

DECONSTRUCTING FOUNDATIONALISM AND THE QUESTION OF PHILOSOPHY AS SYSTEMATIC SCIENCE

William Maker

Clemson University

Wittgenstein accurately characterized philosophy as that endeavor which is continually plagued by questions which bring it itself into question. Since at least Descartes, and up through Husserl and the logical positivists, philosophers have attempted to confront the scandal of philosophy's perennial foundational crises by attempting to transform philosophy into a rigorous science. Broadly speaking, these projects have been characterized as foundationalist, either epistemological or transcendental.¹ But just as every finished philosophical position since Parmenides has come under attack, modern attempts to transform philosophy from the love of knowing into actual knowing have also been subject to critique.

What is perhaps most distinctive about contemporary rejections of foundational philosophy is the self-understood radicality of these critiques. They claim not to be doing better what their predecessors had attempted, but rather to be putting an end to the philosophical tradition in general. What I aim to do in this paper is threefold: (1) to consider the basic character of some contemporary attempts to reject philosophy wholesale and to indicate certain difficulties with these attempts; (2) to suggest a method of criticizing traditional philosophy which avoids these difficulties; (3) to outline how such a method both coherently articulates what is valid in contemporary criticisms of philosophy and points the way to a different understanding of what philosophy as a rigorous or

systematic science might be.

1. The Contemporary Idea of Deconstruction

Since Nietzsche, philosophy has become increasingly preoccupied with meta-questions concerning both its status and its possibility as a meaningful endeavor. In more recent years, in the works of Heidegger, the later Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Habermas, Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida and Rorty, this meta-concern has been transformed into a concerted effort to analyze and to critically reject or "deconstruct" the traditional guiding ideal of philosophy: its aim to attain a standpoint of objective and autonomous reason and thereby to transform itself into the "queen of the sciences," a radical, absolute or presuppositionless foundational discipline which can speak for *the* truth.

The possibility of philosophy in this grand and traditional sense has been disparaged from several different perspectives. All might be said to share in common a belief in, and a desire to demonstrate, the unattainability of the radical self-grounding or self-legitimation which the traditional ideal of philosophy demands. In brief, the deconstructors hold that the philosophical pretension to an aperspectival, presuppositionless standpoint is an unwarranted conceit. Positively expressed, the differing attempts to deconstruct foundationalism variously strive to demonstrate that there are inherent, necessary and non-transcendable limits to thought. I shall call this the thesis of thought's finitude. It is further argued, with differing stresses and in differing ways, that these limits must be taken into account if philosophy, or post-philosophical thought, is to go about its business in a meaningful way.

This contemporary attack on philosophy's ideal of rigorous science takes the shape of a thoroughgoing rejection or deconstruction of foundational epistemology. In aiming to speak of the nature of truth itself and the conditions for its possibility -- a precondition for philosophy's claim to be a rigorous science -- epistemology claims to discover and ground the necessary conditions for the possibility of true knowing or discourse. And the capacity to do this successfully presupposes implicitly or explicitly that one has attained a meta-standpoint of unconditional knowing, a standpoint in which thought is fully transparent to itself, meaning that the epistemological ground or foundation is itself as fully legitimated or grounded as that which is to be founded upon it. Since the standpoint to which foundational philosophy must lay claim is the absolute standpoint from which the determinate character and legitimacy of philosophy as a rigorous foundational science would be articulated, and since epistemology is that endeavor in which claims to such a standpoint are both made and argued for, the attack on the ideal of philosophy as a rigorous science

has taken shape specifically as an attack on foundational epistemology.

Positively expressed, the antifoundationalist position asserts that the self-grounding standpoint of absolute knowing to which foundationalism must lay claim is unattainable, in that every standpoint of thought is necessarily one from amongst several possible perspectives, each of which is a limited standpoint unavoidably conditioned by determinative factors which can neither be made fully transparent nor transcended. Such factors might consist in the overdetermined character of the given natural languages in which philosophical thought is articulated. Or, expressing the antifoundationalist position in Heideggerian fashion, it is claimed that the correspondence model of truth -- which foundational epistemology presupposes and which promises knowledge as a full revelation and a complete mirroring of what is -- is illusory in that every truth-telling or disclosure is also a concealment. Each event of presencing presupposes, as a condition of its possibility, a correlative absencing or concealing. Truth as dis-closure (*a-letheia*) always retains within itself an ineluctable reservoir of closedness or obscurity (*lethe*).

What does the antifoundationalist position have to do with *systematic philosophy*? Systematic philosophy claims to provide a mode of discourse which is unconditional and absolute in the sense that what comes to be established in this discourse is thoroughly determined by the discourse itself. As self-determining discourse, systematic philosophy articulates the position of autonomous rationality. On the face of it, both the positive and negative points made by antifoundationalism would seem to suggest that, if anti-foundationalism is correct, systematic philosophy is impossible. This would seem to be the case because, as self-determining, systematic philosophy lays claim to a standpoint of thought which is presuppositionless and from out of which all of the system are generated in a fully immanent manner. Systematicity in systematic philosophy means, first and foremost, this internal immanent or self-generative feature, and the alleged autonomy and rigor of systematic philosophy -- its claim to being science -- is a function of this immanency, an immanency the condition of the possibility of which is the attainment of a presuppositionless starting point.

