

Epistemology as a Theory of Justification: A Critical Analysis of John Kekes' Project

Olusola Ayomide Asaju

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, NIGERIA
Faculty of Art, Department of Philosophy

Received: 23 November 2025 ▪ Revised: 31 March 2026 ▪ Accepted: 21 April 2026

Abstract

There are a lot of issues that we need to provide solutions to in Epistemology as a branch of philosophy. In contemporary philosophy there are issues that demands answers such as the nature and theories of epistemic justification, the basal input of doubt about knowledge claim its possibility and implausibility (skepticism), the issues of perception in epistemology, should epistemic justification be internal or external among others. In recent trends in the development of epistemology is the philosophical debate on reasoning, epistemic judgement, a priori, posteriori, introspection, memory and so on. These issues are vital to epistemologist and many scholars have responded to it. Among this epistemologist is John Kekes, a renowned scholar in contemporary epistemological discourse. This paper is a look into Kekes view on these issues and some of the philosophical issues in epistemology and then an appraisal of some of the problem he identified in contemporary epistemology is provided.

Keywords: skepticism, epistemic issues, foundationalism, fallibilism, rationality.

1. Introduction

Epistemology is generally known as the theory of knowledge. This label, Keke 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. This shift from knowledge to justification arises from skepticism about the plausibility of achieving the kind of knowledge and certainty that epistemologists have traditionally believed is inherent in that knowledge. Kekes offered three philosophical discussions that are vital to epistemic justification, emphasizing the movement from knowledge to justification and the importance that proponents of such changes place on it.¹ The question is: Is there a way that skepticism can be refuted or countered? Can human belief have a secure foundation? What criteria are essential for justifying our beliefs? The requirement for answers to these questions is not problematic. The purpose of this paper is to critically assess Kekes' answers to these significant questions.

¹ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

2. Can human belief have secured foundation? Kekes assessment

Kekes provides two ways to understand and assess the problem of whether we can have a secure foundation for our knowledge claims. He offered the foundational perspective and the fallibilism perspective. Foundationalism is a theory of epistemic justification that tries to answer the question, 'How are some of our beliefs justified?' Epistemology aims to explain when our beliefs are justified. It should be noted that foundationalism as an epistemic theory is an attempt to solve the epistemic regress problem. To avoid regress, the foundationalist concluded that there must be a belief or a set of beliefs that does not need any justification and is not inferred from any other belief. Foundationalists call this set of beliefs "basic belief". Foundationalists aim to prevent the question of how a belief is justified from continuing indefinitely, known as the regress problem, by asserting that there must be at least one belief that is self-justified, referred to as a basic belief. This basic belief possesses unique features, including being infallible, incorrigible, and indubitable, and it is also considered self-justifying. On this basis, non-basic beliefs lack these basic requirements and therefore depend on the basic belief for their justification.²

Scholars who advocate for foundationalism perceive it differently; William P. Alston explains that foundationalism is best understood as the perspective that views knowledge as a structure supported by a foundation. This foundation gives support to the structure, although it does not require any support on its own.

According to him:

"Our justified belief 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 foundation."³

The idea of the foundation also led the foundationalist to a dual nature of justification. There are, according to them, some beliefs that are self-justified. These self-justified beliefs are also referred to as beliefs that are directly or immediately justified. It should be noted that the concept of an inferential or non-inferential justified belief can only be understood when it is considered along the foundationalist point of view. How are our beliefs justified? Some philosophers have maintained that some beliefs are justified by the relationship they bear to other beliefs. Some are justified not by the relationship they bear to other beliefs, but by their own nature. Those beliefs that are justified by the relationship they bear to other beliefs are called "inferentially justified beliefs". Beliefs that are justified by their own nature are referred to as non-inferentially justified beliefs.

"I shall call a belief that is justified without being justified through the justification of other beliefs a non-inferentially justified belief. A belief that must be justified through the justification of other beliefs, I shall call an inferentially justified belief."⁴

Alston views foundationalism as the view that deals with how an epistemic argument against beliefs can be justified. According to him, foundationalism deals with the structure of beliefs by dividing them into foundations and the superstructure. Beliefs in the superstructure are justified via their relationship with those beliefs in the foundation. To understand the foundationalist thesis, it is important to explicate the concept of mediate and immediate justification. A belief is said to be mediately justified if it is justified through its relationship with

² Davidson, D. (1986). A coherence theory of truth and knowledge. In E. LePore (Ed.), *Truth and interpretation: Perspectives on the philosophy of Donald Davidson* (pp. 307-309). Blackwell

³ Alston, W. P. (1976). Two types of foundationalism. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(7), 165–185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025576>

⁴ Alston, W. P. (1976). Two types of foundationalism. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 73(7), 166. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2025576>

other beliefs. Such beliefs derive their status of being justified, most of the time, when they are inferred from other beliefs. However, a belief is immediately justified if it is established to be justified independently of its relationship with other beliefs.

