective and certain through sense experience?

CAN PERCEPTION PROVIDE A VIABLE EPISTEMIC FOUNDATION?

The fact that human beings see, feel, hear, taste and smell using the sense organs is incontestable. Hence in a sense "no doubt" as Russell would say, "Knowledge is derived from them" (1). However, the question before us is whether the knowledge we derived from the senses can be regarded as true knowledge of things as they are in the world. More specifically can we derive a basic proposition or belief that is indubitable, self-justifying and non-inferential from the senses? Maud captures the problem of the nature of perceptual knowledge when he explains:

The most natural view to take perception is that it is a process by which we acquire knowledge of an objective world. We take this world to consist of physical objects and happenings, which exist independently of us and our acts of perceiving, and which are things we commonly perceive. Problems arise, however, when we reflect on the nature of that process and on how the knowledge is supposed to be acquired. Many of the traditional puzzles of perception arose, for example, when people tried to make sense of the fact that in different circumstances the same things appear appeared differently, either to different people placed differently or to the same person on different occasions. Crucial question

that arose were whether we ever know what objects were really like, as opposed to how they appeared, and indeed whether how they appeared had anything to do with what they were really are (1).

The major point on prominent relief here is the problem of the conflicting views, different people in different circumstances or the same person in different condition, perceive from the same objects through the same sense organs. The argument that necessarily erupts from this is that since the same sense organs furnish us with different conflicting views about the same objects under different conditions, sense perception cannot be regarded as the source of a basic proposition or a basic belief that can serve as an indubitable foundation for knowledge. This is because every knowledge gotten through sense perception is not indubitable and objective. Russell makes the impossibility of acquiring a basic perception or belief from sense perception very explicit with his vivid analogy about how different people looking at the same table at the same moment cannot see the table from the same point of view due to certain conditions (2-3). What this point comes to is that sense perception cannot give us an indubitable and non-inferential knowledge. “What we know or claim to “know” about objects is indirect derivation by inference from what directly”. (Quinton, 61)

The foregoing argument against perception as a viable epistemic foundation is known as “the argument from illusion”. Explaining the nature and veracity of the argument from illusion against the indubitability of sense perception, Ayer authoritatively elucidates:

This argument as it is ordinarily stated is based on the fact that material things may present different appearances to different observers, or to the same observer in different conditions, and that the character of these appearances is to some extent causally determined by the state of the conditions and the observer. For instance, it is remarked that a coin which looks circular from one point of view and may look elliptical from another; or that a stick which normally appear straight looks bent when it is seen in water... (215 – 6).

The necessary inference from Ayer’s position is that knowledge gotten through the senses is deceptive. And that which is by nature deceptive is dubitable and inferential hence perception cannot provide a basic proposition or belief upon which we can build a secure epistemic

foundation. Any theory of knowledge built on sense perception is likely to collapse, “the way we perceive things with our senses can be influenced by our habit, our environment, prejudices, prior conceptions etc” (Omoregbe, 25). Little wonder, David Hume’s through going empiricism which is entirely based on sense-perception – impressions – ended in skepticism.

CONCLUSION

The major point buttressed in this short essay is that perceptual knowledge lacks the basic characteristics of a viable epistemic foundation. An epistemic foundation must be a basic proposition or belief that is indubitable, objective and non-inferential. Perception as the act of acquiring knowledge through the human sense organs often furnishes us with conflicting views about the same objects under different conditions. It is only through proper inference and interpretation of the various conflicting views that we a times come to make meaning from the different conflicting views presented to us by the senses. Therefore perception is a form of inferential knowledge that can only be justified through valid inference from a non-inferential foundation that is objective and indubitable.

The offshoot of this is that perception is not a secure epistemic foundation. As Rene Descartes rightly demonstrates in his *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, all knowledge derived from sense perception can be doubted without contradiction (74 – 8). The uncertainty of perceptual knowledge shows that it is a derivative form of knowledge in need of a justification. And any form of knowledge that is not self-justifying cannot be a secure epistemic foundation. Perceptual knowledge is fallible.

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