

Lecture 14: The Regress Argument

I. Doxastic vs. Propositional Justification

There are two importantly different ways in which we talk about justification in the realm of belief:

"S is justified in believing P."	"S's belief in P is justified."
"Believing P is justified for S."	"S's belief in P is well founded."
"S has a justification for believing P."	"S justifiably believes P."

The sentences in the left-hand column are compatible with S not believing P, and they are compatible with S believing P but for terrible reasons. The sentences in the right-hand column, on the other hand, imply both that S believes P and that S does so for the right reasons.

The sort of justification picked out by the sentences in the left-hand column is called *propositional justification*. The main focus of assessment here is a proposition, which may or may not be believed by the subject in question.

The sort of justification picked out by the sentences in the right-hand column is called *doxastic justification*. ('Doxastic' means 'pertaining to belief'.) The main focus of assessment here is a belief.

Some authors think beliefs can be *morally justified*, *prudentially justified*, *aesthetically justified*, and so on in addition to being *epistemically justified* (i.e. justified in that distinctive way which is relevant to knowledge). I will usually drop the 'epistemically'-qualifier unless it matters.

II. Mediate vs. Immediate Justification

Some of our beliefs are (doxastically) justified *because* they are supported by other beliefs that we have. However, in order for these further beliefs to provide the right sort of support, it seems that they themselves must be justified. Which raises the question: if we trace back the chain of support for any one belief, where (if at all) does it ever stop?

Let us distinguish between two types of (doxastically) justified beliefs:

S's belief in P is *mediately justified* (or *inferentially justified*) iff S's belief in P is justified, and it is justified due to its connection to at least one other justified belief of S's.

S's belief in P is *immediately justified* (or *non-inferentially justified*) iff S's belief in P is justified, and it is justified in some other way than through its connection to other justified beliefs of S's.

Often *immediately justified beliefs* are also called *basic beliefs*, but it is important to remember that basic beliefs are a type of *justified* belief, not merely a type of belief.

What does it take for the justifiedness of S's belief in P to *depend on* (or *be due to*, or *derive from*) its connection to other justified beliefs that S has? It is standard to hold that at least the following must be the case:

- (i) S justifiably believes each member of $\{Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_n\}$.
- (ii) P follows from $\{Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_n\}$ by means of a valid *deductive*, *inductive*, or *abductive inference*.
- (iii) S believes P *because* S believes each member of $\{Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_n\}$ and takes (ii) to hold.

Several clarifications:

- One can have a mediately justified belief without explicitly rehearsing any inference in one's mind.
- The contrast between mediate and immediate justification concerns the *source* of one's justification, not its *strength*.

III. Formulating the Regress Argument

Let us make two simplifying assumptions:

1. Let us assume that there is no *justificatory overdetermination*: that no belief is justified in several ways, each of which would suffice to make it justified.
2. For each mediately justified belief, let us assume that its justification is derived from the justification of a single (possibly conjunctive) belief.

(So instead of saying that my belief in P depends for its justification on my justified belief in Q_1 and on my justified belief in Q_2 , we'll say that my belief in P depends for its justification on my single justified belief in $Q_1 \& Q_2$.)

With these simplifications in place, we can define a given justified belief's *chain of support* as follows:

The *chain of support* for S's justified belief in P is a (possibly infinite) sequence of beliefs held by S such that: (a) S's belief in P is the first member of that sequence, and (b) for each member of the sequence, if that member is mediately justified, then the next member of the sequence is the single justified belief on which its justification depends (otherwise there is no next member).

Note: an immediately justified belief will have a one-member chain of support consisting of only that belief.

According to *foundationalism*, every justified belief ultimately rests on a foundation of immediately justified beliefs.

The most famous argument for foundationalism runs as follows:

the regress argument for foundationalism:

1. If S's belief in P is justified, then either
 - a. the belief's chain of support terminates in an immediately justified belief, or
 - b. the belief's chain of support eventually circles back on itself, or
 - c. the belief's chain of support consists in an infinite regress of distinct mediately justified beliefs. [*premise*]
2. No justified belief can be based on a chain of support that circles back on itself. [*premise*]
3. No justified belief can be based on a chain of support that involves an infinite regress of distinct mediately justified beliefs. [*premise*]
4. Therefore, if S's belief in P is justified, then the belief's chain of support terminates in an immediately justified belief. [*follows from 1, 2, 3*]

Foundationalists accept this argument's conclusion: they hold that there are immediately justified beliefs, and that every other belief depends for its justification on its inferential relations to immediately justified beliefs.

Linear coherentists deny premise 2: they hold that a chain of support for a belief can loop back on itself without undermining the justificatory support provided by that chain.

Infinitists deny premise 3: they hold that the regress of support for a justified belief goes on indefinitely.

Pyrrhonian skeptics add an additional premise according to which there are no immediately justified beliefs, and then conclude that no belief is justified.

One can also hold a *mixed view* according to which some kinds of beliefs can have a chain of support of one variety, and other kinds of beliefs can have a chain of support of another variety.