

## Review

# “Recent trends and future prospects in epistemology” - A review of John Kekes

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**The paper is a critical survey of John Kekes' perspective on the recent trends and future prospects of epistemology. The three fundamental issues in contemporary epistemology that engaged the attention of Kekes are intimately connected to justification: foundationalism, skepticism and rationality. The paper argues that Kekes' epistemic survey of these issues is on the one hand commendable as his analysis clearly reveals a sound awareness, understanding and apprehension of the recent trends and future prospects in epistemology. On the other hand, the paper critically exposes the conceptual flaws and problems that fraught Kekes' epistemic survey in the final analysis.**

**Key words:** Justification, foundationalism, fallibilism, skepticism, rationality

## INTRODUCTION

Epistemology in contemporary philosophical epoch is fussy with many burning issues, flurry of debates and counter debates on some open-ended epistemic themes. It is remarkable to note that epistemology in contemporary times has witnessed intensified serious controversies among pool of veteran epistemologists, whose various works and classics have continued to spurn intellectual surprises within the interstice of epistemology. At the moment, the contemporary epistemological province and scope is still very uncertain and not immediately foreseeable as many issues of epistemological relevance are just emerging. However, some of the central concerns and problems that have attracted the attention of contemporary epistemologists are issues on the nature of justification and theories of justification, the challenge of skepticism and various responses to it, the problem of perception as well as the theories on it and the debate on whether epistemology should be naturalized or not. Besides these issues, the other themes in contemporary epistemology include discourse on memory, judgment, introspection, reasoning, the 'a priori-a posteriori' distinction and scientific method, among others. As diverse as these epistemic issues are and as a matter of scholarly interest and choice, many contemporary epistemologists have responded to them differently. John Kekes is one of the most pronounced and renowned scholars in contemporary epistemological discourse who has written volumes on some of the issues

and themes in contemporary epistemology. His works and papers on epistemology are: "Skepticism, Rationalism and Language" (1971)<sup>1</sup>, "Fallibilism and Rationality" (1972)<sup>2</sup>. "The Case for Skepticism" (1975)<sup>3</sup>, "A Justification of Rationality (1976)<sup>4</sup>, "Recent Trends and Future Prospects in Epistemology" (1977)<sup>5</sup> and The Nature of Philosophy (1980)<sup>6</sup>. In this paper, we shall attempt an examination of John Kekes' perspective on some of the problems in contemporary epistemology. Consequent upon this, we shall attempt a critical evaluation of his central arguments and positions. Given the enormous nature of Kekes' writings on epistemology and the limited scope of this paper, we have chosen to examine closely, his article titled "Recent Trends and Future prospects in Epistemology". It is our conviction that a proper grasp of his ideas in this paper constitutes a basis for understanding his other works and serves as a preface to them.

## John Kekes and the meaning of epistemology

Epistemology is traditionally known as a theory of knowledge. This label, Kekes notes, has become inappropriate given the trends and issues discussed in contemporary epistemology. Hence, it is much more accurate to describe recent epistemology as the theory of justification. The shift from knowledge to justification results

from serious doubts about the possibility of attaining the kind of certainty that knowledge has been taken to involve (John Kekes, *The Nature of Philosophy* (Totowa: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980, p.87)). Given this epistemological shift of emphasis from knowledge to justification, Kekes discussed three fundamental issues that are intimately connected with justification. These issues are raised in question form vis-à-vis: do our beliefs have secure foundation? Can skepticism be countered? And what are the considerations relevant to the justification of our beliefs? While these issues are all fundamental, Kekes elaborately discussed the answers given to these questions as well as their nexus.