For David Annis, foundationalist theory can be divided into two. The foundationalist thesis is, for him, the combination of self-justification and dependency criteria. The self-justification criteria concern those beliefs that are self-justified. The beliefs under this category do not need any other beliefs for their justification. The thesis of dependency, in Annis's opinion, are those beliefs that need the support of other beliefs for their justification. This is because they cannot be justified on their own. Just like Ann David's scholars who support this position are of the view that:

"A: Some statement have at least some degree of initial epistemic justification which is dependent of the justification they may derive from other statement.

B: All empirical statements must ultimately derive at least some of their epistemic justification from statements that are self-justified, that is, from statements, that satisfy thesis A".⁵

Annis contends that, for the foundationalist, the dependency relationship among beliefs is direct or linear. The linear model of justification is such that non-basic beliefs are justified by the basic beliefs that are self-justified. There are two categories of statements. Some are self-justified, or what foundationalists refer to as basic statements or beliefs, and there are non-basic beliefs that are inferentially justified. Foundationalists argue that the justification of the non-basic statements from the self-justified belief is essentially linear. This perspective emphasises a clear hierarchy within the belief system, where basic beliefs serve as the bedrock for all other convictions. Critics of foundationalism, however, contend that this model oversimplifies the complexities of belief justification, suggesting that relationships among beliefs often resemble a web rather than a straightforward line. Annis also said that:

"From the basic statement *P*, we derive or infer the non-basic statement *q* and from *q* we infer the further non-basic statement *r*. In this way, *r* derives its justification from *P* through the essentially linear relation of sequential derivation. Thesis (B) thus asserts that at least some of the justification of every empirical non basic statements must be derived in this linear way from basic statements: otherwise no basic statement would be justified".⁶

3. John Keke's assessment of foundationalism

On his quest to explain the foundational thesis, Kekes introduces two models of foundationalism: Cartesian foundationalism and Moorean foundationalism. Cartesian foundationalism is traceable to René Descartes in his book titled "Meditations". In this book, he tries to subject everything that he knows to the method of doubt. He argues that beliefs based on the senses are unreliable because the epistemic agent may be deceived by them. We have doubted claims of reasoning because an evil genius could have tricked us into believing them to be true. This radical scepticism leads Descartes to seek a foundation for knowledge that is indubitable. Ultimately, he arrives at the famous conclusion, "Cogito, ergo sum," or "I think, therefore I am," which serves as the cornerstone of his philosophical system. In the final concept of his work, Descartes came out with his famous quote, "Cogito ergo sum." What is popularly translated as "I

⁵ Annis, D. B. (1978). A contextualist theory of epistemic justification. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(3), 215.

⁶ Annis, D. B. (1978). A contextualist theory of epistemic justification. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(3), 218.

think, therefore I exist” serves as the only form of knowledge that serves as the foundation. Because of the foregoing, Descartes can be considered a foundationalist.⁷ For him, basic propositions are sincere, first-person present-tense reports of perceptual experience. It is said that such views are devoid of errors and are basically incorrigible. This belief is because there is no mediating agency between the epistemic subject and the object of perception. This perspective underscores the certainty of self-awareness and challenges traditional notions of knowledge that rely on external validation. By asserting the indubitable nature of one's own thoughts and perceptions, Descartes sets the stage for modern epistemology and the ongoing debate about the relationship between the observer and the observed.

For Moorean foundationalism, basic propositions are made up of readily observable public facts, which are referred to as common-sense beliefs. The basic propositions of Moorean foundationalism are also incorrigible, but unlike those of Cartesian foundationalism, they are not fallible. For Mooreans, incorrigibility means that basic propositions are incorrigible not because they are infallible but because it is logically impossible to amend them.⁸ 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 human beings. From the above, it can be deduced that Kekes has a clear and positive view of Moorean foundationalism because basic propositions are the final courts of appeal and do not provide infallible knowledge. This perspective highlights the value of shared beliefs in grounding knowledge, suggesting that communal consensus can serve as a more reliable foundation than individual psychological states. Furthermore, it positions Moorean foundationalism as a pragmatic approach, acknowledging that while our beliefs may not be infallible, they are essential for navigating the complexities of human experience.

