Phil. 159: Epistemology
Mar. 31, 2022

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, R_1, available to S for B; and there is some reason, R_2, available to S for R_1; 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 (a.k.a. the Conjunctive Free-Rider Problem)

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

<a belief in P, a belief in R, a belief in S, a belief in T, . . . >.

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

<a belief in Q, a belief in P&Q, a belief in R&Q, a belief in S&Q, a belief in T&Q, . . . >.

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:

(*) If R supports P, 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 Avoiding Circularity.

(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:

<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*,
. . . >

(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: ". . . 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 . . . ," p. 176).