Epistemology and the Regress Problem

Scott F. Aikin
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When I was a graduate student, I took a rough version of my defense of epistemic infinitism to a conference. I got about halfway through the paper before I'd found that every person in the audience was shaking his or her head back and forth vigorously in disagreement. I'll tell you, it's daunting to see that. The question-and-answer session was brutal, but I held my own. But I did not convince anyone that the view was right. In fact, everyone in the audience still thought the view utterly wrong. A fellow graduate student came to the session, and he talked with me later and said consolingly, “Isn’t it a philosophical achievement when you can take a view that’s obviously false and defend it so that it’s at least not quite so obviously false?”

That’s setting the bar pretty low for philosophical achievement, but that’s at a minimum what I’m out to accomplish here. Infinitism is a view that, at least every time I talk about it with other philosophers, my students, and even my family, is taken to be just obviously wrong. My first ambition here is to make it so that philosophers don’t immediately go to the ‘that view is crazy’ response when thinking about infinitism. How my students and family members respond to the infinitism proposal is a matter to be handled by other means. There are lots of views in philosophy that strike me as utterly ‘round the bend. For example, divine command theory, the view that God’s will explains various ethical truths. I simply can’t see how the view could be true, but there are sophisticated defenses of it. And despite the fact I think the view is wrong-headed, I’m willing to admit that I may be missing something about it, and that divine command theorists deserve a place at the table in discussions of meta- and normative ethics.

In some ways, the baseline objective in this book is to work out a way for epistemic infinitism to appear better than obviously wrong, for it to be one respectable player in the discussion. And if it can’t do better than that, perhaps having it just meet the there are non-stupid defenses of it mark is still a worthwhile goal. There has been a small bloom of work considering infinitism’s independent merits in the journals. Infinitism, especially in the last 10 years, has come a very long way. Considering the view’s status since Aristotle formulated a version of the regress problem in the Posterior Analytics, this is quite a sudden rise in fortunes. And I believe a book-length defense of the view will improve its prospects.
But being a player isn’t enough, especially for those who think, as I do, the view is not just deserving of a place in the conversation, but is correct. And it’s not just correct, but fecund. Following from it are lots of very interesting and powerful insights into reasoning’s rules. And so a book-length treatment of infinitism should do more than meet the very low standard of not being obviously wrong, but it should outline some of the appealing features of the view. That is, it should show why the view is true and appealing. Again, I think a good deal has been done to show this by Charles Sanders Peirce, Peter Klein, Jeremy Fantl, and me in earlier work. But there needs to be a sustained piece of work to that end, showing the appeal of infinitism. In particular, I will show that a rich program in philosophy of argumentation follows as a consequence of infinitism in epistemology. As a consequence, infinitism has an appeal that extends beyond its simply being a solution to the regress problem.

One further way of showing a view is appealing, at least for philosophers, is to show that it is dialectically robust, that is, that there are debates to be had between those who hold that view, that the view is still to be further refined, that the view is alive. And so in the case of infinitism, I will show that though there are infinitists, they are each distinct in their respective forms of infinitism. That is, one interesting thing about many views is the intramural dialogues between those who hold it. The variety of foundationalisms, I think, is testament to the philosophical appeal of the view. This has yet to happen in any sustained way for infinitism, and this is perhaps my highest ambition for the book—to show that there are independent philosophically pressing issues to be pursued between the various infinitist views. And so Peirce, Klein, Fantl, and myself are put into dialogue, and I argue that my mixed view of justification is infinitism’s best bet.

The project has, then, three objectives of ascending ambition: (i) Improve the standing of infinitism from being an obviously false view to a not-quite-so-obviously false view that deserves sustained philosophical attention, (ii) Draw out some of the implications for the view as one of justification applied to argument and dialectical exchange, and (iii) Outline a new frame of debate within the infinitist research program.

This book is the result of about 12 years of thinking. It was in my first graduate seminar at Vanderbilt, John Post’s contemporary epistemology course, that my interest in the regress problem was sparked. Since then, I have discussed the problem with every teacher, colleague, friend, and student who had the patience to walk the long road of reason with me. The students I have puzzled with the regress problem over the years are too many for me to remember. However, Jeff Adams, Yaroslav Alekseyev, Kevin Burson, Eric Dominguez, Jens Frederiksen, Adam Gross, Rachael Phillips, Cliff Roberson, Jeana Simpson, and Jeff Sterett are students who have all given me substantive feedback on the problem and my project. Additionally, many friends and colleagues have helped me
think through the problem: Jason Aleksander, Antonio Bendezu, James Bednar, Caleb Clanton, Allen Coates, David Hildebrand, Joe Joyce, Chris King, Sebastian Lurie, Aaron Simmons, Derek Turner, and Chase Wrenn. Additionally, my colleagues at Vanderbilt, Jeff Edmonds, Lenn Goodman, David Gray, Joan Forry, John Lachs, Michael Hodges, Jose Medina, Jonathan Neufeld, Henry Teloh, and Julian Weurth, all deserve great thanks, as I have received so much input from them over the years I have been with them. Robert Audi, Jeremy Fantl, and Peter Klein have all seen and commented on earlier drafts of the chapters here or the articles that preceded them. Additionally, Erica Wetter, my editor at Routledge, the editorial team, and the two anonymous reviewers all provided valuable feedback.