### Foundationalism and fallibilism

The first problem that concerns the question of whether there is a secure foundation for our beliefs is answered by Kekes from two perspectives. In the first wing, we have the foundationalists who answered positively that our beliefs do have a secured foundation. Foundationalism is a theory of justification, which states that our beliefs can only be justified if they are self-evidently justified or they are related to some beliefs, which are themselves self-evidently justified (Kolawole, 1995, p. 13). Foundationalism as an epistemic theory is an attempt to solve the regress problem. The regress problem has its root in traditional account of knowledge, which requires that for any belief to be justified, it needs an antecedent belief or set of beliefs that will justify it (Bolaito, 2005, p. 64). Such an antecedent chain of justifications lead necessarily to infinite regress of justification. Accordingly, the problems involved in this infinite regress of justification are: either to (i) explain why an endless regress of required justifying beliefs is not actually troublesome, (ii) show how we can terminate the threatening regress, or (iii) accept the skeptical conclusion that inferential justification is impossible (Kekes, 1977, p. 89).

Foundationalist position is to the effect that we can terminate the threatening regress. However, in an attempt to bring the regress of justification to a stop, foundationalism asserts that there are some basic self-justified beliefs that require no external justification. This belief is regarded as foundational belief or basic propositions because they carry with them their own justification and are non-inferentially justified. Basic propositions are said to be incorrigible by foundationalists and because they are incorrigible, certainty in their cases is justified. The epistemological ideal of foundationalism is to build on such foundational systems of beliefs in accordance with reliable methods of reasoning such as deduction or induction in order for the system to yield knowledge.

While explaining the foundational thesis, Kekes identified two models of foundationalism: Cartesian and

Moorean foundationalism. The former holds that "basic propositions are sincere, first person's present tense reports of perceptual experience (Paul, 1996, p. 3). Such propositions are said to be pure, infallible, indubitable, devoid of error and are basically incorrigible. Their incorrigibility derives from the fact that there is no mediating agency between the subject, i.e. perceiver and the object of perception. In the absence of such mediating agency, there is no misinterpretation, hence basic propositions are incorrigible.

For the Moorean foundationalists, basic propositions consist of readily observable public facts, otherwise called common sense beliefs. Basic propositions for them are also incorrigible however not infallible. Incorrigibility for the Mooreans means that basic propositions are the final courts of appeal; they are incorrigible not because they are infallible but because it is logically impossible to correct them (Paul, 1996, p. 90). While noting the difference between Cartesians and Mooreans, Kekes observes that basic propositions to the Cartesians report private psychological states, while for the Mooreans; basic propositions report common sense beliefs which are universally and compulsively held by normal human beings.

It is important to note that Kekes favours Moorean foundationalism over and above Cartesian foundationalism because incorrigibility of basic propositions is the final courts of appeal and not providing infallible knowledge. Such basic propositions are important because a normal human being cannot help holding these beliefs, which express the unavoidable features presented by the human perception of the world.

The second wing of response to the question of whether our beliefs have secured foundation is the fallibilist negative answer that they do not. According to Kekes, the fallibilist attack upon foundationalism has occasioned one of the liveliest and most important controversies in the history of contemporary epistemology (Paul, 1996, p. 91). The attacks are based on two strong arguments. One is the neglect of the Gettier-problem by the foundationalists, second is the denial of the possibility of non-inferential or direct knowledge. These fallibilists attacks are a direct anti-thesis of foundationalism and a total denial of an impregnable and infallible genuine foundation of knowledge. The core of the Gettier argument is that a person may hold a justified true belief and yet it would be false to say that s/he knows what s/he is justified in believing (Gettier, 1963, pp.121 - 123).

While this Gettier position called into question the traditional conception of the conditions of knowledge as incorrect and insufficient, the implication of such a position on foundationalism is that foundationalists (whether Cartesian or Moorean) have already conducted their debate and argument on the assumption that the meaning of knowledge was clear. In the final analysis, it has been shown by Gettier that the meaning of knowledge is yet clear and further conditions need to be

identified.