The other question of whether our beliefs have a secure foundation is the fallibilist negative proposed answer to the question of whether our beliefs have a secure foundation, which the fallibilist provides a negative answer to. Kekes believes that this question and responses to the question are vital to contemporary epistemology. This question stems from two issues that have emerged in the development of contemporary epistemology. One of the issues to be addressed is the foundationalist neglect of the Gettier problem; the other is the denial of the possibility of non-inferential or direct knowledge. The core of the Gettier problem arises from the fact that an epistemic agent can meet all the requirements of the traditional method of knowledge justification, that is, the Justified True Belief (JTB) criterion, and still not have knowledge. Though Gettier's 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 have already conducted their debate and argument on the assumption that the meaning of knowledge is without opposition. However, Gettier's proposition and example clearly demonstrate the need for additional conditions. These additional conditions seek to address the gaps exposed by Gettier, prompting philosophers to explore alternative frameworks for understanding knowledge. As a result, contemporary epistemology has become increasingly focused on refining the criteria that determine what it means to truly know something.

The second fallibilist critique of foundationalism discussed by Kekes has to do with the denial of the possibility of direct, non-inferential knowledge. Foundationalism's supporters argued that direct and non-inferential knowledge is practically impossible. These proponents are basically scientists who have a flair for the scientific method when it comes to epistemic

⁷ Descartes, R. (1993). *Meditations on first philosophy*. (D. A. Cress, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1641)

⁸ Moore, G. E. (1925). A defence of common sense. In J. H. Muirhead (Ed.), *Contemporary British philosophy* (2nd series). Allen & Unwin.

justification; they base their observations on it. They believe that the foundationalist position claiming the proposition is incorrigible is false because, in their view, observations are influenced by certain theories. For this case, all knowledge is indirect, implying all observation is theory-laden. This means that foundationalists' self-justified propositions are flawed and contain uncertainty and errors. As a result, critics argue that our understanding of knowledge is always mediated by theoretical frameworks, which can lead to a more nuanced view of epistemology. This perspective underscores the significance of context and interpretation in moulding our perception of justified belief.

Other ways to discredit the foundationalist thesis, Kekes uses the analytic-synthetic distinction. Kekes demonstrates that if we can uphold the distinction between the two, we cannot say that propositions are purely synthetic. If no synthetic propositions exist, then no basic propositions exist. The dissolution of the basic proposition means that the incorrigible position held by the foundationalist is false, thereby discrediting the foundationalist position. This challenge raises serious concerns about epistemology, suggesting that our understanding of knowledge may be far more complex than previously assumed. Consequently, it invites further examination of alternative theories that could better account for the nature of justified beliefs and knowledge acquisition.

Another criticism of the fallibilists regarding the possibility of direct knowledge is the critique of the empiricist's theory of concept formation. The theory is all about how we acquire empirical concepts through direct knowledge. Foundationalism argues for the plausibility of this theory. But the fallibilists believed this view was implausible. Their position is that concepts are not possible. This argument is that the concept is possible only if the person already possesses other concepts. Thus, concepts cannot be learnt one at a time, as foundationalists claim; they must be learnt together. Kekes then concluded that the fallibilist thesis is more plausible than the foundationalist thesis and favoured the Moorean foundationalist over the Cartesian foundationalist. Kekes' analysis invites further exploration of the implications of fallibilism for epistemology and the nature of knowledge. It raises important questions about how we can justify our beliefs and the interconnectedness of concepts in shaping our understanding of the world.

4. On skepticism

The second issue comes from the question, "If our beliefs have no secure foundation, how can they be justified as knowledge?"⁹ Skepticism is the position that denies knowledge claims. According to sceptics, our rational assumptions cannot be justified. He views skepticism as a distinct approach in contemporary epistemology, primarily targeting the reasoning processes we typically rely on to justify knowledge claims. In this new era, skepticism involves examining the reasoning processes used to support knowledge claims. This critical examination calls into question the very methods by which we ascertain truth, urging us to reflect on the reliability of our cognitive faculties. As we navigate through a landscape laden with information, the challenge lies not only in acquiring knowledge but also in discerning its validity amidst a plethora of competing perspectives. To put this in a clear form Kekes says 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

