

Is Infinitism the Solution to the Regress Problem?

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1 Klein: Yes

1.1 The problem

I assert p . Because p is not evident to you, you ask me my reason for p . I offer q . You ask me my reason for q . This goes on for a while, and over the course of the reasoning session I offer a series of propositions: $\langle p, q, r, \dots \rangle$. The series will fall into one of three types, each of which corresponds to one of three epistemological positions.

Series types:

finite: The series might be finite in length. This requires it to have a last member.

infinite repeating: The series might be infinite in length but still have finitely many members (i.e. its members might all be members of a finite set). This requires it to repeat some subseries. (These repetitions could be straightforwardly circular, or they could be nodes that are hit multiple times as a finite web of reasons is traversed.)

infinite nonrepeating: The series might be infinite in length but involve no repetition. This requires it to have infinitely many members.

*Klein seems to want these series to be made of propositions. His main task will be to specify *in virtue of what* a proposition is a member of a series: it need not be involved in any actual inference or occurrent belief; will a potential inference or a disposition to believe be enough? And each proposition should be supported by the next, but how?

*Also, one might already worry about whether there indeed are infinitely many propositions.

Positions:

Foundationalists prefer finite (nonrepeating) series¹, because they don't like repetition or having infinitely many members. They think having a last member is fine, as

¹No one seems to prefer finite repeating series.

there are some basic propositions in which warrant arises autonomously, and this warrant can be transferred to other members of the series.

*Audi (in the suggested reading) differentiates between two kinds of foundationalists: ‘strong’ foundationalists hold that *all* warrant derives from basic propositions, and ‘moderate’ foundationalists hold that while warrant can be strengthened by inference, warrant can only *originate* with basic propositions. As we will see, Klein disagrees with both kinds of foundationalist, though his position has something in common with moderate foundationalism.

Coherentists prefer infinite repeating series, because they don’t like having a last member or having infinitely many members. They think repeating some subseries is fine, as warrant can still come through in one of two ways:

warrant-transfer coherentism: Warrant can transfer from some one proposition in the series to the next, eventually getting back to the one when it is repeated later in the series.

warrant-emergent coherentism: Warrant can emerge in the right kind of series (a series traced through a large network with many connections).

Infinitists prefer infinite nonrepeating series, because they don’t like repetition or having a last member.

The question is:

Which type of series of reasons and the account of warrant associated with it, if any, can increase the credibility of a non-evident proposition? (132)

1.2 The task

... to produce an account of warrant, where “warrant” refers to the property possessed by propositions or beliefs such that (1) true beliefs with that property are known and (2) reasoning in accordance with the dictates of that account increases our rational confidence in non-evident propositions. (132)

1.3 The argument

1. Foundationalism can’t solve the problem, because making a foundationalist move will either fail to stop the regress or suffer from arbitrariness. Imagine Fred the Foundationalist and Doris the Doubter:
 - (a) Fred asserts p , Doris asks for his reason, Fred gives it, Doris asks for his reason for that, Fred gives it, and so on until Fred gives b , which he says is autonomously warranted.
 - (b) Doris could grant that b is autonomously warranted, but even then she would have a meta-foundational question—she would want to know whether MF: whether “autonomously warranted propositions are, in virtue of that fact, somewhat likely to be true” (133).

- (c) Now Fred has three options:
 - i. He could hold that MF, but then the regress would continue—Fred would owe Doris his reason for holding that *b* is autonomously warranted and that MF.
Ginet (later): If Doris asks Fred his reason for holding that *b* is autonomously warranted and that MF, Fred should deny that he needs such a reason: the reasoning process will bottom out at *b* and an understanding of justification.
 - ii. He could deny that MF, but then using *b* as a basic proposition to give warrant to the previous in the series would be arbitrary—it’s hard to see why he would do it.
 - iii. He could also withhold whether MF, but then using *b* as a basic proposition to give warrant to the previous in the series would again be arbitrary.
- 2. Warrant-transfer coherentism can’t solve the problem either, because merely *transferring* warrant from one proposition to another does not increase credibility. Imagine Carl the Coherentist and Doris:
 - (a) Carl asserts *p*, Doris asks for his reason, Carl gives it, Doris asks for his reason for that, Carl gives it, and so on until Carl gives *p*.
 - (b) Carl has done nothing to increase the credibility of *p* (and repeating the process won’t help), since credibility does not increase across transfers of warrant—if *p* gets its warrant entirely from *q*, *p* cannot have higher credibility than *q*. Indeed, in many cases (all non-deductive inferences), credibility will decrease across transfers.
- 3. Warrant-emergent coherentism can’t solve the problem either, because it is just one-step foundationalism. Imagine Carl and Doris again:
 - (a) Carl asserts *p*, Doris asks for his reason, and Carl says that *p* is a member of a coherent set of propositions.
 - (b) Doris could grant that *p* is a member of a coherent set of propositions, but even then she would have a meta-coherent question—she would want to know whether MC: whether members of sets of coherent propositions are, in virtue of that fact, somewhat likely to be true. (We will take up the question of whether MC—the question of whether coherence is truth-conducive—in a later session.)
 - (c) Now Carl would have the same options as Fred, which have the same problems as Fred’s options.
- 4. So the series of reasons cannot increase the credibility of *p* by repeating or by stopping. The only option left is for the series to go on forever and include infinitely many members.

