

## Infinitism *Redux*? A Response to Klein

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Foundationalist, Coherentist, Skeptic etc., have all been united in one respect—all accept epistemic justification cannot result from an unending, and non-repeating, chain of reasons. Peter Klein has recently challenged this minimal consensus with a defense of what he calls “Infinitism”—the position that justification can result from such a regress. Klein provides surprisingly convincing responses to most of the common objections to Infinitism, but I will argue that he fails to address a venerable metaphysical concern about a certain type of regress. My conclusion will be that until Klein answers these metaphysical worries he will not have restored Infinitism as a viable option in epistemology.

Infinite regresses have played important roles in many philosophical debates, but they have recently been most prominent in epistemology. A wide array of positions, Foundationalist, Coherentist, Skeptical etc., have all been adopted in response to a looming regress of epistemic reasons and these positions are united in one respect—they all accept that epistemic justification cannot result from an unending, and non-repeating, chain of reasons. In his commentary in this journal on Richard Fumerton’s (1995) and in a longer paper elsewhere, Peter Klein has recently challenged this minimal consensus with a defense of what he calls “Infinitism”—the position that justification can result from such a regress.<sup>1</sup>

Klein provides surprisingly convincing responses to what he identifies as the toughest objections to Infinitism. But my goal will be to argue that Klein fails to address a venerable metaphysical concern, dating back at least to Aquinas, about a certain type of regress. The standard response to such problems is to abandon one of the theses that generate the relevant regress, but I will argue that the very nature of Infinitism precludes this type of reaction. My conclusion will be that until Klein successfully offers an answer to these metaphysical worries about regresses, then he will not have restored Infinitism as a viable option in epistemology.

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<sup>1</sup> See Klein (1998) and (1999). I focus on the latter paper given its more detailed account and all page references are to this paper unless otherwise noted. The term “Infinitism” is attributed by Klein to Moser (1984).

The promise of Klein's Infitism is that, unlike other positions in epistemology, it would allow us to hold two plausible principles and still be justified in our beliefs. The first of these principles, where 'x', 'y' etc. are all beliefs, is what Klein calls the "*Principle of Avoiding Circularity*" (PAC):

(PAC) For all x, if a person, s, has a justification for x, then for all y, if y is in the evidential ancestry of x for s, then x is not in the evidential ancestry of y for s. (p. 298)

By "evidential ancestry" Klein means that "if r is a reason for p, and q is a reason for r, then r is in the evidential ancestry of p, and q is in the evidential ancestry of p and r" (p. 298). PAC is a highly intuitive prohibition against circular reasoning and Klein's other principle is equally attractive. This is what he calls the "*Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness*" (PAA):

(PAA) For all x, if a person, s, has a justification for x, then there is some reason,  $r_1$ , available to s for x; and there is some reason,  $r_2$ , available to s for  $r_1$ ; etc. (p. 299)

Again, PAA makes a familiar and appealing demand, namely that our reasons cannot be arbitrary and must always themselves be supported by non-arbitrary reasons.

PAA and PAC are both highly attractive principles and together they entail that justified belief depends upon the existence of an unending and non-repeating regress of non-arbitrary reasons. For PAA implies there must always be some further non-arbitrary reason in order for prior reasons to be non-arbitrary and PAC entails this chain will be non-repeating. Furthermore, given the truth of PAA and PAC, it appears that there can only be justified beliefs if such a regress of reasons can result in *any* of its members being non-arbitrary reasons. Klein accepts these implications, for he summarizes the attractions of his account as follows:

It is the straightforward appeal of these principles [PAC and PAA] that is the best reason for thinking that if any beliefs are justified, the structure of reasons must be infinite and non-repeating. (p. 299)

As we shall shortly see, Klein further contends against the Skeptic that for all we know such an infinite chain may produce justified beliefs.

