Lecture 18: Infinitism

I. Why Not Infinitism?

According to infinitism, a belief is justified at a given time for a given subject if and only if its chain of support is infinitely long and non-repeating (that is, if and only if it is supported by an infinite sequence of beliefs held by the subject at that time, such that each belief in the sequence supports the next belief in the sequence, and no belief is repeated).

Klein insists that two intuitively attractive principles together make infinitism extremely plausible:

- **the Principle of Avoiding CIRCULARITY (PAC)**: If S has a justification for belief B, then for any belief B* which is in S’s chain of support for B, it is not the case that B is in S’s chain of support for B*.

- **the Principle of Avoiding ARBITRARINESS (PAA)**: If S has a justification for belief B, then there is some reason, R₁, available to S for B; and there is some reason, R₂, available to S for R₁; etc.

In order for reason R to be available to subject S for belief B, Klein thinks two things must be the case:

- R must be objectively available to S, that is, it must genuinely support belief B. (Different theories will fill in what this notion of support amounts to in different ways.)

- R must be subjectively available to S, that is, S must believe it, or at least must be able to call on it.

Two things to be wary of when reading Klein’s article:

1. Throughout he’s very inconsistent about whether the items in the regress are propositions or beliefs.
2. At times he appears to conflate the dialectical regress (the regress that occurs when one interlocutor asks another what reasons he/she has to believe a particular claim) with the epistemic regress (the regress of support that exists for a particular belief held by a particular subject at a particular time).

II. The Finite Mind Objection

**objection**: It is impossible for humans to have an infinite number of independent beliefs.

**reply**: It might be impossible for us to consciously entertain an infinite number of beliefs at one time, but there is good reason to think that our beliefs include much more than what we are consciously entertaining at a given moment.

For example, maybe right now I believe the following: that I am within 10 miles of Boston, that I am within 20 miles of Boston, that I am within 30 miles of Boston, etc.

**objection**: Eventually a proposition in this series will include a number so large that no human can consider it.

**Klein’s reply**: For our purposes, let us count as beliefs not only already formed first-order beliefs (such as your already formed first-order belief that 1 + 1 = 2), but also dispositions to form a first-order belief (such as your disposition to form a first-order belief that 366 + 71 = 437 after a little calculation).

Then, even with a finite vocabulary, we could have an infinite number of beliefs by employing indexicals like “this” and “that.” For example, if there are an infinite number of discernable objects with some shape α, we can have an infinite number of beliefs of the form “This is α-shaped.”

**objection**: But those don’t seem to be the right sort of beliefs to form the links in an infinite chain of support.

**Klein’s reply**: “When our vocabulary and concepts fall short of being able to provide reasons, we can develop new concepts and ways of specifying them. That is, we can discover, develop, or invent new concepts to provide a reason for our beliefs” (“Human Knowledge . . .,” p. 173).
III. First Reductio Objection

_objection_: Suppose a belief in P could be justified by the following chain of support:

\[
\langle \text{a belief in P, a belief in R, a belief in S, a belief in T, \ldots} \rangle.
\]

Then, for any proposition Q, a belief in Q could be justified by the following chain of support:

\[
\langle \text{a belief in Q, a belief in P\&Q, a belief in R\&Q, a belief in S\&Q, a belief in T\&Q, \ldots} \rangle.
\]

But then infinitism allows any arbitrary proposition to be justified, which is an absurd result.

_Klein’s first reply_: This objection relies on the following principle:

\[ (*) \text{ If R supports } P, \text{ then R\&Q supports P\&Q.} \]

However, claims Klein, this principle is false and leads to untoward consequences for any theory of justification, not just infinitism. For example, suppose that belief in R is justified, and that R supports P. Then, given principle (*) and the undeniable assumption that P\&Q supports Q, we get the result that belief in Q is justified for any arbitrary Q.

(Actually, this last bit is mistaken: the result only follows if we assume that if belief in R is justified, then belief in R\&Q is justified. But that won’t be the case for most theories of justification.)

_Klein’s second reply_: Principle (*) is ruled out by the Principle of AvoidingCircularity.

(I don’t see why that is so: as formulated, the principle of avoiding circularity only rules out entire links in a chain of support being repeated, not parts of a link being repeated in parts of subsequent links.)

IV. Second Reductio Objection

_objection_: There are other examples in which, given infinitism, a belief can be too easily justified. For example, one could have a justified belief that there is at least one perfect number greater than 100 by possessing the following chain of support for it:

\[
\langle \text{a belief that there is at least one perfect number greater than 100, a belief that there are at least two perfect numbers greater than 100, a belief that there are at least three perfect numbers greater than 100, \ldots} \rangle.
\]

(Note: a perfect number is equal to the sum of all its divisors other than itself.)

_Klein’s reply_: The existence of such a chain is necessary for one’s belief to be justified, but it is not sufficient. In addition, each reason in the chain must be objectively and subjectively available to the subject.

(However, surely we can imagine cases where this is so. Since each proposition in the chain is entailed by the next one, the objective availability constraint will always be met, so all we need to do is imagine someone who believes [in Klein’s loose sense of that term] each proposition in the chain.)

_Sosa’s reply_: We must distinguish between actual and merely potential regresses of justification. A merely potential regress of justification is a series of beliefs with following property: “while it is true that if any member were justified then its predecessor would be, still none is in fact justified” (“The Raft and the Pyramid,” p. 151).

(But this is no help, unless something more is said about what distinguishes an actual from a merely potential infinite regress of justification; moreover, what more Sosa says is unhelpful.)

V. The Specter of Skepticism Objection

_objection_: If all justification is provisional, then no belief becomes unprovisionally justified.

_Klein’s reply_: “\ldots although every proposition is only provisionally justified, that is good enough if one does not insist that reasoning settles matters once and for all” (“Human Knowledge \ldots,” p. 176).