1.4 The position

What is infinitism? Infinitism is like the warrant-emergent form of coherentism because it holds that warrant for a questioned proposition emerges as the proposition becomes embedded in a set of propositions. Infinitism is like foundationalism because it holds that some propositions are epistemically prior to others. (135)

What we seek is an account of warrant that is not a warrant-transfer view and is not warrant-emergent finite coherentism. There is only one option remaining. What we need is warrant-emergent infinitism. . . . It can solve the regress problem because it endorses a warrant-emergent form of reasoning in which warrant increases as the series of reasons lengthens.

Infinitism results from adopting the following two principles:

Principle of Avoiding Circularity (PAC): for all propositions, x , if x is warranted for a person, S , at t , then for all y , if y is in the reason-ancestry of x for S at t , then x is not in the reason-ancestry of y for S at t .

Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness (PAA): for all propositions, x , if x is warranted for a person, S , at t , then there is some reason, r_1 , available to S for x at t ; and there is some reason, r_2 , available to S for r_1 at t , etc., and there is no last reason in the series. (136)

Availability: For a proposition to be available to S at t is for it to be “appropriately ‘hooked up’ to S ’s beliefs and other mental contents at t .” (136). This does not require occurrent belief; a disposition to (form a disposition to) believe might be enough.

*Klein has to walk a very fine line with his notion of availability. Ginet will worry that there are no infinite series of available reasons, but Branden worries that there will be too many (uncountably many, even). It’s unfortunate that Klein doesn’t say much more about what it takes for a proposition to be available, since it’s hard to see how the requirements could be both

- loose enough to allow for even one infinite series (which ‘disposed to believe’ doesn’t seem to do), thereby allowing some beliefs to be knowledge,

and

- strong enough to rule out uncountably many infinite series (which ‘able in principle to understand’ doesn’t seem to do), thereby allowing some beliefs to *fail* to be knowledge.

Audi (in the suggested reading) offers the following series:

1. I weigh at least 500 pounds.
2. If I weigh at least 500.1 pounds, then I weigh at least 500 pounds, and I do weigh at least 500.1 pounds.
3. If I weigh at least 500.2 pounds, then I weigh at least 500.1 pounds, and I do weigh at least 500.2 pounds.
4. . . .

Reason: Anyone giving an account of warrant needs to give *some* account of being a reason, but they have many to choose from (including making probable, etc.). This is where externalism might come in.

So if my belief is warranted, no matter how many times you ask for my reason I will have something new to offer you. I cannot repeat my reasons, and I cannot stop giving them.

1.5 The objections

- Sextus: If the reasons go on *ad infinitum*, there is no starting point for the argument, so belief should be withheld.
- Klein: Reasoning doesn't start with a basic reason; it starts with a question, and its aim is to answer that question as well as is possible. "Warrant, and with it rational credibility, increases as the series lengthens; but the matter is never completely settled" (138).
- Williams: The human mind is finite; we cannot believe an infinite number of things.
- Klein: Occurent belief is not necessary; availability will do.
- Audi: Some infinite series of propositions (e.g. '2 is twice 1', '4 is twice 2', and so on) increase in complexity until they go beyond the ability of the human mind to grasp them.
- Klein: Other infinite series of propositions (e.g. 'that is red' [said of one thing], 'that is red' [said of another thing], and so on) do not increase in complexity.
- Audi: It is not "clear how infinite epistemic chains could account for any of our knowledge" (138).
- Klein: Knowledge need not require completing the chain; the relevant threshold might be reached earlier.
- Ginet (later): Then can't one start with a totally unjustified belief and, by making a long enough (but still finite) series of inferences from it, reach knowledge?