The apparently complete incompatibility between systematic philosophy and antifoundationalism arises from the linking of such a presuppositionless starting point with the completion of a project of foundational epistemology. Philosophy as a rigorous systematic science is seen as requiring presuppositionlessness and immanency -- which it does -- and it is assumed by antifoundationalists that the systematic standpoint can only be attained in and through the completion of a project of foundational epistemology which has as its outcome the attainment of a standpoint of self-grounding or self-legitimizing thought or reason. This would

purportedly function as a determinate standpoint from which the systematic philosopher lays claim to having uncovered and grounded the conditions for the possibility of knowledge *uberhaupt*. The favorite historical example -- and the *bête noir*-- of the antifoundationalists is, of course, Hegel's system.²

Thus the view which sees systematic philosophy as wedded to foundationalism and as falling along with it holds that "presuppositionlessness" must and can only consist in a position in which the determinate factors constitutive of knowledge are clearly defined and fully legitimated. (Such that, these factors having thus been shown to be the necessary preconditions for thought, they are 'absolutes' and not presuppositions in the negative sense of the word.)

I shall argue, however, that presuppositionlessness need not -- indeed cannot -- be construed in this manner. Thus I shall contend that a genuine systematic philosophy which does have a presuppositionless beginning point does not claim to have attained this by successfully completing the project of foundational epistemology in the manner envisioned by antifoundationalists. I shall argue, to use the closing words of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that ". . . a new form of systematic philosophy. . . which has nothing whatever to do with epistemology but which nevertheless makes normal philosophical enquiry possible"³ is possible. Furthermore: I aim to show not only that such a systematic philosophy is possible, but also that its possibility is not only compatible with, but itself presupposes, a deconstruction of foundationalism. In making that point I shall contend that there is an essential difference between a systematic -- that is, a thoroughly immanent -- deconstruction or critique of foundational epistemology and an ad hoc deconstruction. My contentions will be (1) that systematic deconstruction makes clear the extent to which a non-foundational systematic philosophy is possible, (2) that it makes possible a coherent, non-paradoxical articulation of the finite character of thought and (3) that in so doing it thereby avoids various difficulties found in ad hoc deconstructions. In criticizing ad hoc attempts at deconstruction and in arguing the superiority of systematic deconstruction I shall contend that a major failing of ad hoc deconstructivists consists in the paradoxical or self-referential character of their assertions that thought is finite and not susceptible to transparent self-legitimation. I shall argue that, as a consequence of this paradoxicality, ad hoc deconstructionists are unable to decisively undermine the foundationalist perspective. Lastly, as it is clear that a systematic philosophy which does not begin with epistemological foundations but rather with a systematically deconstructive critique of foundationalism would be something different from what one would expect of philosophy as a rigorous science, I will conclude with a few

remarks concerning what I take the nature of such a scientific system of philosophy to be.

2. The Problematic Character of Ad Hoc Deconstructions of Foundationalism.

One way of focusing on the difficulty with ad hoc rejections of foundationalism is by examining the complex character of the issue of dogmatism as it is perceived and addressed both by foundationalists and antifoundationalists. This is an important issue because one of the guiding motivations for both foundationalism and antifoundationalism is a desire to avoid dogmatism, broadly understood as the unfounded assumption that a particular point of view is unequivocally right. For foundationalists, dogmatism can only be avoided by foundational epistemology. For the antifoundationalist, however, it is rather foundationalism itself which leads to dogmatism. By looking more closely at this issue we can see (1) how and why it is that ad hoc deconstructions of foundationalism fail as decisive critiques of foundationalism and (2) why a systematic deconstruction is called for if the claim that foundationalism ought to be rejected is to be substantiated.

That one aim of foundationalism is to transcend dogmatism is clear from the works of Descartes, the founding father of foundationalist epistemology and from the work of his followers in modern philosophy who continued and transformed his project. Foundational epistemology's original position regarding dogmatism can be expressed as follows. If the definitive conditions for knowledge are not first established and grounded by means of a preliminary investigation into the nature and limits of knowing, then when we go about the business of making knowledge claims we cannot be certain that we are operating properly. The project of foundational epistemology is needed so that the twin specters of radical skepticism and dogmatism can be laid to rest. For our assumption that we are going about things in the proper way may be unjustified. We may have deceived ourselves (or we may be being deceived) into thinking that we are coming to know the truth when we in fact are not. Mere assumptions concerning the rightness and legitimacy of how we go about the business of knowing must be viewed as so many dogmatic assertions, as unjustified assumptions, resting on faith, tradition, convention or whatever. They amount to untenable appeals to authority and they are not to be accepted until they pass certification by the tribunal of reason. Foundational epistemology achieves this end in two steps. First, it determines whether knowledge as such is possible or impossible. Having determined the possibility of knowledge, it then supplies a method allowing the

systematic verification or falsification of our beliefs, enabling us to create a rationally reconstructed, autonomous and self-grounding culture.⁴

