

PETER KLEIN'S INFINITISM PRECLUDES JUSTIFICATION

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Can we adduce reasons for propositions forever? Peter Klein thinks we can. In this paper, I set out to show that his view precludes justification simpliciter. In **section I**, I introduce his position. In **section II**, I introduce what Klein calls the regress problem. In **section III**, I show Klein's reason for thinking that only his view solves the regress problem. In **section IV**, I argue that his view precludes justification simpliciter. In **section V**, I deliver an objection to my view. I then argue that granting the objection would require Klein to deny a premise integral to his argument that other views of the structure of justification do not succeed in solving the regress problem. I finish by concluding that Klein must either deny or substantially revise his view.

Key Words: epistemology, infinitism, justification, regress problem, foundationalism, coherentism

1 INTRODUCING INFINITISM

Infinitism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if, for a subject *S*, there is an endless chain of non-circular propositions available such that each succeeding proposition in the chain is a reason for the immediately preceding one (Klein, 2007, p.11). The chain of propositions may branch out to other infinitely long and non-repeating chains. 'Availability' of a proposition can also be construed as the subject's having the 'capacity' to believe in a proposition or as the subject's being 'disposed' to believe a proposition (Klein, 1999, p.308). Dispositions include second-degree dispositions to have first-degree dispositions to believe a proposition (Klein, 1999, p.308) I will use 'capacity', 'availability', and 'disposed to be' interchangeably. Infinitism depicts justification of a proposition as emerging. The more reasons are adduced to a proposition and the longer the chain of non-repeating reasons gets, the more justified a proposition gets (Klein, 2013b, p.294). The reasons that feature in

a chain of justification are exhaustive such that the antecedent(s) in the chain are the only justifications for the consequent(s) (Klein, 1999, p.324). The only way the external information relates to the chain is that it *makes* a belief a reason in the chain, but is not itself a part of the chain of the reasoning (Klein, 1999, p.324).

2 THE REGRESS PROBLEM

I will describe what the regress problem is to make Klein's argument, and in turn my argument, intelligible. As Klein puts it, the regress problem is the problem of determining the correct structure of justification that provides a good model for "locating propositions that are worthy of belief" (Klein, 2007, p.6) or for "increasing the credibility of a non-evident proposition" (Klein, 2013a, p.275). The criterion for a good structure of justification is thus that, following the structure, a proposition should not arbitrarily be believed. In other words, following the structure, a non-evident proposition's truth-value should be determinable. Klein argues that only infinitism can satisfy this criterion.

For instance, take the proposition expressed by my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. The truth of this proposition might not be evident to someone skeptical of my belief-reports. In any case, let us suppose for the ease of example that the proposition's truth is not evident. Another way of putting this is to say that it is not clear that my belief is justified. If Klein is right, the proposition is justified just in case there is available to me an endless chain of reasons, where each one of which I am disposed to adduce as a reason for the immediately preceding one, and none is a duplicate of any other in the chain. I might start to traverse this chain of reasons by thinking that I'm justified in my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening because I remember going to the gym. That, in turn, is because my memory functions properly. I have reason to believe that, in turn, because my memory rarely leads me astray on such everyday matters; and so on, *ad infinitum*. Klein thinks that the proposition that I set out to justify is more justified the more reasons I (correctly) adduce. Whether it can be completely justified depends on whether there is an endless chain of such reasons available to me, which I'm disposed to traverse. That is the picture.

3 KLEIN'S REJECTION OF FOUNDATIONALISM AND COHERENTISM

To get my argument off the ground, I need to give an account of Klein's rejection of foundationalism and coherentism. For our purposes, foundationalism is the view that all justified belief rests on a foundation of non-inferential knowledge or belief. These beliefs are basic, in the sense that one is justified in believing them without justifying them. Coherentism is the view that all

justified belief is justified in virtue of the strength of their relation to beliefs ‘surrounding’ them. Whereas foundationalism posits that knowledge is structured like a building, with a foundation ‘at the bottom’ justifying everything above; coherentism posits that knowledge is structured like a web, where the density and the strength of the connections in the web justify the nodes of the web.

Klein argues that foundationalism and coherentism do not solve the regress problem, and that only infinitism does. The argument against foundationalism is as follows. Suppose that there is a foundational proposition b such that b is autonomously justified. The nature of this autonomous justification is irrelevant. Further suppose that b is autonomously justified because of some foundational property F such that all and only those propositions having F are autonomously justified, that F is the only property that confers autonomous justification, and that if b did not have F , all beliefs grounded by b are not justified. If we ask of this F whether it is truth-conducive, we face three options:

1. F is truth-conducive, such that autonomously justified propositions are likely to be true (greater than 50% chance of being true).
2. F is not truth-conducive, such that autonomously justified propositions are not likely to be true (less than 50% chance of being true).
3. F is neither truth-conducive or not truth-conducive, such that a proposition’s having F does not have any bearing on the truth value of autonomously justified propositions (50% percent chance of being true).

