CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

From the study undertaken in the foregoing chapters we find ourselves confronted with the same problem that was occupying human minds ever since Plato—that is, the problem of knowledge and its foundations. Strikingly similar approaches, although the instruments or conceptions or methods may be different, can be found in the philosophical experiments of Descartes and of Popper, in the course of the history of human minds, and they bring forth strikingly different results.

In the discussion on Descartes I have reconstructed systematically his views on knowledge and its foundations. Through this process we found that Descartes conceived knowledge in the sense of *scientia* which is certain, indubitable and built on a rational foundation. Thus, we have seen that Descartes devoted his intellectual effort in searching after solid knowledge and laying a firm foundation for his own house of knowledge. We have thus seen how Descartes tore his old house of knowledge using his Method of Doubt in order to build a new one. I have also systematically described the criteria that a new foundation, and certain elements from the old, house must possess in order to be regarded as certain and firm epistemic structures of the Cartesian house of knowledge.

The new house, in contrast to the old one, contains the *cogito* and the carefully analysed concept of a God whose existence is proven which he called as the first principle of his knowledge. This principle provides him with secure epistemic foundations that is

capable of withstanding any sceptical attempt at rocking this edifice of knowledge. Furthermore, his method also requires that the various elements which are discovered should be systematically integrated, and that one should clearly perceive how the various elements of the epistemic structure support one another. These elements, however, should be tested against experiments. Thus, it is in this sense that Descartes gave the empiricist principle a significant place in his new house, although it no longer provides the foundation for the house. We have also seen that morals were an important principle employed so as to avoid him getting into trouble in his practical life in the course of demolishing and building a new house of knowledge.

As a matter of fact, the synoptic ambition of Descartes in constructing a new house of knowledge based on certain, infallible epistemic principles have given rise to a modern foundationalist programme in Western philosophy.[127] This programme has been very prominent historically and is still widely held in some other form by contemporary philosophers. However, some other philosophers after Descartes have regarded the foundationalist programme commenced by him as not viable. And Popper was an interesting case in this reaction against foundationalism.[128]

Popper's thought is marked by a rejection of foundationalist programme of erecting an edifice of secure knowledge by virtue of his conception of knowledge as conjectural and not of certain and infallible truth. Throughout the discussion on his theory of knowledge it is obvious that his philosophy of scientific knowledge admits hypotheses into the body of

[127] For example, in the philosophy of mathematics, Russell tried to base mathematics on the foundation of logic; and in the philosophy of science, the Logical Positivism attempted to base science on the principles of verificationism.
[128] Popper was not the one who reacted against the foundationalist programme for there is also another movement led by Wilfrid Sellars and Keith Lehrer called Coherentism. The coherentists criticised foundationalism by raising doubts about its ability to justify its own epistemic principles.

knowledge subject to the requirement of the notion of falsifiability, corroboration and verisimilitude. He centred his whole philosophy on the fallible character of our knowledge. In contrast to Descartes' analogy of the house of knowledge, Popper proposed a new analogy in which the edifice of the house of scientific knowledge does not rest upon solid bedrock, but plunge its roots into a muddy swamp. He thought that our scientific enterprise is based on the activity of attempting to disprove theories. Thus, a genuine scientist makes bold conjectures and then, equally boldly, attempts to refute his conjectures by the severest tests he can devise. Following this procedure, we can accept as yet unfalsified theories provisionally, though we should not think that this means they have been accepted as true.

In certain parts of the discussion on Popper's epistemology I have also attempted to provide a new interpretation of the genealogy of his epistemological principles and methods. I have suggested that his fallibilism is a basic conviction that lies deep in the structure of his thought. It was this basic conviction that Popper reiterates throughout his works, and it is upon this basic conviction that he based his theory of knowledge, which he designates as falsificationism, and his scientific method of conjectures and refutations.