From this perspective, reason is a "natural light."⁵ This image is powerful, important, and seductive. In raising the specter of radical skepticism as a possibility for which the absolute certainty provided by foundationalism is the only antidote, the foundationalists shaped a view of reason, mind, understanding or consciousness as a fully self-illuminative faculty. Only if mind or reason can attain to full transparency concerning itself -- knowing its own workings as the instrument or medium of knowledge -- can the knowledge conditions which constitute its operations be fully justified and grounded and the twin specters of radical skepticism and blind dogmatism be exorcised. This justification and exorcism entail a view of reason as an instrument, faculty, or medium which can only perform this justificatory task insofar as it is itself capable of full self-justification as the epistemologically critical and justifying instrument. Self-justification is required since anything left unjustified -- merely assumed as true -- would compromise the whole endeavor. Thus foundational epistemology requires a moment of absolute self-transparency in which reason's own operating conditions are known and validated in an unconditional, unquestionable, indubitable fashion. Indeed, one can view the entire development of modern epistemology as a search for that moment of fully self-certain, self-transparent, unconditional, absolute knowing. And one can further see this search as rooted in the assumption, later to be brought into question by the anti-foundationalists -- that the mind or reason knows nothing better than itself and can attain to full clarity concerning the conditions of its own possibility.

What distinguishes the foundationalist view of dogmatism from the antifoundationalist view is the former's linking of dogmatism with the possibility of radical skepticism. For the foundationalist, radical skepticism -- the possibility that we could be wrong about everything -- is a philosophically genuine possibility which can only be met by an absolute certainty attained through the self-investigation of reason. Given the specter of radical skepticism, from the standpoint of the foundationalist, any and all positions which are not rooted in and justified by a successful foundational epistemology are *eo ipso* unjustified, uncertain, and dogmatic, insofar as they claim to be anything more than unjustified and uncertain.

From the point of view of the antifoundationalist, radical skepticism is itself only a by-product of the seductive vision of absolute certainty and self-transparent reason to which the foundationalist is mistakenly attached. As a corollary of the belief in an absolute certainty, the threat, if not the possibility, of radical skepticism is held to disappear once it is

made clear that the absolute certainty is unattainable in principle. The antifoundationalist assures us that if absolute certainty cannot be attained, then absolute uncertainty makes no sense, since they are correlative terms. In addition, foundationalism's false claims to absolute certainty amount to dogmatism in pretending to provide an unequivocal, exclusive standpoint from which the truth can be established. With the demonstration that absolute self-grounding certainty is an illusion, the Gang of Four which contemporary deconstructionists are accused of nurturing and which they dismiss -- radical skepticism, relativism, nihilism and dogmatism -- are said to be liquidated.

The difficulty of the contemporary antifoundationalists' ad hoc attempts to deconstruct foundationalism by showing that absolute truth or absolute certainty is impossible lies, as the label "ad hoc" suggests, in the manner in which these critiques of foundational epistemology are carried out. The essence of the the problem is the internal inconsistency of the anti-foundationalist position. The problem here concerns the status of the discourse in which, and the status of the standpoint from which, one attacks foundationalism.

The antifoundationalist wishes to assert that the aperspectival, ahistorical metaposition -- the standpoint of absolute self-grounding knowing -- which the foundationalist aims to attain is an impossibility *in principle*. Correlatively, the antifoundationalist desires to show that *all* human knowing is finite and burdened by inherent limitations which, although they can be philosophically articulated and illuminated cannot, nevertheless, be removed or transcended. According to antifoundationalists, we have something like a basic insight into or self awareness of these limits, one which can be philosophically accounted for.⁶ It is only the seductions of the powers of reflection which lead us into the illusion that they can be gone beyond. The difficulty for the antifoundationalist concerns the character and status of these claims and the implicit position or standpoint from which they are promulgated.

For one thing, the claim that an absolute standpoint is unattainable *in principle* and that efforts to attain it are thus mistaken and doomed to failure from the start is itself an absolute claim. For the assertion that not only has no one yet succeeded in successfully articulating an absolute philosophy, but that it is in principle impossible to do so, is itself an apparently ahistorical claim to an insight into the true nature and possibility of truth and knowledge.