Four friends deserve special thanks here. First, Brian Ribeiro is a fellow traveler, as we share the unfortunate tendency to adopt exceedingly unpopular views (his being a form of what I call in the book Agrippan skepticism). He can be thanked or blamed for my disinclination to be worried that skepticism is a consequence of my views. Second, Mason Marshall, who has been a sounding board for ideas for many years, deserves thanks for his tireless diligence in rooting out bad writing and nonsense. Third, my longtime friend and frequent collaborator, Robert Talisse deserves a good deal of credit for convincing me to take what was a piecemeal philosophical program and synthesize it here. Robert’s good sense for how intellectual programs fit together has been my model. Fourth, and finally, is my teacher and mentor, Jeffrey Tlumak. He deserves a great heap of thanks for his thoughtful guidance and support.

Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Susan Foxman, and our children, Madeleine and Iris, for their patience with me while I have been writing this book. For as hard as I have tried to be of good humor while writing (and reflect that good humor in the writing), it was Madeleine who had the best joke. She asked me about my book and I explained the regress problem to her. I then told her that I would be defending the infinitist’s option. She then said gravely, “Daddy, I see why you’re working so hard . . . that’s gonna be a really long book!”
Introduction

DON’T FEAR THE REGRESS

We are rational creatures. We are beings upon whom demands of rationality are appropriate. We don’t always live up to those demands, though. In those cases, we fail to be rational, and it is fitting to use the term ‘irrational’ to describe us in these cases. It is worth noting that when we fail the demands of rationality, it is different from how rocks, tadpoles, and gum fail to be rational. In fact, it is better to say they don’t fail to be rational; they just aren’t rational. So, for them, we use the term ‘arational.’ They don’t face the demands of rationality, but we do because we have minds that can move us to act, inspire us to create, and bring us to believe in ways that are responsible and directed.

My interests here are the demands that rationality places on our beliefs and the way we manage our assent. Beliefs not only aim at the truth but also at its comprehension, and so one of the requirements of being a rational creature with beliefs is that we manage them in a way that is pursuant not only of the truth but also our understanding of it. Reasons and reasoning play the primary role in that pursuit—we ought to believe on the basis of good reasons. That is, if you believe something, you think that you’re right about the world in some way or another. You believe because you think that something (call it ‘p’) is true. Now, p’s being true is different from all ways it could have turned out false, and so your being right about p isn’t just some arbitrary commitment, one that could just as well have been its negation. This nonarbitrary specificity of beliefs is constituted by the fact that they are held on the basis of reasons. Arguments are our model for how these reasons go—we offer some premises and show how they support a conclusion. Of course, arbitrary premises won’t do, so you’ve got to have some reason for holding them as opposed to some others. Every premise, then, is a conclusion in need of an argument, and for arguments to be acceptable, we’ve got to do due diligence on the premises. This, however, leads to a disturbing pattern—for every premise we turn into a conclusion, we end up with at least one other premise in need of another argument. Pretty soon, even the simplest arguments are going to get very, very complicated.
This problem is an old saw in philosophy, and it drives a number of classi-
cal works on knowledge. In contemporary parlance, the challenge posed
is the epistemic regress problem. Traditionally, there have been a number
of places where the story yielding the problem gets interrupted. On the one
hand, the argumentative model for reasoning can be called into question.
Perhaps argumentation requires more awareness and linguistic ability than
what is required in order to reason (e.g., babies don’t give arguments, but
they seem to know things). On the other hand, there have been special sorts
of reasons posed, and the special properties of these reasons make them so
that they don’t have to be conclusions of arguments for them to serve their
purpose—they may be indubitable (you don’t have to argue for proposi-
tions nobody doubts), they may cohere with other truths (sometimes it’s
enough for a story to hang together), or the premises may be yielded by
some reliable source (who’s to argue with a track record of success?). The
thought here is that some beliefs may end the regress of reasons by their
having some special property that makes them justified without having any
further arguments.