Klein is only committed to the existence of an unending and non-repeating regress of non-arbitrary reasons being a necessary, and not sufficient, condition for justified belief, since he contends there are other necessary conditions (p. 318, n. 8). Yet in order to make even this more limited claim plausible Klein addresses four objections that have convinced most philosophers otherwise. I lack the space to examine all of Klein's subtle and careful responses, but I encourage the reader to examine his papers directly since he does a surprisingly successful job of answering many common worries. My focus here, however, must be limited to Klein's interpretation of the fourth objection to

Infinitism that he considers—what he calls “The Specter of Skepticism” and tells us “is the most difficult objection because it is the most difficult to fully understand” (p. 312).<sup>2</sup>

As his name for it implies, Klein takes this concern about the unending regress of reasons to be a distinctly epistemic problem suggesting that “the objection rests upon a Cartesian-like view that the whole point of reasoning is to ‘settle’ an issue” (p. 312). Klein argues that this view results in a ultimately skeptical demand for “lifetime” or “final” guarantees and, specifically, final guarantees both that there actually exists an unending array of reasons for our beliefs and that humans have the cognitive capacities to comprehend these reasons. With regard to such demands, Klein explicitly sides with Richard Foley (1990) in arguing that they should not be legislated against and are the understandable result of the epistemic drive to take our own methods of inquiry as objects of study. Nonetheless, Klein also follows Foley in arguing that we should reject these demands for “final” guarantees and he consequently argues that:

...we do have limited guarantees. And for all I know, there might be an infinite number of such limited guarantees. Thus, although no *a priori* argument is available whose conclusion is that there is an infinite regress... of reasons, as we have seen there is also no such argument for the claim that there is no such set of reasons available.(p. 316)

Klein therefore concludes that so long as there might be such an unending and non-repeating chain of reasons, and we lack evidence that there is not, then the truth of Infinitism is compatible with our beliefs being justified, contrary to skeptical intuitions and received opinion in philosophy.

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<sup>2</sup> Let me briefly summarize the other objections Klein addresses, as well as his responses, to reassure readers that he does not answer the problems I will later outline. (I refer the reader to Klein (1999) for the full details of his responses). The first objection is what Klein dubs “The Infinite Mind Objection” which is expressed in a variety of ways, but presses the point that a finite human mind cannot encompass, in whatever manner, the infinite array of reasons Infinitism implies are necessary for justification. Klein distinguishes between ‘occurrent’ and ‘dispositional’ beliefs and argues that Infinitism implies only that humans must have the potential for an infinite array of dispositional beliefs. Furthermore, he argues that when we are discussing dispositional beliefs it is not implausible that we might have an infinite number of such beliefs (pp. 306-310). The next concern that Klein addresses is Aristotle’s argument that not all beliefs can be inferential which seems to imply that, contrary to Infinitism, there is an end to the chains of inference connecting our beliefs. Here Klein wields the distinction between the genesis and the justification of a belief, agreeing with Aristotle that our beliefs are not *generated* by an endless chain of inference, but pressing the Infinitist point that our beliefs may nonetheless be *justified* by such an endless chain (pp. 310-11). Third, Klein considers the recent *reductios* of Infinitism, offered by Oakley (1976), and Post (1980) and (1987), that seek to show that if Infinitism is true, then any contingent proposition is justified. Klein answers these arguments by arguing that Oakley uses an unsound principle, at odds with the truth of PAC, and that Post relies upon an implausible construal of Infinitism, specifically taking it to be the claim that an unending regress of reasons is by itself sufficient for justification (pp. 311-12).

Klein admits that this final worry is the hardest to understand and I therefore wish to explore an interpretation of this concern about regresses. I will argue that these worries are metaphysical and completely general in nature, and arise where instances of two general principles hold. The first principle can be defined as follows (I use 'entity' widely to refer to individuals, states, properties, events, and processes):

(I) For all entities, an entity  $x$  has a property  $H$  only in virtue of, amongst other possible necessary conditions, some entity  $y$  having the property  $H$ ; and  $y$  is  $H$  only in virtue of some entity  $z$  being  $H$ ; etc.