⁹ Goldman, A. I. (1979). What is justified belief? In G. S. Pappas (Ed.), *Justification and knowledge* (pp. 1–23). D. Reidel Publishing.

provided because the process of justifying one standard by another must lead either to infinite regress or to non-rational commitment to some standards.”¹⁰

Most philosophers have tried to discourage this skeptical argument because it does little to discourage knowledge claims. Some have argued that the question being asked by the sceptic seems far-fetched. It is meaningless to question the standard of rationality because rationality has meaning only with reference to some standards. But Kekes still holds to the fact that this question cannot just be dismissed. Keke's discussion of the attempts at responding to the skeptical challenge is very logically true and tries to show how the sceptics' argument still remains. He uses the argument 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 something in the epistemic agent. This was one of the positions that Wittgenstein also supported. Based on the above, skepticism is a misguided and illegitimate attempt to find a standard of rationality outside a given form of life. To disagree with the above, 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.”¹¹

But there is communication among different forms of life, and this automatically implies shared standards. Such a shared standard indicates that there are standards transcending the confines of any one form of life and which need rational justification. The different ways to respond to the skeptical challenge by identifying standards of rationality with logical facts, scientific methods, or transcendental arguments are seen as the best conditions of rationality. But Kekes objected to the use of logic as a standard of rationality because its rationality is also questionable. He thinks that logic can lead to irrational propositions even with a valid structural form. Another attempt to refute skepticism is the modernized Kantian employment of transcendental arguments. The main point of this idea is to offer a rational justification of beliefs by showing how they derive from a particular system and then demonstrating that the system is the only one possible. The problem with this method is that it's impossible to show that any part of a conceptual system is needed. While it can be shown that some components are necessary for a particular system, it is incorrect to argue that a component is necessary for a conceptual system, and this transcendental argument falls short of demonstrating the rationality of the system.

Science is one of the most used methods for rationality. It is generally assumed by many to be the real paradigm of rationality. Anything that is not scientifically proven is said to be neither rational nor irrational. But the validity of scientific results relies on propositions, which it accepts without justification. Based on this, science is not totally reliable as a standard for rationality. The usefulness of science has been defended by scholars over the years; however, Kekes objected to this notion, arguing that while an idea may be scientifically pragmatic, this does not guarantee its rationality, as it can also be used to pursue irrationality. According to him, a scientific statement also requires validity and justification from other methods to be admissible as a clear method. This implies that the pragmatic justification of science has also been undermined. Because these issues and challenges seem insurmountable, Kekes sees skepticism as a vital problem that current epistemologists must solve.

5. Critical assessment of Kekes position about contemporary epistemology

Examining Kekes' description of contemporary epistemology as a theory of epistemic justification as opposed to the traditional conception of the theory of knowledge is a clear

¹⁰ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

¹¹ Kekes, J. (1979). *The nature of philosophy*. Rowman and Littlefield.

judgement to make. But it should be noted that this does not discredit epistemological pursuit, like most scholars are interested in what Kekes was trying to portray it to be. It does not discredit the traditional conception of what knowledge should be; it has just streamlined it to epistemic justification. The trend on epistemic justification shows that it is one of the main parts of epistemic discourse that has been overlooked but needs to be part of epistemic discourse also. Kekes should not be criticized for saying that contemporary epistemology is based on epistemic justification; if we are to look into the issue critically, we will also understand that the methods and theories of epistemic justification that scholars have developed over the years are a testament to such a claim of Kekes. He was only bringing to the notice of philosophers to note that epistemology is not just a theory of justification but also of knowledge and that other fundamental epistemological discussions must also be given priority.

Another fundamental problem with which scholars have argued against Keke's view of epistemology is that he tries to humanize it, saying that it is normative. He maintained this position because that is what he sees as one of the new trends in epistemology. He observes that scholars have attempted to answer several questions posed by contemporary epistemologists and has found that these questions necessitate considering human nature to arrive at plausible answers. These findings led him to the Aristotelian justification theory of rationality. He was convinced that this theory would provide the right answers to the questions posed by sceptics. He believes that we can achieve a more robust understanding of knowledge by integrating insights from human nature into the framework of epistemology. This approach addresses the sceptics' challenges and enriches the discourse within the field, paving the way for a deeper exploration of the interplay between reason and human experience.