Before examining the second side of the fallibilist argument, that is, the denial of possibility of direct knowledge against foundationalism, let us quickly comment on Kekes attempted dissolution of the Gettier problem. Kekes did not solve but rather dissolved the problem posed by Gettier. In doing this, Kekes observes that such a problem is occasioned by a false conflation of a subjective psychological state of certainty and an objective state of truth in an attempt to define knowledge. Such conception to Kekes is false. Knowledge, rather for him, ought to be seen as two different senses. One subjective knowledge and second; objective knowledge (Kekes, 1977, p. 92). Subjective knowledge, he tells us, is the psychological state in which a person is certain of the truth of a proposition and in such case, knowledge is still fallible. Objective knowledge entails the benefit gained from human inquires and is the approximation of truth. It is what can be found in books, journals and stored libraries or database. In neither case is knowledge beyond revision as incorrigibility is an impossible ideal.

The second fallibilists' attack against foundationalism as identified by Kekes has to do with the denial of the possibility of direct, non-inferential knowledge. Fallibilists like W.V.O. Quine, W. Sellers and Karl Popper argue against the possibility of a direct and non-inferential knowledge as earlier claimed by foundationalists. If at all there would be such knowledge, they argue that it is supposed to be a product of pure observation. However, pure observation, they posit, is impossible because all observation is unavoidably theory bound. The implication of this fallibilist conclusion is that if there is direct knowledge, foundationalists' argument of incorrigible proposition will hold sway. But since there is no direct knowledge, there is no pure observation. Hence, contrary to what the foundationalists would have us believe, self-justified basic propositions are not pure, devoid of error and uncertain.

In an attempt to strengthen the above fallibilistic argument, Kekes identified two other arguments that are thought to be the pillars of foundationalism with a view of berating them of substance. These are the analytic-synthetic distinction and the criticism of the empiricist theory of concept formation. Using W.V.O Quine's argument against the distinction between analytic statements and synthetic statements, Kekes shows that if the distinction cannot be upheld, then propositions cannot be said to be purely synthetic. If there are no purely synthetic propositions, then there could be no basic propositions. The denial of basic proposition is *ip so facto*, the tragic end of incorrigibility being claimed by foundationalists.

The other critique of fallibilists against the possibility of direct knowledge is the criticism of the empiricists' theory of concept formation. The theory is all about how we acquire empirical concepts singly through direct knowledge. Foundationalism presupposes the validity of this

theory. However, the fallibilists opposed it as logically impossible. Their argument is that concepts cannot be acquired in this way since the acquisition of any one concept is possible only if the person already possesses other concepts. Hence, one cannot acquire concepts one by one as the foundationalists would have us believe, rather they must be acquired wholesale.

Given the veracity of the above fallibilist attacks on foundational thesis that there is secure foundation for our belief system, Kekes notes that fallibilists have stronger arguments and that Moorean foundationalists are more correct than Cartesian foundationalism. Kekes is quick and right at pointing out that though fallibilists have stronger case over foundationalism, they have however failed in suggesting ways of justifying the system and the foundation upon which they rest.

### **Skepticism in contemporary epistemological discourse**

The conclusion from the above led Kekes in discussing the second issue, which is if our beliefs have no secure foundation, how can they be justified? Skepticism asserts that our fundamental assumptions cannot be rationally justified. While recognizing that skepticism has a long history, Kekes states that skepticism in contemporary epistemological discourse is most fundamental with different meaning from what we used to take skepticism to represent in traditional epistemology. Skepticism in contemporary epistemology, Kekes tells us, is directed not against the possibility of knowledge but rather against the reasoning process, which eventually yield knowledge. Skepticism is now calling into question the reliability of the reasoning process arguing that it is rationally impossible to justify any system of belief. In stating the core of the skeptical argument, Kekes observes that: 'No belief or action can be rationally justified because the standards upon which the supposed justifications rest also need justification. But this justification cannot be provided because the process of justifying one standard by another must lead either to infinite regress or to non-rational commitment to some standards' (Kekes, 1977, p. 97).

While noting that the task of contemporary epistemologists is to meet this most fundamental of the skeptical challenges of justifying standards of rationality, Kekes equally observes that many philosophers (like J. Benett and P. F. Strawson) have dismissed the skeptical challenge as nonsensical. Their argument in this regard is that it is meaningless to question the standard of rationality because rationality has meaning only with reference to some standards. Questioning therefore, the rationality of standards of rationality is like questioning the length of the standard meter rod. For Kekes, this is quite an unsatisfactory approach in dismissing the skeptical challenge that all standards are arbitrary be-

cause they lack the possibility of rational justification.