Comparatively speaking, I have already mentioned some of the fundamental differences between Descartes and Popper in their untiring effort in dealing with the problem of the foundations of knowledge. I shall now summarise some other differences in their epistemologies and highlight certain remarkable similarities in them. The first no doubt is their conception of knowledge: Descartes conceived knowledge as being logically constructed by which he built his edifice of knowledge based on infallible epistemic foundation, while Popper employed a piecemeal approach by way of the method of trial

and error—or conjectures and refutation. It is also clear from the discussion of Descartes' conception of knowledge that he conceived knowledge in the sense of justified true belief. This concept is essential in his epistemology in which he asserted that we are obliged to be justified in our knowledge claims in order to avoid error. Popper, on the contrary, held that justification in the sense of the truth of our knowledge claims is not germane to epistemology and thus replaced it with his idea of falsification where for him now the question is how to criticise our theories and eliminate falsehood rather than to justify their truth.

Both Descartes and Popper can be considered as rationalists from the fact that they employed the rationalist theses of intuition and deduction in their scientific methods. But, what distinguishes them is that Popper refused to attribute a foundationalist character to his rationalism and gave criticism prominent position in his rationalism—by which he designated the term critical rationalism. And, as I have pointed out earlier, it is upon this critical principle of reason that Popper has strived to eliminate justificationist elements in his redefinition of rationalism. In the course of the discussion on his critical rationalism I have also noted that Popper's criticism against traditional rationalists concerning their hostility towards tradition is not necessarily true in the case of Descartes. For I have found the fact that Descartes accepted the Aristotelian conception of *scientia* while rejecting other aspects of such a tradition.

In the discussion of their conceptions of truth it is obvious that Descartes' conception was characteristically religious or metaphysical, while Popper holds the modern secular conception of truth where religious or metaphysical elements have been eliminated

from it—that is, the correspondence theory of truth. Popper, of course, was well aware of the fact that Descartes concerned himself with the problem of replacing Aristotelian and Church authorities with the authority of clear and distinct ideas guaranteed by the truthfulness of God. But still, for Popper, this new authority in its turn has brought about another form of authoritarianism in the history of modern Western civilization. Thus, in order to avoid the authoritarian attitude we have to admit that our knowledge is purely a human affair, and there is no ultimate authority whether in human or superhuman forms.

It is a remarkable fact that despite their rationalist attitude both Descartes and Popper gave a significant position to the empiricist principle in their epistemological systems. This proves that their methods went beyond the modern categorization of rationalism and empiricism, and to some extent show how crude this category is. But, in the case of Descartes, he still maintained the foundational status of reason over experience, while for Popper neither reason nor experience has the foundational status in scientific knowledge, although both play a role in determining the validity of knowledge claims.

Another remarkable fact that I have pointed out in the study of Descartes and Popper is the relationship between their epistemologies and their ethical views. As we have seen in the previous chapters, ethics plays an essential role throughout the development of their epistemologies. For Descartes, however, ethics played a provisional role in the process of building his new edifice of knowledge so as to avoid him encountering any difficulties in his practical life. While for Popper ethics occupied an integral position in his philosophy since they form the very basis of his theory of scientific knowledge and his scientific methods. It has been pointed out earlier that both of their ethical views that is, individual

ethics, has become one of the most important principles in modern liberal democracy. But there is still a point of difference in their views in so far as liberal democracy is concerned, that Descartes envisaged ethics as a way of attaining happiness, whereas for Popper it is a means of minimising suffering.

Finally, what I can say is that this study, as it is obvious from the very beginning, is concerned with understanding what Descartes and Popper said about knowledge and its foundations and not with whether what they said is true. It was undertaken with the aim of not only attaining a better understanding of the philosophers who are no longer living, but also a better understanding of philosophy itself. Moreover, not everything Descartes and Popper said is true, or clearly thought out. Nevertheless, both of them are exceptionally interesting philosophers who developed their own tools, instruments, concepts, and methods in dealing with the same perennial problem of knowledge, and whose arguments are still sound.