2 Ginet: No

2.1 Ginet's finitism

Ginet offers Sextus's objection to infinitism (above): in formulating his version of the regress problem, he speaks of "premise beliefs," and in showing how he differs from Klein he insists that "inferential justification cannot ramify without end (or, rather, beginning)" (141).

To solve his version of the regress problem, Ginet adopts a kind of foundationalism involving non-inferential justification.

2.2 Two examples of non-inferential justification

2.2.1 A priori

Anything that lasts exactly one hour lasts exactly sixty minutes. (141)

In this case, justification is constituted by understanding, and understanding entails belief. No inference is involved.

2.2.2 A posteriori

I seem to see (and believe that I do see) a blue smear on a white surface in good light a few feet in front of me, and I am not aware of any reason to think that things are not what they seem. Justification for my belief does not involve any inference: it depends on my experience being such-and-such and my lack of awareness of any reasons for doubt.

2.2.3 Objections

Klein: (PAA) If your belief is justified, then there is a reason for it available to you. That is, then you have inferential justification for the belief.

Ginet: These beliefs can be justified by means other than inference.

Klein: These beliefs do have interesting properties. Is having those properties truth-conducive? If you say it is, the regress continues, and if you say it isn't, the beliefs are arbitrary.

Ginet: I might have the perceptual belief described above without entertaining (and therefore without believing) the reason for it (i.e. without entertaining the proposition that it is truth-conducive for the belief to be being accompanied by my experience being such-and-such and my lack of awareness of any reasons for doubt).

Klein: PAA requires that the reason be *available* to you, not that you have any belief. (later) You might have some kind of non-cognitive reason that makes you partially justified in having that belief, but you would be *better* justified if you had an answer to the meta question.

Ginet: Available reasons are potential reasons, but I am interested in actual justification, which requires actual reasons. Every belief that p comes with many available reasons of the form $p \vee (q \wedge \neg q)$ that are not relevant to whether the subject is justified.

Klein (later): Since that is equivalent to p , it violates PAC. Believing $p \vee (q \wedge \neg q)$ cannot increase the justification of the belief that p .

Audi (elsewhere):

2.3 Two problems for infinitism

1. An infinitist cannot provide a plausible example—even in outline—of an infinite chain of reasons justifying a belief. Suppose I believe p on the basis of experience and believe q , which is a reason for p : when I have such-and-such experience p is likely to be true. What would my reason, r , for q be? And what would my reason for r be?

Klein (later): Descartes was involved in just this kind of reasoning practice in the *Meditations*, and contemporary reasoners bring in evolutionary biology to answer these questions.

2. (Sextus's objection) Justification has to originate somewhere, and inference doesn't help with this. Inferential justification is only conditional justification (conditional on the premises being justified).

Klein: "... although every proposition is only provisionally justified, that is good enough if one does not insist that reasoning settle matters once and for all" (148).

Ginet: Justification may be provisional in the sense of *defeasible*, but that is different from being inferential. The problem is that "an endless chain of inferential justifications can never ultimately explain why any link in the chain is justified" (148). Inference preserves, but does not generate, justification, just as deductive inference preserves, but does not generate, truth.

3 Adjudication

Klein's central tenet seems to be that reasoning can originate warrant: if I assert p , and you start questioning my reasons, I can show that I am warranted in believing p (or, I can increase the credibility of p for you) *merely* by showing that I can go on forever giving new reasons for each previous assertion.

Ginet thinks this is precisely the "most severe difficulty" (155) with Klein's position, at least in part because it seems to lead to the following dilemma: either

A: Knowledge requires a completed infinite series of reasons.

or

B: One could generate knowledge by starting with a totally unjustified belief and making a very long (but finite) series of inferences from it.

Klein seems not to like A, and he does say that "[a]s the series [of reasons] lengthens, warrant and credibility increase" (138), but he might still try to avoid B by claiming that reasoning increases warrant asymptotically: a belief with a long chain of reasons underneath it has more warrant than a belief with no reasons underneath it, but a finite chain of reasoning cannot by itself increase the warrant to the level required for knowledge.

If Klein also wishes to claim that an infinite series of reasons makes for knowledge, he could point out that the series he is interested in are *potential* series, not completed series (thereby denying A) and claim that the asymptote (the level of warrant that reasoning approaches but does not reach except in the limit case) is the threshold for knowledge. But he needs to be *very* careful not to make knowledge too easy to come by—as there are *lots* of potential infinite series of reasons out there.

Other questions about how reasoning alone can generate warrant might come up next week in the debate between coherentism in its more general form and foundationalism.