Undoubtedly, what the antifoundationalist *says* is that unconditional truth claims are not possible, but this claim is itself an unconditionally true meta-assertion about the nature of truth. From the standpoint of the foundationalist, the antifoundationalist has a right to be skeptical about the possibility of attaining an absolute standpoint through a foundational

project. But she has no legitimate grounds to dismiss the project out of hand. Correlatively, the antifoundationalist's positive assertions concerning finitude also appear as claims which are being made from an absolute, aperspectival standpoint. One might say that the antifoundationalist is in a difficult position both in regard to what she wishes to assert and in regard to the position from which she makes her antifoundationalist claims. Antifoundationalism seems to succumb necessarily to the self-referential inconsistency of making absolute claims against absolutism and to be denying the possibility of an absolute perspective on the truth from a perspective which itself is absolute. From the standpoint of the foundationalist, the antifoundationalist's unequivocal claims concerning the impossibility of attaining an absolute standpoint can only appear as question-begging and dogmatic. For in the foundationalist's eyes, the antifoundationalist is going about making unconditional claims about the nature of truth and the conditions and limitations of its possibility -- something the foundationalist claims to do also - *without* going through the effort of justifying the standpoint from which such claims can rightly be made.

What is the antifoundationalist response to all this? Sophisticated anti-foundationalists such as Gadamer and Rorty seem to be aware of the opening to charges of paradox and inconsistency which their positions put them in, but not to be especially troubled by it.⁷ If the foundationalist can respond to their attacks on foundationalism by raising meta-questions and meta-issues concerning antifoundationalism, the antifoundationalist can respond in kind, although with a certain twist. The kind of meta level response which the antifoundationalist can make has its *locus classicus* in the earlier Wittgenstein's notion that certain things which cannot be said -- or cannot be said coherently without violating fundamental limiting principles of discourse -- can nevertheless be shown. The antifoundationalist response might go like this:

It may appear that antifoundationalist claims are unconditional and absolute claims concerning the nature of truth and the possibility of knowledge; the language of the foundational tradition in which they must be asserted produces this appearance. But it is the very nature of the limited or finite character of human knowing and speaking that they convey this appearance when addressing their own nature. The very meta-level problems which are brought to bear against antifoundationalism reveal the truth of antifoundationalism in that they *show* at the meta-level what cannot be articulated without this self-referential inconsistency. This self-referential inconsistency is not a problem, but rather a revelation of thought's inescapably limited character, a revelation which appears whenever thought focuses on its own nature. It serves to indicate the impossibility of our ever being able to provide a

transcendental grounding for the definitive conditions of finitude, and this disclosure is perfectly consistent with our position. For it is just the impossibility of any such grounding which we are interested in articulating. A consistent antifoundationalism could not do what foundationalism demands, so we are being consistent with our position in refusing to attempt to do so. The charges of paradox raised against antifoundationalism are finally of no importance simply because what foundationalism sees as a paradox to be removed or avoided the antifoundationalist recognizes as evidence for the point he wishes to make: the opacity, the non-transparency of knowledge and truth conditions and the impossibility of attaining a standpoint from which they can be talked about in a fully adequate manner. In addition, in charging antifoundationalism with question-begging and dogmatism it is the foundationalist -- from the perspective of antifoundationalism -- who is truly begging the question and being dogmatic. For these charges against antifoundationalism can only be made -- since they only make sense if foundationalism is a real possibility -- by someone who does not see beyond the confines of the foundationalist paradigm. Thus it is the foundationalist who is begging the question and being dogmatic in refusing to be open to the radical questioning of the possibility of foundational philosophy itself. The foundationalist is willing to be a radical skeptic about everything except the necessity of foundationalism. In demanding that the paradoxes of self-reference be successfully dealt with by us, you are demanding that we resolve problems which foundational epistemology cannot resolve itself, problems which our position holds cannot be resolved as their irresolvability is itself indicative of our thesis concerning the finite, non-groundable character of knowing. And in demanding that we ground and justify our antifoundationalist position you are asking us to play your game and to accomplish something which foundational epistemology has not been able to accomplish, and which we claim cannot be accomplished with success. Thus our failure to meet your demands is not indicative of a problem in our position, but of the truth of what we assert about the nature of knowing.

To which the foundationalist might respond: You are trying to modify your position without owning up the consequences of such a modification. The counter charges of question-begging and dogmatism will not work. Foundationalism can admit that as yet no one has succeeded in completing the project; indeed, foundationalism is open to bringing the possibility of foundationalism itself into question, for our demand that a standpoint of justification be sought brings everything into question. But antifoundationalism is not content with making the historically accurate observation that no one has yet succeeded in successfully carrying out the

foundational project. Rather, antifoundationalism wishes to dogmatically assert that foundationalism is impossible in principle, that it is a way of understanding the nature and the goal of philosophy which is fundamentally mistaken. Of course antifoundationalism refuses to engage in the foundational activity which would ground the legitimacy of its 'insights' into the absolute character of finitude. Were the antifoundationalist to do this he would see that he is engaged in much the same project as we are. But unless the antifoundationalist brings his own position into question, the charge of dogmatism is correct. And if antifoundationalism admits that its own position is and remains ungrounded, then anti-foundationalism has no basis on which to make unequivocal claims about the possibility of foundational philosophy. If antifoundationalism will admit that the impossibility or errancy of foundationalism cannot be demonstrated from a justified position, then it must also admit that the possibility or impossibility, the meaningfulness or non-meaningfulness of foundational philosophy is an open question, which is all that foundationalism asks. The paradoxes of the antifoundationalist position 'show' nothing else but the fundamental wrongheadedness of the antifoundationalist position itself.