The problem with these solutions is that with all of them, if they are
solutions you use to end the regress for yourself, you still must argue not
only that one belief or other has those properties, but also that those prop-
erties confer justification. Surely we need an argument to stop with one
sort of belief and not another, because we may have the truth, but we won’t
understand it as such. And so, we haven’t ended the regress. Call this the
meta-regress problem: any time you propose a regress-ender, you do so on
the basis of an argument, which needs due diligence. And that puts us back
on the road to regress.

The regress problem is a consequence of a tension between our flatfooted
intuitions about justifying reasons. The first is that ‘justification’ and ‘ratio-
nal belief’ are success terms. They are inherently normative notions. Being
rational creatures lays claims on us, and we may meet those demands or
not. Second, knowing and rational believing are reflective successes. We
know and believe rationally by thinking hard, being careful, doing our
homework, getting our facts straight. And these are the applications of a
cognizer’s awareness of her responsibilities. Third, reflective successes can
be made explicit and determinative. You can always show your work and
explain why you arrived at one conclusion instead of another. And finally,
the explications of our reasons allow us to address those who might have
doubts or disagree, so our reasons are dialectical. Let me call the collection
of these first four intuitions epistemic aspirationalism: knowing and rational
believing are consequences of some relatively rigorous belief manage-
ment with the ends not only of getting the truth and understanding it but
having a legitimating story to tell about it.

The problem is that this model conflicts with some other intuitions that
we have about knowing. One is that human beings are good at knowing.
Dumb people still know lots of things, despite the fact that they cannot put
an argument together to save their lives. On top of that, even smart folks, given the regress problem, won’t know much, since no matter how smart you are, you can’t complete an infinite series of arguments. It looks like the standards are just too high with aspirationalism to let in a good deal of our knockabout knowledge—what gets us to work on time, what keeps us from stepping in front of buses or eating glass, what makes it so I can work my telephone, and so on. Let us call this perspective *epistemic populism*: rational believing, though an achievement, is something that is simple, widespread, and likely only rarely a reflective achievement. The regress problem, then, is a case of the clash between aspirationalism and populism. (The clash between the two perspectives is not just limited to the regress problem. All the same intuitions clash in discussions of skepticism, contextualism, the analysis of knowledge, religious epistemology, and so on.)

The view I will defend in this book is called *epistemic infinitism*. It is the view that the regress problem correctly captures what we must have in order to have a justified belief: an infinite series of nonrepeating, supporting reasons. The epistemic infinitism I will be defending in this book is a thoroughgoing aspirationalist view that those who are justified are those who are maximally intellectually responsible. In essence, if you really are justified in your belief, you can answer questions about what you know until there just aren’t any more questions. But, as it turns out, there are in principle no final questions. So those with justification on their side must be able to keep coming with the answers.

This is a heavy task. And one critical reaction may be that since rational believing is widespread and infinite reason giving is not, there must be something wrong with infinitism (namely, that it is false). This is an illusion on two fronts. First, the fact that we allow people to say they know in cases were they didn’t have infinite reasons, or, for that matter, had no reasons at all (maybe they were just lucky) doesn’t mean that *knowledge* is so easy. For example, take Jerry, who bets on a 50–1 horse to win, and the horse wins. Jerry proclaims, “There’s something about the name ‘Glue Factory Bound’ . . . I just *knew* he would win!” We let Jerry get away with saying this not because it is true that he knew, but because it doesn’t really matter whether or not he knew—what matters is whether or not the horse won. But now change the situation. You are about to place a large bet on a long-shot horse based on whether or not you like her name. Do you *know* that ‘Pretty Pony,’ ‘Firefly,’ or ‘Old Brown Shoe’ will win? Even if you made the bet and it paid, you may in a fit of jubilation exclaim that you *just knew it*, but would you in cool reflection say you knew it? I think not.

The point here is that *knowledge-attribution* is cheap. We regularly allow people who do not know to claim they do, and we allow it because we may waste time correcting them, it may be rude, or it just doesn’t matter. Knowledge-attribution happens in contexts where there are many other tasks on the docket in addition to saying truly or not whether someone knows. But all you have to do to burst the bubble is to ask the question,
often in the appropriate tone of voice, “Yes, but do you really know?” With the regress problem, we are looking at the justification that gives the right to claim to know and the same pragmatic distortions happen, especially when we attribute justification to third parties. The question is how you can claim it legitimately.

The second illusion is the significance of the fact that infinite reason giving isn’t widespread. The illusion, of course, is not that some cases of actual nonterminating reason giving are being overlooked; instead, the illusion is that when people stop giving reasons, they have satisfied the demands of justification. A regular thought regarding arguments is that they are speech acts addressed to an audience for the sake of either resolving a disagreement or settling an issue. Once arguments accomplish these goals, there is no more social use for them—once we are in agreement, we don’t argue any more. The fact that there are no infinitely long chains of arguments is a social fact—people have a tendency to agree with each other, but when debates go on too long, we give up on arguments and settle matters with our fists. So the epistemic question returns once the issue is resolved—though we may persuade each other that p, does that mean that we now know or that we have sufficient reasons to justify our belief that p? A chasm yawns between the two. Just because we have found a place of agreement with an audience neither means that we have rationally correct belief nor does it mean we have knowledge. If we cannot justify what upon which we agree; all it means is that we have an agreement.