Kekes discussion of the attempts at responding to the skeptical challenge is very logically painstaking, as he showed how the arguments of the various attempts have not been too strong to vitiate the veracity of claims of skepticism. Kekes underscores the combination of the Wittgensteinian notion of the form of life and anthropological evidence in an attempt to show the flaws of the skeptical challenge. The crux of this idea is that different forms of life have different standards and the rationality of beliefs and practices in each form of life should be a matter of internal justification.

Given this, skepticism is a misguided and illegitimate attempt to find a standard of rationality outside a given form of life. In an attempt to refute this response, Kekes argues that "if forms of life were genuinely independent of each other, then the absurd conclusion will follow that there could be no communication between participants in different forms of life" (Kekes, 1977, p. 99). But there is communication among different forms of life and this automatically implies shared standards. Such shared standard indicates that there are standards transcending the confines of any one form of life and which needs rational justification.

The attempts to meet the skeptical challenge by identifying standards of rationality with logical rules, science, transcendental arguments and pragmatism establish at best conditions of rationality. Logic, as we know, has usually been taken as a necessary paradigm and condition of rationality. However, Kekes objected to logic as standard of rationality because its rationality is also questionable. Logic may give vent to an irrational proposition even with a valid structural form. Another attempt to refute skepticism is the modernized Kantian employment of transcendental arguments. The central idea here is to offer a rational justification of beliefs by showing how they derive from a particular system and then demonstrate that the system is the only one possible (Kekes, 1977, p. 100). The difficulty with this approach is that it is impossible to demonstrate that any component of any conceptual system is necessary. While it can be shown that some components are necessary for a particular system, it is incorrect to argue that a component is necessary vis-à-vis any conceptual system. If this holds then the force of the transcendental argument falls short of demonstrating the rationality of the system.

Science is the most widely accepted current theory of rationality. It is generally assumed by many to be the real paradigm of rationality. Anything contra science is assumed to be irrational. However, it is evident in philosophical history that science itself rests upon presuppositions, which it accepts but does not justify.

Against this background, it will be question begging to accept science as a paradigm of rationality without requiring first, the rationality of its presupposition, (which is metaphysics). Other philosophers have resulted to the pragmatic consideration of science in an attempt to justify

it as a standard of rationality. Their argument is that science and its presuppositions are rationally justified because the inquiries resting on them are fruitful. Science we are told, solve our problems, yield reliable conclusions and enables us to achieve our goals and cope with the world. While this argument sounds plausible, Kekes objected to it on the ground that an idea may be scientifically pragmatic yet that is not sufficient to guarantee its rationality, for science may be successful in pursuit of irrational goals ((Kekes, 1977, p. 102).

In addition, he argues that there are other goals besides those ones science helps in attaining. Thus, scientific goal needs to be justified vis-à-vis other alternative goals (such as worshiping of God, aesthetic appreciation of beauty, mystical union with nature, etc.) which are its rivals. This suggests a non-pragmatic justificational criterion for science, if at all it will be justified. The implication of this is that pragmatic justification of science as standard of rationality has equally failed.

Given the failure of the various attempts to combat skepticism, John Kekes warns of its grave implications. The inability to combat the skeptical challenge means that nothing is justifiable by reason and that all contradictory systems have equal cognitive merit. It means that there will be no rational way or criteria of deciding between the merits of conflicting claims of religion and science, medicine and quackery, Nazism and democracy. The result is that inevitable conflicts would only be settled by force. The implication of this is that the civilizing restraint of debate, criticism and intelligence would disappear. While the fedeists and anarchists welcome this conclusion. Kekes insists that skepticism should rather be overcome rather than embraced. It is on the basis of these challenging implications that Kekes posits that the skeptical challenge must be met and to find a way out of this predicament is one of the main problems of contemporary epistemology. This led him to the third and last issue he addressed and that is the question-what sort of considerations are relevant to the justification of our beliefs? What are the essentials of a theory of rationality?