Standing back from this dialogue, we might say at this juncture that the foundationalist - antifoundationalist debate has reached a standoff, and that these two positions on the character and possibility of philosophy are separated by an unbridgeable gap. It seems that each occupies a position from which neither can finally speak to the other, for *each* is looking at the philosophical world in a way which is diametrically opposed to the other's, and which precludes the possibility of finding a common ground upon which their differences can be resolved. Each side approaches the question of what philosophy is, and ought to do, in such a fashion that their respective visions are incommensurable.

The foundationalist will not be swayed from the fundamental and definitive demand that no truth claims -- and especially truth claims about the nature and possibility of truth claims -- can be regarded as adequate unless the standpoint from which such claims are made is justified. The foundationalist article of faith is that reason's demands for such justification are self-evident and unavoidable. Consequently, from the foundationalist point of view, the demands of finitude, while seemingly obvious in being grounded in basic facts about human nature, are contestable insofar as the commonsensical standpoint which asserts them remains ungrounded, and insofar as these demands run counter to the idea of rational accountability. Any critical project can only touch the foundationalist position insofar as it recognizes the demands of reason. To fail to do so is, for the foundationalist, simply to step outside the bounds of philosophical discourse

The antifoundationalist will not be swayed from the fundamental and definitive view that no truth claims -- and especially truth claims about the nature and possibility of truth claims -- can ever be fully justified or grounded. The antifoundationalist article of faith is that the self-evidence of human finitude precludes the possibility of absolute self-grounding. Consequently, from the antifoundationalist point of view, the demands of reflective reason, while seductive, are illusory, and any attempt to attack this principle can only touch the antifoundationalist position insofar as it recognizes the limits of finitude.

Seeing that foundationalism recognizes the demands of reason as primary and antifoundationalism recognizes the constraints of finitude as primary might lead one to the view that there is no possible rational resolution of the controversy. And thus one might conclude that no final demonstration of the correctness or incorrectness of either position is possible, because they have incommensurable criteria concerning what counts as a demonstration. Looking at the matter in this way one might feel that only a quasi-religious, or quasi-psychoanalytic, conversion from one standpoint to the other is possible; a conversion which consists just in 'coming to see things aright' however this is construed, in the spirit of the later Wittgenstein.

Now *this* meta-perspective on the issue might seem most amenable to the antifoundationalist. In fact, an antifoundationalist might hold that if the foundationalist can be brought to agree with this meta-perspective on their differences, then the issue would be resolved in the favor of antifoundationalism. One could imagine a sophisticated antifoundationalist saying: "Of course I cannot demonstrate to you that you are wrong in a manner that you find acceptable, for you can always respond to what I say and to what I bring forth as evidence with a demand that I justify the standpoint or the discourse in which or from which I make my claims. And you cannot demonstrate to me that I am wrong in a manner which I find acceptable. But that's the whole point. Just this incommensurability *shows* that the ideal of an absolute meta-perspective of knowing which could reconcile such differences is unattainable." To which the foundationalist can respond, once again, that while such a standpoint has not been reached, this in no way proves that it cannot be reached. This meta-perspective on the issue will only appear to the foundationalist who does not 'see' that he is 'bewitched' by a 'pseudoproblem' as question-begging.

What is to be done? *Can* anything be done to resolve this situation or is it truly an impasse? From the point of view of systematic philosophy something can be done. Systematic philosophy holds that a common ground for resolution is attainable in that *antifoundationalism's demand for the recognition of finitude and foundationalism's demand for radical*

justification can be accommodated. Both a demonstration of finitude which avoids paradox and an articulation of a self-grounding standpoint which is non-foundational are attainable. The key to this reconciliation, the effort which literally effects both of these seemingly antithetical goals, lies in a *systematic* consideration of the foundational project. I have labeled this a systematic deconstruction of that project in anticipation of its negative outcome for foundationalism, but in fact its results will be equally negative and positive for both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. The systematic consideration which follows will reveal that *antifoundationalism is right in that our way of knowing is inescapably finite, but wrong in assuming that no other way of knowing is conceivable.* Correlatively, it will show that *foundationalism is right in that a presuppositionless and hence self-grounding standpoint is attainable, but wrong in seeing this standpoint as providing foundations for cognition.* This systematic (and deconstructive) consideration of foundationalism will also be critical of antifoundationalism in that it will show that a consistent recognition of the finitude of our mode of knowing is incompatible with the claim that this mode of knowing is absolute in its finitude: the antifoundationalist view that no other mode of knowing is possible cannot be reconciled with its assertion of the finite character of our mode of knowing. It will be critical of foundationalism by showing that a realization of a presuppositionless standpoint is incompatible with the establishment of foundations of cognition: the foundationalist view that a self-grounding science must begin with determinate conditions for cognition cannot be reconciled with its own realization that such a science must begin without presuppositions.