If (2) is the case, it does not make sense to believe b because this would render all the beliefs one has which are only based on b likely to be false. Likewise, if (3) is the case, it does not make sense to believe b because all the beliefs one has which are only based on b are neither likely to be true nor false, and we want our beliefs to at least likely to be true.

The only remaining option is (1). But if (1) is the case, then b is not a foundational proposition because the chain of reasons can be continued to the reason for b ’s being foundational. This reason is that b has F and that the propositions which have F are likely to be true. In virtue of the second clause of this conjunction, the regress of reasons continues. Thus, foundationalism does not solve the regress problem (Klein, 2013a, p.276-277).

Following Klein, neither does coherentism solve the regress problem. The line of reasoning is like that above. The only difference is that having F does not render a proposition foundational but instead makes it a member of a set of propositions coherent in a way the coherentist asks. In this case, if F is not truth-conducive or is neither truth-conducive nor not truth-conducive, then belief in that set of coherent propositions is arbitrary. If F is truth-conducive, then the proposition that “coherent sets are likely to contain propositions that

are true" must either be in the set or not. If the proposition is not in the set, then the coherentist has a circular view of justification. If the proposition is in the set, the regress of reasons has continued (Klein, 2013a, p.278).

4 INFINITISM PRECLUDES JUSTIFICATION

I am now in a position to introduce my argument. Grant Klein's infinitism. Suppose that I have a belief P and that there is a set of reason-making facts A . The relation R between P and A is such that if the relation between a belief and a set of external facts is R , then the set of reason-making facts makes the belief into a reason that features in a chain of justifications. *Ex hypothesi*, A makes P into a reason that features in a chain of justifications.

In more concrete terms, suppose P is the first proposition that justifies my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. Remember that this proposition was that *I remember going to the gym*. What makes P a reason for the belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening? The answer lies in the set of reason-making facts A . One of the facts in this set might be that P is about me, as opposed to someone else. For how could a reason justify a belief about me if the reason adduced is about someone else? It could not in the absence of some other reason. (Think about the reason you would be puzzled if I told you that the reason I believe that I went to the gym yesterday evening is because, and only because, *you* went to the gym yesterday evening.) Other candidate reason-making facts that might be included in A are: that P is intended to be a reason for some belief; that P features some action that is identical to the action that features in the belief for which it is adduced, and so on. I postulated above that the relation between these set of reason-making facts, A , and P , is the relation R . It is in virtue of A 's bearing the relation R to P that P is a reason for my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening. Pictorially, where the dots represent the chain of reasons that come after and justify P and each other, and where B represents the belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening, and where the arrows represent the direction of justification:

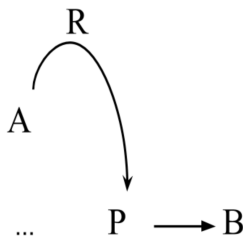


Figure 1

But if this is so, P has the property of bearing the relation R , F .¹ If we ask of P what it is that makes it into a reason, the answer is that P has F .

¹More explicitly: " P has the property of having been made into a reason by a set of external

In asking so, we provided a justification for P 's being a reason, so invoked another chain of justifications. Notice that we did not justify P but justified its being a reason for another proposition. But what justifies that having F makes P into a reason? It cannot be that merely having F somehow justifies P 's being a reason, as if having F was a foundational property. Put another way, it cannot be that the chain of justifications for P 's being a reason terminates at F . That would run counter to what Klein holds. The chain of justifications must continue. Pictorially, where F can be parsed as a shorthand for P 's bearing R to A , or P 's being a reason for B :

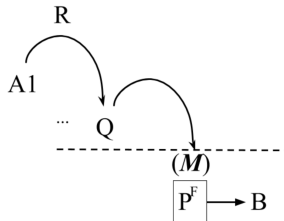
$$P^F \rightarrow B$$

Figure 2

To return to the concrete example above, the question of what justifies P^F translates to the question of what makes that I remember going to the gym a reason for my belief that I went to the gym yesterday evening in virtue of its being about me, that it is intended to be a reason for B , that it features some action that is identical to the action featuring in the belief for which it was adduced, and other facts about the reason adduced that make up the reason-making fact set A ?