### **Towards a theory of rationality**

For Kekes, what is needed to meet the skeptical challenge is a theory of rationality, which will justify some standards of rationality and show why it is that propositions, which conform, to these standards have a better chance of being true than other proposition (Kekes, 1977, p. 100). Theory of rationality, he argues, must also show why acting rationally is a better policy than acting otherwise. Kekes harps that for a theory of rationality to be adequate and successful, it must be able to distinguish between propositions and actions which are potentially true and successful and propositions and actions which

lack these potentials.

Kekes notes the difficulties of foundationalism as shown earlier by fallibilists to consist in the justification of our beliefs. The fallibilists' positions inevitably led to skepticism. Because of the complexity of the skeptical challenge and the failure of combating it, there is a proposal (Quine, 1971, p. 87-103; Hookway and Peterson, 1993, p. 62 - 81; Stroud, 1981, p. 106 - 115) and this proposal is that of naturalizing epistemology. The idea of naturalizing epistemology centers on the claim that natural science has an important role to play in epistemology. It holds that epistemological questions can be investigated and resolved using the method of the natural or social sciences (Ozumba, 2001, p.124). For W.V.O. Quine in particular; he believes epistemology should be made to become a chapter in psychology. This Quinean approach, which reduces epistemology to having its final end product as coming out of our psychological interaction with external evidence, was rejected by Kekes. Kekes argues that naturalizing epistemology through one branch of science or the other is futile because epistemology is normative (Kekes, 1977, p. 107). Justification is not merely a descriptive term connecting agents, means and goals. It is also evaluative because the goals are valued.

Another fundamental challenge of contemporary epistemology is to show how goals can be rationally justified. The attempt to naturalize epistemology is simply exhibition of despair of solving problem. Rather than naturalizing epistemology, Kekes maintained that epistemology should be humanized because epistemology is normative. In an attempt to arrive at this, he puts forward Aristotelian justification theory of rationality (Kekes, 1976, p. 256 - 270). This theory, he believes, will provide the final refutation of skepticism that sees all theoretical views as equally irrational and unjustifiable.

This Aristotelian theory of rationality, as he calls it, has two components, which must be kept clearly separate as each has its own particular justification standard. In the first place, the context of discovery, the main question is intended to account for the rationality of the existence of theories and the reason for having them. Here, the justification standard provides a "context independent standard of justification" and cultural influences (such as one's history, politics, sociology and psychology) play an important role since we consider "conformity to the existing worldview as a sign of initial plausibility" (Kekes, 1980, p. 107). The introduction of several theories, of course, will be justified by this standard and they will each offer somewhat different counsel.

In the second place, "context of justification", our task is to determine which of these theories should be accepted. Here, Kekes is of the view that the standard of justification should be one of truth-directedness. According to him, "the theory we ought to accept is the one which has the best chance of being true" (Kekes, 1976, p. 111). This will involve comparing rival theories in terms of their con-

sistency, the adequacy of the interpretation they offer and their ability to withstand criticism. While emphasizing on the context of justification of theory of rationality, Kekes posits that a theory of rationality must see justification not as merely descriptive but also evaluative and normative. Such a theory must be capable of valuing goals, connecting agents and means. Aristotelian theory of justification, he believes, recognizes that human beings have some goals that ought to be pursued (essentially, that of resolving enduring problems of life) and as such, goals are rationally justified for them.

## CONCLUSION

As we conclude the paper, two points in this review of John Kekes' perspectives on some contemporary epistemological problems merit special emphasis. One, when we examine critically, Kekes' description of contemporary epistemology as theory of justification as against the traditional conception of theory of knowledge, it is evident that Kekes new conception is guilty of fallacy of composition. The fact that there are concentration of efforts on justification theories in contemporary epistemology does not sufficiently warrant drawing conclusively, as Kekes had done, that the whole epistemic enterprise in contemporary epoch is a concatenation of justification theories; other issues and fundamental themes of epistemological relevance have also continued to shape the contours of epistemology in contemporary period. It will be premature to therefore conclude that epistemology is no longer the theory of knowledge but the theory of justification.