The way in which a systematic consideration of foundationalism operates is to apply the principles and criteria of foundationalism to the foundational project itself. What I have labeled ad hoc deconstructions fail because they assume the correctness of a position antithetical to foundationalism, and thus apply criteria to it which beg the question at issue. Thus foundationalists can always dismiss antifoundationalist critiques as beside the point. To approach foundationalism systematically however, is to approach its prospects for success as, initially, an open possibility. If foundationalism is to be shown defective this must be demonstrated immanently: the demands laid upon foundationalism and the criteria by which it is judged must be its own. What are foundationalism's basic principles and criteria, and how does their application to the foundationalist project lead to its own immanent deconstruction?

3. The Systematic Consideration of Foundationalism.

Foundationalism demands that we do not presuppose our capacity to know the truth, but rather that we first establish it by means of a preliminary investigation into the nature of cognition, one which will demonstrate that and how knowledge is attainable. Foundationalism holds that cognition is something which is in need of being investigated because it could go wrong. It further holds that cognition is capable of being investigated in such a way that this tendency toward error can be redressed by laying out the rules for cognition's proper exercise. In holding this, foundationalism commits itself to understanding cognition in terms of a determinate relationship between knowledge and object. Cognition must involve a relation, for if we are going to speak of our being right and wrong, we must have a standard for correctness and something we compare to that standard. On the one hand we must be able to specify knowledge, and on the other that which it is purportedly knowledge of -- the object as standard of judgment -- if cognition is going to be understood in the manner of foundationalism: as capable of having the conditions under which it both meets and fails to meet a standard specified by an epistemological or transcendental investigation. In addition, the cognitive relation must be understood as something which is capable of analysis in general terms -- all instances of cognition must involve certain uniform conditions -- if an investigation into it is to result in the kind of foundational knowledge which will serve as a useful prophylactic against error.

In accord with these requirements, foundationalism understands the relation between knowledge and object in terms of the correspondence model: an idea -- or, if we make the linguistic turn, a proposition -- is true when it corresponds to an objective state of affairs. Just how knowledge and the standard are more specifically conceived makes no essential difference to the character of the foundational project. In line with Descartes' classic distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, we may construe knowledge and standard as falling into two separate ontological domains, with the standard as an object understood as existing external to an inner dimension of mental awareness in which it is represented. Or, as has become fashionable in more recent times, we may attempt to avoid the problem of bridging inner and outer which "externalists" confront by going "internal": refusing to regard knowledge and its object as fundamentally different in character, seeing them rather as distinct components of a larger, ontologically seamless unity (such as the pragmatists' "nature") The reason that the particular ontological specification of knowledge and standard/object makes no difference -- the reason that it is irrelevant for foundational purposes whether they are both conceived as ontologically the same or as different -- is simply

because all versions of foundationalism minimally require an *ineliminable* epistemic difference: Foundationalism minimally demands that the standard be construed as something which is determined as what it is independently of the knowledge which is to be measured against it, irrespective of whether the character of the determination as independent is construed as following from an ontological difference or not. If the standard is not so construed -- as independently determined -- there can be no question of an objective test of the knowledge against the standard. (If the domain of that which is to be tested were permitted to determine the standard against which the test is made, objectivity would be sacrificed. A ruler cannot be an objective measure of its own correctness.) Knowledge and standard may both be ontologically ideational, as with Berkeley, or they may both be ontologically natural, as with the pragmatists; but only so long as the standard is construed as determined independently of the knowledge being measured against it (whether it is said to be so determined by God, or by nature, or whatever) does the possibility for a test exist.

Once this epistemic difference which is required for testing is allowed, the foundationalists' central difficulty of comparing knowledge and object without compromising the validity of the standard as an independently determined measure arises. That is, if we grant the epistemic difference needed for genuine testing - - that the standard is determined as what it is prior to and apart from the knowledge of it -- the difficulty of showing that knowledge and standard correspond arises whether or not knowledge and object are ontologically different or not. The attempt to fashion an "internalist" foundationalism as a response to "externalist" difficulties cashes out as the introduction of a distinction without a difference. For the foundational act of comparing knowledge and standard requires that the standard be epistemically distinct in order to be a genuine standard, but also epistemically the same (of the status of something knowable) in order to be something against which knowledge can be compared. But as soon as the standard becomes epistemically knowable -- that is, as soon as it comes to be known in the act of making the comparison -- its status as an objective standard against which knowledge claims are to be tested is fatally compromised. For once the standard is known, the foundationalist no longer has a guarantee that it is determined as what it is objectively, independent of the foundational knowing act. As this intimates, and as I shall discuss in more detail below, the failure of foundationalism is that it requires itself to satisfy test conditions which cannot possibly be met without compromising the conception of knowledge which it presupposes.