Keke was also accused of selectively using his analysis of skepticism to favor only the Cartesian and Moorean models of skepticism. This was one of the arguments critics of Keke's work use to discredit his work. Critics said he ignores other epistemology theories. An examination of the two models that Keke focused on should be seen as a way to address the question of skepticism, not a way of neglecting other forms of epistemology. His ways of addressing the problem of foundationalism with these two models have only provided a way out of some of the problems that foundationalism has caused in the quest to provide answers to knowledge justification. He did not discuss other non-foundationalist theories of epistemic justification because it was unnecessary for his quest on the nature of contemporary epistemology, not because he overlooked them. Epistemologists continue to scrutinize these theories, and the scholars who proposed them need to further develop them. His failure to address other scholars' views about how epistemology should move forward indicates that he was primarily focused on the issues at hand in his argument for reviewing contemporary epistemology. His focus was to discuss the issues and problems in contemporary epistemology. He selected the issues he wants to discuss; he stated them and discussed them. His success is a philosophical problem that locates issues in every proposed answer; he was on a quest against contemporary epistemology. His critique serves as a catalyst for deeper reflection on the foundations of knowledge and belief. By challenging existing paradigms, he encourages scholars to reconsider their assumptions and explore new avenues for comprehending the complex issues surrounding epistemological thought.

On the issue of skepticism and naturalized epistemology that was looked at by Kekes, he should be commended for viewing these two fundamental problems as just a challenge and not something that can override epistemology's development. The sceptics' response to rationalists is to ground and justify their rational standard by pointing out that any such argument must itself be based upon presuppositions, and further, any attempts to ground these lead either to an infinite and vicious regress, a circular justification, or an unargued, arbitrary, and unjustified commitment on the part of the rationalist. Kekes tries to provide a solution to this argument by trying to allocate justification to rationality. This position has been said to be faulty by scholars and is said to be fallacious because it will show his concept of justification has not really handled the sceptics'

problem. Keke's approach has shed new light on the sceptic's challenge, resulting in some fundamental developments in contemporary epistemology. These developments invite further exploration of how rationality can be reconciled with skepticism, potentially offering pathways to a more robust understanding of knowledge. As scholars continue to engage with Kekes' ideas, the discourse around justification and belief is likely to evolve, revealing deeper insights into the nature of epistemic certainty.

However, he defends the idea that truth is the most fundamental goal of epistemology. He defends his theory of justification as truth-conducive. This position of Kekes has been said to require justification itself. It was argued that his view is more pragmatic, which is what he wanted to refute. It must be noted that his view of truth conduciveness does not require pragmatism. All theories of epistemic justification in recent times are basically truth-conducive; without that, they will face a lot of criticism or outright rejection. His theory of truth-conduciveness is actually a criterion for epistemic justification, not a disguised version of pragmatism. We can't, even in the present state of epistemology, do without the truth-conduciveness of any epistemic claim.

6. Conclusion

This paper has critically analyzed John Kekes' views on the main problems in modern epistemology, with a focus on foundationalism, fallibilism, and skepticism. Kekes persuasively contends that epistemology has transitioned from a predominant "theory of knowledge" to a "theory of justification," a transformation driven by the enduring difficulties presented by skepticism and the intricacies revealed by contemporary philosophical exploration.

Kekes evaluates the potential for a secure foundation for human belief by offering a nuanced comparison of Cartesian and Moorean foundationalism, ultimately endorsing the latter for its basis in common-sense beliefs that are publicly verifiable and function as a pragmatic, albeit not infallible, court of appeal. His investigation of fallibilism further undermines the pursuit of indubitable foundations, emphasizing the Gettier problem and the theory-laden character of observation as critical refutations of conventional foundationalist assertions.

Kekes does not dismiss skepticism as a philosophical nuisance; instead, he regards it as a significant and unresolved issue. He rigorously critiques efforts to establish rationality through logic, science, or transcendental arguments, illustrating that each ultimately fails to deliver a non-circular, universally justified standard. His understanding that communication between various "forms of life" suggests the presence of common, transcendent standards is a significant contribution, indicating the necessity for a justificatory framework that can embrace this intersubjective reality.

Some people don't like Keke's work, especially because he only looks at certain models and because he says he "humanizes" epistemology. However, his overall project is both valid and useful. By focusing on epistemic justification and supporting a truth-conducive theory of knowledge, he shifts the epistemological discussion towards a more practical and robust comprehension of how beliefs can be justified. Kekes adeptly identifies and examines the critical issues within modern epistemology, aiming not to dismantle the discipline but to enhance and progress it. His work is a strong call for epistemologists to keep coming up with theories that can stand up to skeptical challenges and still be based on how people really think and act.

Acknowledgements

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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