

## Descartes' Foundationalist Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge)

1. Foundationism is the view that some beliefs are non-inferentially justified; put another way that some beliefs are self-evident. A foundationalist believes that other beliefs are ultimately justified by reference to foundational (self-evident beliefs).
2. Foundationalism is motivated, in part by the requirement that "justifying beliefs be justified"
  - a. Given this requirement and the three possible combinations of justifying beliefs listed below
    - i. All justification is inferential and linear
    - ii. All justification is inferential but not linear
    - iii. All justification is linear but no inferential
  - b. The foundationalist can make her case for iii. Because (i) involves an infinite regress, (ii) involves circularity; only (iii) can satisfy the requirement, from the foundationalist's perspective of condition (a)
  - c. For the foundationalist (iii) implies that some beliefs are self-evident (Brink 104-105)
3. Two types of foundationalism
  - a. Subjective (based on the psychological force with which beliefs are held)
    - i. Strong: indubitable/ incorrigible (uncorrectable)
    - ii. Weak: Prima facie indubitable
  - b. Objective (based on truth)
    - i. Strong infallible
    - ii. Weak: probable or as a class reliably true(108-109)
4. According to Newman Descartes is a subjective foundationalist:

What is it to us that someone may make out that the perception whose truth we are so firmly convinced of may appear false to God or an angel, so that it is, absolutely speaking, false? Why should this alleged "absolute falsity" bother us, since we neither believe in it nor have even the smallest suspicion of it? (Replies 2, AT 7:144-45)

On one reading of this remark, Descartes is explicitly embracing the consequence of having defined knowledge wholly in terms of unshakable conviction: he's conceding that achieving the brand of knowledge he seeks is compatible with being—"absolutely speaking"—in error. If this is the correct reading, the interesting upshot is that Descartes' ultimate aspiration is not absolute truth, but absolute certainty. Of course, it should not be ignored (on this reading) that these same remarks imply that achieving this perfect certainty entails being *unshakably convinced* that we're *not* in error, absolutely speaking.