This principle simply implies that it is a necessary condition of any entity having the property  $H$  that some other entity has  $H$ , and so on. The second principle is:

(II) For all entities, if entity  $x$  has the property  $H$  only in virtue of, amongst other possible necessary conditions, some entity  $y$  having the property  $H$ , then  $y$  does not have  $H$  in virtue of  $x$  being  $H$ .

Principle (II) entails that there are no circles, or mutual dependencies, in any chain of in virtue of relations that result in an entity's having the property  $H$ . It should be obvious that (I) and (II) are general analogues of Klein's more specific principles PAA and PAC, and we will return to this point shortly. More importantly, however, it should also be clear that principles (I) and (II) generate a regress of entities bearing 'in virtue of' relations to each other. For (I) demands that for any entity to have the property  $H$  there must be some distinct entity that is  $H$ , and this further entity has  $H$  only in virtue of some further entity being  $H$ , and so on. And principle (II) prevents the same entity from appearing twice in the resulting chain. To ease my discussion, I will call the latter an 'IV Regress', to mark the role of 'in virtue of relations' in it, and I shall refer to a property such as  $H$  as a 'dependent property' of the regress.<sup>3</sup>

At least since Aquinas there have been general metaphysical concerns about whether a regress like an IV Regress can actually result in any of its members having its dependent property.<sup>4</sup> These concerns may be put as follows. Let us call an arbitrary member of the regress ' $s_n$ ' and consider what

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<sup>3</sup> My interpretation of the problems surrounding vicious regresses is superficially similar to Clarke (1988), but ultimately diverges from his account. Clarke's view is that *reductio* arguments based upon vicious regresses ultimately depend upon premises that some property is both "conditionally" and "unconditionally" instantiated by individuals. Consequently, someone such as Klein who argues that justification is always only "provisional", i.e. "conditional" to use Clarke's term, can slip the vicious regress objection under this interpretation of its nature. As will become clear below, such claims of "provisionality" do not ameliorate the problems I outline. (See Black (1988) for a nice abstract formulation of the structure of vicious regress arguments).

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas (1964).

effect its addition would have to the regress. Regardless of the nature of this entity, and its place in the chain, all the members,  $s_1$ - $s_{n-1}$ , prior in the regress to  $s_n$  only instantiate H in virtue of  $s_n$  being H. But  $s_n$  will only have property H in virtue of some still further entity being H. And, of course, this will be the situation regardless of how many more entities are added to the regress. The question consequently arises how it could ever come to pass that any member of the chain has the property H? For it appears that whatever entity, or structure of entities, is added to the chain of prior entities, consistent with the governing principles (I) and (II), this addition will not be sufficient for the dependent property H to feed back to any member of the regress. Adding more entities one by one, or even as structured groups, will still not suffice, for once again these additional entities will only have H in virtue of some still further entity that is H. Thus, the objection ultimately concludes, there is no entity, or structure of entities, that can be added to an IV Regress, consistent with its governing principles, that will suffice for any of its dependent properties to feed back to any of the members of its chain. Let us call this the 'Structural Objection', since it argues that the structure of an IV Regress means that it cannot produce any of its dependent properties.<sup>5</sup>

We should note that, as well as being completely general, the Structural Objection is also ontological in nature. That is, the Objection does not depend upon a distinctly epistemic demand, such as that for explanation, sufficient reasons or non-arbitrary reasons, since the Objection is solely based upon the metaphysics of IV Regresses. It is apparently true that in Aquinas' most famous application of something like the Structural Objection the driving concern is a demand for explanations or sufficient reasons (Rowe (1975) and (1997)). But this is merely an artifact of the particular theses Aquinas implicitly used to generate an IV Regress, specifically some version of the 'Principle of Sufficient Reason'. However, IV Regresses may result from instances of principles (I) and (II) which are non-epistemic in character, since the relata of 'in virtue of' relations take many forms.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In effect, the Structural Objection illuminates that what Aristotle termed an "actual infinity" must exist in order for Infitinism to be true and all the problems surrounding the actual infinite consequently dog Infitinism. (Sosa (1980) has defended the notion of the "actually infinite" in defending Infitinist positions from criticism, but Moser (1985) provides plausible arguments that Sosa's notion does not succeed with this task).