Foundationalism's goals are to show that there is a specific mode of knowing which satisfies this correspondence relation and to specify the general conditions (pertaining to knowledge, objects, and their relation)

which make this satisfaction possible.

It is when we think through what must be required for foundationalism to succeed that we discover how and why it cannot succeed in grounding its understanding of cognition. In order to demonstrate correspondence, foundationalism must violate or suspend the very assumption that gets the project going: that cognition consists in a determinate relation between its purported knowledge and an object. To put it differently, demonstrating correspondence means attaining to a state of affairs in which what must be presupposed to carry out the demonstration can no longer be presupposed, so that what foundationalism was going to "found" disappears in the very act of founding it. In short, if foundationalism's demands are to be met, the conditions for its possibility must be violated; the foundational project displays an immanently generated internal incoherence that requires its rejection, and allows us to do so without any need on our part to claim any sort of quasi-foundational, absolute knowledge, as is the case with the ad hoc antifoundationalists. How so?

To establish that and how a truth-affording relation between (what is purportedly) knowledge and object is possible, foundationalism must demonstrate correspondence between the candidate for knowledge and the object. It must show that "knowledge" and object are identical in content, in order to establish that the purported knowledge is true, is genuine knowledge; and it must, at the same time, preserve the distinction between knowledge and object: Demonstrating that we have achieved a successful comparison means that the entities being compared must also be distinct from one another, for without the difference, we have no comparison. In addition, without the preservation of a difference between knowledge and its object we have no knowledge to speak of (at least insofar as knowledge is understood in the manner presupposed by foundationalism.) Additionally (as noted above) only if the difference between knowledge and object is preserved in the foundational act can it be shown that the knowledge in question is objective, is knowledge *of* the object, and not a mere subjective projection or fantasy. So what foundationalism must establish is a state of affairs in which knowledge and object are at one and the same time in a relation of identity (to demonstrate truth) and difference (to insure that a comparison has been achieved; to insure knowledge, for knowledge is a relation and must have distinct relata; and to insure the objectivity of knowledge). In short, this state of affairs requires identity and difference at one and the same time, for if at one moment (or in one foundational act) identity is established, and at another difference, we cannot be certain that the knowledge identified at the one moment and distinguished at the next are the same.

The problem, however, is that if we have simultaneous identity-

and-difference, we no longer have anything that can be picked out and identified as "knowledge," on the one hand, and as the "object" on the other. The state of identity-and-difference between knowledge and object which must be required in order to found knowledge is one in which "knowledge" and "object" disappear, for insofar as *both* are identical and different at once, they are neither the same nor different.⁸ Or, to put the problem another way, we no longer have a determinate relation here, and foundationalism presupposes that knowledge involves a determinate relation as one in which knowledge and its object are always distinguishable from one another. The fatal problem for foundationalism is that both the identity of knowledge and object and the difference must, but cannot, be attained at one and the same time, if this model of knowledge is to be grounded. They cannot be attained, because attaining them eliminates the model; they must be attained, because if they are not the possibility of truth as correspondence remains in question. Put in another way: foundationalism cannot show both that its knowledge is true and that it is knowledge of an object; it can attain certainty about truth at the price of objectivity, or objectivity at the price of certainty about its truth, but not both.

4. The Possibility of Systematic Philosophy

Because the very conditions required for foundationalism to succeed have led to the suspension of the model of knowledge which foundationalism sought to ground, this systematic thinking through of foundationalism demonstrates the failure of foundationalism according to its own criteria. Thus it is a thoroughly immanent critique; thus, unlike ad hoc anti-foundationalism it does not beg the question by presupposing an alternative non-foundational model of knowledge.

If a systematic consideration of the foundationalist project succeeds in effecting the antifoundationalist critique without the problems of ad hoc antifoundationalism, how does it also open the way to a systematic science? Put differently, how is the consideration also a partial success for foundationalism and a partial failure for antifoundationalism? It is a partial failure for antifoundationalism in the sense that it is a critique of antifoundationalism's (inconsistent) pretensions to absolutism. Both foundationalism and antifoundationalism presuppose the same model of cognition, the subjectivist model which presupposes that knowledge is always of a determinate other given independently of cognition. Foundationalism presupposes this model in its attempt to establish correspondence; antifoundationalism presupposes it in its assertion that knowledge is inescapably finite because it is grounded in conditions which cannot be rendered transparent. The immanently generated collapse of

the subjectivist model reveals that it is finite because it cannot ground itself, but it also shows that one cannot successfully claim, as the anti-foundationalists inconsistently wish to claim, that knowing must be understood in terms of this model. If the subjectivist/foundationalist model cannot show how knowledge understood in its terms is legitimate, then it cannot be claimed (as *both* foundationalists and antifoundationalists wish to claim) that this is the only conceivable model for cognition. And thus, foundationalism's self-effected failure to ground its model of cognition is also a partial success for foundationalism because it opens the way to a conception of cognition which is arguably self-grounding. How so?