In what follows, M denotes P 's having F making P into a reason, for otherwise everything gets a bit mouthful. Following Klein, mere belief cannot fully justify M (Klein, 2013b, p.292). M must be justified in virtue of a reason, Q . Note that Q does not lie in the same chain of justifications as P but justifies P 's being in the chain of justifications in which it features. Q is at a 'meta' or 'upper' level, so to speak. It is salient to ask at this point: what justifies Q 's being a reason for M ? It must be a set of reason-making facts, $A1$. Per definitions above, the relation between Q and $A1$ must be R , and thus Q must have $F1$. At this juncture, one might ask what justifies that having $F1$ makes Q into a reason. Here, the reasoning in this paragraph will repeat for Q . This line of reasoning can go on *ad infinitum*.

Pictorially (the dots symbolise the chain of reasons that justify Q and each other):



facts via the appropriate sort of relation to those facts". Here I make the substantial assumption that bearing a relation can be a property of a reason.

Figure 3

Part of Q might be that a reason for why a proposition adduced as a reason for some belief is a reason for that proposition is its being about the thing that the proposition for which it is adduced as a belief is about. Part of AI might consequently include facts about justifying justification, such as the fact, if it is a fact, that numerical identity of subjects is necessary for sufficiency of relevancy of one proposition to another *qua* a reason. (Exact contents of Q and AI is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is that if Klein's view is right, there must be some such Q and some such AI .)

Going back to our starting point, the problem that arises from this picture is that one never gets from P (the initial proposition in the above line of reasoning) to the proposition P justifies, B . One only goes 'up' or 'meta' in justifying P 's being a reason (namely, that it has F), and then justifying P 's being a reason's being a reason (namely, that it has FI), *ad infinitum*. This is a problem because Klein holds that a belief is justified if and only if for a subject S there is an endless chain of non-circular propositions available (i.e., if and only if S is disposed to believe such propositions, or if and only if S has the capacity to believe such propositions). According to this picture, before S could even undertake justifying P , she should be disposed to justifying P 's being a reason (that is, adduce F), and be disposed to that's being a reason (that is, adduce FI), and so on. The problem with this is that the justification of P simply never comes. What I mean by this is that S can never be disposed to believe P to start with, for S would never be able to get to the reason for P , for S would be stuck in the infinitely long chain of non-recurring reasons that make each other a reason but are not a reason for each other. By adducing more reasons, S would only be making P 's being a reason stronger, not making P stronger. Thus, granting informatism, one can never justify a proposition. This is an unacceptable result.

5 AN OBJECTION

I will now consider an objection to my argument. One of the responses to this objection will motivate the implication of my argument that Klein must either grant the foundationalist and the coherentist their solution to the regress problem or deny his objection to them. The objection to my argument is that it needs only be the case that S be disposed to give reasons for P in the chain of justifications in which P features. (That is, that it needs only be the case that S be disposed to traverse the propositions that the dots in Figure 1 represent.) The 'meta' propositions considered here (i.e., a proposition about a proposition's being a reason) need not feature in S 's account for her belief. (That is, S need not go 'up' the ladder of arrows that would ensue.) In other words, the assumption that the reason-making facts must feature in the chain of infinitely long non-recurring propositions S must be disposed to traverse is not warranted.

This qualification to Klein's account of propositional justification is not justified because of two reasons. The first is that there is at least one 'meta' reason S must consider, namely that of the property of being related to a set of reason-making external information in the appropriate way. This must be a reason to consider for otherwise having this property would be a foundational reason for that proposition's being a reason. That would contradict Klein's position.

The second reason this qualification is not warranted is that the way Klein takes himself to show that foundationalism and coherentism do not solve the regress problem uses the same assumption. I consider his case against foundationalism below, but *mutatis mutandis* it is also applicable to his case against coherentism. Recall the argument against foundationalism: some foundational proposition b has F and it is in virtue of this F that b is a foundational property. Klein then goes on to show that F must be truth-conducive, and that this truth-conduciveness must be a further reason for b , and thus that b is not foundational. The property of truth-conduciveness is used to show that the regress continues. But truth-conduciveness of F is an external fact related F to in such a way that it makes F a reason for us to believe b . We might also say that it is R -related to F . In citing truth-conduciveness of F , Klein thus makes a reason-making fact feature in the chain of justifications that justify b . That reason-making facts cannot feature in a chain of justifications is just what the objection is problematising. Thus, the objection problematises an assumption Klein uses to dismiss contenders to solving the regress problem.

My argument uses possession of a reason-making property F in a similar way. The difference is that, in my argument, there must be a reason not for F 's truth-conduciveness, but for its reason-making-ness. Should Klein deny this usage, he should also deny his usage. *Ipsa facto*, Klein should either revise his infinitism or deny the assumption that reason-making facts cannot feature in chain of justifications. Denying the assumption enables my main argument, which, if true, renders infinitism unacceptable. Thus, Klein should either revise his infinitism or reject it.

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