Further more, a cursory assessment of Kekes' analysis of the first problem/question, which his paper addresses, we come to see that his analysis of foundationalism is restricted only to Cartesian and Moorean foundationalism, neglecting other cognitive variants of foundationalism like the Husserlian phenomenological model, Chisholm foundational model, Ernest Sosa's reliabilist model among others. While a detailed examination of these variants could possibly weather the storm of fallibilist attacks, it will be pretentious to conclude as Kekes as done that the thesis of foundationalism is generally deficient and impotent under the sledge hammer of fallibilism.

Besides, non-foundationalist theories of justification such as coherentism and contextualism are copiously left un-discussed by Kekes in his discourse on theories of justification in contemporary epistemology. These theories of justification are controversial and one would have expected Kekes to have given, even if just an overview of their central theses, in his analysis of contemporary trends in contemporary epistemology. Such discourse would have provided a thorough background for his subsequent examination of the challenges posed by skepticism. This lacuna notwithstanding, should not

hide the strengths and resilience of Kekes' paper.

John Kekes should be commended for his scholarly presentation of some of the most prominently and fundamentally discussed issues and problems in contemporary epistemology. The logic of his presentation, coherency and clear use of language devoid of ambiguity clearly marked his sound awareness, understanding and apprehension of the recent trends and future prospects in epistemology. The epistemic issues discussed by him are clearly selected and in fact, his position on a theory of rationality is worthy of consideration. Whether his defense of the theory of rationality he sets forth is successful or not, is another different question entirely. But one thing is clear; his is a significant attempt to provide a cross-cutting review and analysis of issues in contemporary epistemology.

Secondly, Kekes' contributions to the twin challenges of skepticism and naturalized epistemology in contemporary epistemology deserve further comment. While Kekes' approach to the issues of skepticism and naturalized epistemology is worthy of note in that he treated them as challenges and not as problems that should be dissolved or seen as misguided, his conclusion on Aristotelian justification theory of rationality is largely questionable. If we could recall, skeptics respond to rationalists' to ground and justify their rational standard by pointing out that any such argument must itself be based upon presuppositions and further, any attempt to ground these leads either to an infinite and vicious regress, a circular justification, or an unargued, arbitrary and unjustified commitment on the part of rationalists. Kekes position on context of justification is to circumvent this argument and provide the requisite justification in the rationalists' favour. Unfortunately, his justification is circular and does not establish that the skeptics/irrationalists' view is incorrect.

In proposing Aristotelian theory of justification, Kekes makes it quite difficult for us to accept his defense of context of justification as truth-conducive. According to him, truth is our goal in the context of justification and truth-directedness our standard. On our part, we think this claim itself must be justified for it to be acceptable to a rationalist however. Kekes maintains that truth-directedness should be judged in terms of the relative degree of a theory's susceptibility to and survival of critical scrutiny where such scrutiny is to provide a comparison of the relative merits of different theories of justification. Truth-directedness, he said, is to be judged in terms of which theory most adequately recognizes and accounts for and resolves the inevitable facts and problems of life. Here, we can see that critical scrutiny appears to be wholly pragmatic. In other words, the critical question seems to him to be - "which theory better resolves the fundamental problem of life?" rather than "which theory is true(r)?" Thus, we can say that Kekes' standard of truth-directedness is actually a disguised version of pragmatism, which he had earlier objected to. Kekes' theory of rationality therefore does not seem to live up

live up to his goal.

In our contention, rationality is not a theme whose justification can easily be accounted for, as Kekes has depicted. It is an essentially contestable concept, which cannot yield any conclusive argument as to what criteria to use or apply in determining its justification. There could be as many criteria as one could possibly have and none could be privileged over the other. To exclusively characterize justificatory criteria of rationality as Kekes has done in terms of Aristotelian paradigm is incorrect. Such conclusion cannot be yet adjudged conclusive, as future epistemic discussions will determine its veracity in the light of refutation, counter defense and re-configuration.

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