The specific failure of the foundational - antifoundational model lay in presupposing a determinate difference between knowledge and object. If, as we've seen, this model of cognition collapses when the conditions for its self-grounding are fulfilled, then perhaps this also indicates that the way to attain a self-grounding mode of cognition lies just in specifically rejecting that model. That is, perhaps if we begin by deliberately refusing to presuppose any determinate relationship between cognition and its object, a mode of consideration may ensue in which both come to be determined at once. This discourse could then be arguably self-grounding in the sense that nothing *determinate* from outside of the consideration is present to externally determine what comes to be established in it. If that were the case, philosophy as a systematic science would arguably be possible because the demand that this discourse be unconditional or autonomous -- not founded on anything externally determined -- would allow for the possibility of a strictly immanent determination of the categories of the discourse.

While attaining foundationalism's goal of self-grounding, this systematic science would still be compatible with a *consistent* antifoundationalism for two reasons. For one thing, the very possibility of this systematic discourse would have been conditioned by the self-engendered collapse of the assumption that all discourse must be other-determined, founded on something given as determinate. The collapse of foundationalism is the collapse of this assumption in its failure to ground itself. Insofar as systematic discourse is made possible by the prior suspension of this assumption, systematic self-grounding science would not abrogate the antifoundational insistence that all cognition is in some way conditioned or contextual, made possible by factors external to the cognition itself. Rather, it would articulate the only coherent sense in which this thesis can be maintained: Systematic discourse is conditioned because it has been made possible by the self-refutation of the assumption about cognition which insists that all cognition must begin with something determinate. (Foundationalism asserts that it is the conditions of

cognition themselves which are always given *and determinative* of whatever might be thought; antifoundationalism asserts the same thing, with the qualification that these conditions are opaque. Systematic philosophy asserts that it is conditioned -- in the sense of "having been made possible" -- by the self-suspension as a foundational principle for philosophy of this foundationalist - antifoundationalist thesis that thought must always be conditioned -- in the sense of "predetermined" -- by something already given.) Secondly, this systematic discourse would also be consistent with antifoundationalism because, being based on a thoroughgoing rejection of the unconditional validity of the subjectivist model, it cannot claim to achieve those ends which are part of this model's definition of knowledge. The model which has been suspended defined knowledge as always being knowledge of something given to cognition: "knowledge" was thus taken to be fundamentally descriptive in character, an account of something present to cognition. As based on a rejection of this model, systematic discourse would make no pretension to supplant descriptive discourse by offering itself as a perfected form of such discourse. Systematic philosophy does not claim to describe the given world in any of the manifold senses in which traditional philosophy has construed that task; hence systematic philosophy is radically non-metaphysical. However, it does claim to supplant descriptive discourse insofar as it waxes metaphysical by purporting to be unconditional.

Thus, systematic discourse parts company both with foundationalism, which sought a mode of discourse which would be unconditionally authoritative and determinative for all other modes of discourse, and with antifoundationalism, which explicitly or implicitly postulates a relativism in which all modes of discourse are equal.

1. In terms of the investigation and the criticisms of foundationalism presented here, the difference between epistemology and transcendental philosophy is not essential. For an assessment of the difference see my essay "Davidson's Transcendental Arguments," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (1991): 345 - 360.

2. For a consideration of the issues discussed in this essay in the context of Hegel's system, see my "Reason and the Problem of Modernity," *The Philosophical Forum* 27 (1987): 275 - 303.

3. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 394.

4. The issue of how these latter goals may be attained without a foundational philosophy is developed at some length in "Reason and the Problem of Modernity."
5. See Descartes' Third Meditation.
6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. & trans., David Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), p. 172.
7. See Rorty, "Epistemological Behaviorism and the De-Transcendentalization of Analytic Philosophy," in *Hermeneutics and Praxis*, Robert Hollinger, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); *Philosophy And The Mirror Of Nature*, p. 371 - 372; Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 36; *Truth And Method*, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), p. 309.
8. To hold that they are identical in terms of content, but also simultaneously distinct as "knowledge" on the one hand and "object" on the other will not suffice. To preserve that distinction, the nature of the difference must be articulated; there must be some determinate difference, either ontological or formal. But once such a determinate difference is established, the requisite moment of identity is lost: If knowledge and object are in some respect(s) different, the foundationalist can no longer be sure that knowledge corresponds to the object as it is objectively, independent of the knowing act. As long as some determinate difference is allowed, the foundationalist cannot claim that knowledge captures the object as it truly is as determined independently of the knowing act. He would only be entitled to claim that the knowledge in question is knowledge of things as they appear, not as they are in themselves.