<sup>6</sup> For example, consider these two non-epistemic principles:

(I\*) An entity x has a property of being in motion only in virtue of some entity y having the property of being in motion; and y is in motion only in virtue of some entity z being in motion; etc.

And the further principle:

(II\*) For any entity x, if x has the property of being in motion only in virtue of some entity y having the property of being in motion, then y is not in motion in virtue of x being in motion.

The Structural Objection is therefore rather different than the skeptical concern about infinite regresses raised by Klein. The latter is a distinctively epistemic worry, whereas the Structural Objection is a general metaphysical concern about the potential of IV Regresses to produce their dependent properties. And the arguments about guarantees that Klein adduces to turn the Skeptic's epistemological objection do not suffice to allay the ontological concerns about IV Regresses.<sup>7</sup> The driving force behind this Objection is not a demand for "final" or "life-time" guarantees that there is an infinite chain of non-arbitrary reasons, or even that humans have the cognitive capacities to comprehend such a chain of reasons. Rather, the Structural Objection is based upon a general *a priori* argument that *no* IV Regress can produce its dependent property; and hence that PAC and PAA cannot produce an IV Regress that results in its dependent property of being a non-arbitrary reason.<sup>8</sup>

The standard response to IV Regresses, and the arguments based upon them, is to reject one of the theses that generate the regress. Thus Aquinas argues, for example, that one IV Regress shows that we should reject the thesis that all beings are contingent, whilst his opponents often conclude that this regress shows we should reject the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Similarly, in the epistemological debate, in response to the IV Regress of reasons we have seen result from principles like PAA and PAC, Foundationalists argue we must abandon principles like PAA, Coherentists cast off PAC, and Skeptics conclude we can never have justified beliefs. What unifies these reactions is that they accept the Structural Objection that IV Regresses cannot result in their dependent property and hence abandon one, or more, of the theses that produce the relevant regress. Given their position, Klein and other Infinitists cannot take such an approach and must face the Structural Objection square on.

However, it is often objected that an Infinitist like Klein is not, or at least *need* not, be committed to an IV Regress of reasons. Perhaps the Infinitist

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Together (I\*) and (II\*) generate an IV Regress whose dependent property is being in motion, even though these principles are non-epistemic in character.

<sup>7</sup> In the course of his discussion of such skeptical concerns Klein also argues (p. 314) that we should reject what he calls the "Completion Requirement" of Fumerton (1995). And he also responds to Sosa (1980)'s claim that Infinitism cannot adequately account for the differences between having a justification and being justified (pp. 314-315). I contend that his responses in neither case suffice to provide an answer to the Structural Objection.

<sup>8</sup> We should note that specific application of the concerns driving the Structural Objection have often been used in attacking Infinitism. For example, Moser (1985) provides a recent critique of Infinitism of this kind and his objection is in effect an application of the Structural Objection to the case of epistemic justification.

Fumerton (1998) responds to Klein's (1998) defense of Infinitism on rather different grounds by objecting that an Infinitist cannot provide a non-circular definition of justification. However, Klein's (1999) makes it plausible that this objection may be met, since it outlines an account of justification which does not itself rely upon this notion and instead uses the idea of "subjectively and objectively available reasons".

may only be committed to the claim that it is necessary for justified belief that there must be *some* infinite regress of beliefs, all of which are non-arbitrary reasons. But where the beliefs are not non-arbitrary reasons only in virtue of some further belief being a non-arbitrary reason. Thus the objection is that a regress is necessary for justified belief under Infinitism, but it not the type of viciously problematic IV Regress underlying the Structural Objection.

We can better understand this objection and the problems it faces using a couple of crude technical terms. Let us therefore take B to be a ‘marker’ of A just in case it is true that “A only if B”, but not true that “A in virtue of B”; and refer to B as a ‘determinant’ of A just in case it is true that “A only if B” and it is true that “A in virtue of B”. Using these crude notions we can apparently distinguish different kinds of infinitism and articulate the idea behind the objection. For example, we may define ‘Modest’ Infinitism as the position that an infinite regress of reasons is a marker of justified belief.<sup>9</sup> Whilst reserving the name ‘Bold’ Infinitism for a position that claims that an infinite regress of reasons is a determinant of justified belief. The objector’s point is apparently that the Modest position really is a species of Infinitism and clearly is not committed to an IV Regress.<sup>10</sup>

In response we must be careful to mark the different features of the Modest and Bold positions. The Bold view is what I have been referring to as ‘Infinitism’ and it is a position whose truth is incompatible with the truth of either Foundationalism or Coherentism. As a result, the Bold position does appear to be a substantive epistemological position, though of course it faces the Structural Objection. But what of the Modest variant? We should note that by avoiding commitment to an IV Regress the Modest picture holds simply that a infinite regress accompanies whatever conditions are involved in the metaphysical ‘guts’ of justification. The latter conditions being correctly described by either Foundationalism or Coherentism is thus compatible with the truth of the Modest view. Given its compatibility with such positions, it appears questionable whether the Modest view can restore Infinitism as a substantive option in epistemology and whether it is correctly labeled ‘Infinitism’.

Building upon this latter point, we can use what I will call the ‘Infinitist’s Dilemma’ to further sharpen our view of the difficulties facing Infinitists. The Dilemma proceeds as follows: When PAA and PAC are true either a belief, ‘x’, is a non-arbitrary reason only in virtue of some other belief, ‘y’, being a non-arbitrary reason (where y cannot be in the evidential ancestry of x), or it is not. If the former is true, then being a non-arbitrary reason is a

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the Modest view basically entails that PAC and PAA are incorrectly interpreted as instances of principles (I) and (II).

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Peter Klein for helping me see this objection.

dependent property of an IV Regress and one faces the Structural Objection. On the other hand, if there can be a belief that is a non-arbitrary reason, but not in virtue of some further belief being a non-arbitrary reason, then one is left without any reason why an unending array of non-arbitrary reasons is necessary for justification and one plausibly abandons Infinitism. (And if one gives such a reason, then one will plausibly have argued that it is *in virtue of* another belief *y* being a non-arbitrary reason that *x* is a non-arbitrary reason. Hence one would be forced back to the first horn of the dilemma). Thus, the Infinitist's Dilemma apparently shows that either one is an Infinitist and must face the Structural Objection, or one plausibly abandons Infinitism.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, Klein and other Infinitists cannot avoid commitment to IV Regresses that result in their dependent properties, on pain of ceasing to be Infinitists.

To conclude, Peter Klein has achieved a great deal by showing that Infinitism can answer many of the concerns commonly leveled against it. But we have nonetheless found that a general metaphysical concern about IV regresses still dogs even Klein's subtle Infinitism. These concerns do not derive from skeptical, or other epistemic, grounds, but from venerable metaphysical arguments that IV Regresses cannot produce their dependent properties, whether the property of being a non-arbitrary reason or some other feature. The Structural Objection thus provides an *a priori* argument that there cannot be the unending, non-repeating chain of non-arbitrary reasons necessary for the truth of Infinitism. As we have seen, unlike other participants in the epistemological debate, Infinitists such as Klein cannot avoid the Structural Objection and Infinitism must remain unrestored until an answer is successfully provided to it.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> And note that the Dilemma can be applied if the Infinitist moves her focus from the property of being a non-arbitrary reason to some other property, for example being what Klein calls a "subjectively and objectively available" reason. For it appears that the Infinitist must still be committed to some infinite regress of beliefs where the dependent property is now being a "subjectively and objectively available" reason. Furthermore, the beliefs in this regress must be connected by "in virtue of" relations, for otherwise we have no reason why such an unending chain of beliefs is necessary for justification. As a result, one either ceases to be an Infinitist, or one is again committed to an IV Regress of beliefs.

<sup>12</sup> A version of this paper was read at the 2001 Pacific APA conference in San Francisco. Thanks to the audience there for comments and to Seth Crook, Paul Lodge and, especially, Ben Haines and Peter Klein for discussion of the issues of this paper.



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