Being justified requires that you be able to give reasons you justifiably hold are good reasons. It seems a simple truism. Who would say someone knows that p, if asked why he believes it, he shrugged his shoulders and uttered an inarticulate “Hmmm. I dunno.” Or, alternately, concedes, “I feel like I know, but I can’t explain or show how”? Consider what follows.

First, epistemic modesty. I have many beliefs, and I strive to know. But the task of holding these beliefs properly and pursuing knowledge requires that I am constantly testing the reasons I have, and that means I should always be open to the possibility that I am wrong. So I should seek out the smartest people whom I disagree with and find out what they think, and I should thank people who refute me. Fallibilism is the philosophical term of art for that collection of intellectual virtues. The American philosopher Charles S. Peirce was a fallibilist, and he famously claimed that knowledge is what constitutes the beliefs of inquirers at the end of infinite inquiry. Fallibilism, for Peirce, is a natural infinitist outlook: since we are not at the end of infinite inquiry, we don’t know yet if we have knowledge. So we have two duties—be open to correction and help move inquiry along. The question now is whether fallibilism is properly held only on infinitist grounds.

If you thought you had regress-ending beliefs, ones that settled the question of whether you are justified, you wouldn’t be open to challenges from those who reject them. The matter would be sealed for you. Those who disagree may deserve engagement for the sake of correcting them, but they
are people merely being helped to see the light, not those who have an equal share in the conversation. From the perspective of those who know, they are merely ignorant, stupid, or confused. And they must be educated. This, of course, is not to say that someone committed to regress-ending reasons must always fail to charitably respond to those who question. The question is what, exactly, does one say to one’s opponents when the commitments at issue are those for which one thinks no more reasons have to be given? Finitist epistemology does not guarantee dogmatism and intellectual intolerance (contrary to what many antifoundationalists, for example, have claimed), but given the demands of resolving disagreements, it is unclear what other options are available for the finitist except for adopting a temporary infinitism. It is just that the infinitist is an infinitist all the time.

The second consequence of infinitism is that it is the natural intellectual home for the epistemic aspirationalist’s commitment to evidentialism, the view that one’s beliefs should be supported by sufficient evidence. However, infinitism is a demanding form of evidentialism. Given that the quality of the evidence is something always relevant to assessing something as evidence (it’s good or bad evidence, strong or weak), we are always facing a further set of questions when we proffer evidence. Any critical-thinking textbook will offer the same advice—always check your sources, make sure your sample is right, understand your data, ensure that your experiment doesn’t yield vague or ambiguous results. Having evidence isn’t enough. You, if you are in your rights to claim you know, must know the quality of that evidence, which requires that we know a whole lot more things.

A final concern looms: surely there are many things we know without having to give further reasons:

This is my hand. $2 + 2 = 4$. If object $x$ has properties $P$ and $Q$, then $x$ has property $P$. Don’t torture innocent people for fun. Pain is bad. I am being appeared to red-bulgy-fruitly.

But with each of these, it seems that if someone weren’t convinced, or curious about why you believed these things, you could (and should) still offer an argument. I know this is my hand, because I am being appeared to my-handly and I’m having a kinesthetic impression of holding my hand in front of my face. From these, I’ve arrived at the belief that this is my hand and I can contrast what this impression does support with what it does not. $2 + 2 = 4$, because if you take two of anything and two of anything else, you’ll have four things . . . just try it! Each argument here is a function of our concepts . . . but do we have the right concepts? For example, couldn’t I add two things and two other things and have five things—four objects put together and the collection of them? (Isn’t a collection a thing? Baseball collections, coin collections, aren’t they things? Why isn’t the collection also counted when we do addition?) There are answers to these questions, but you see that it requires that we continue the reason giving even on the level
of the concepts used. And the same with experiences—having the right experiences is crucial for the empirical justification for many of our beliefs about the world. But we, if we take those experiences to give us information about the world, should be able to give an argument that they are veridical and how they are relevant to the beliefs they support. If you are justified, you should be able to answer questions with reasons instead of shoulder-shrugging or the back of a hand. Now, we may say those who use those other means to answer questions “know” or “are justified” but this is out of our desires to be nice to them or save our skins. And those aren’t reasons to say someone has the right to say she really knows or really is justified.

TEN THESES

One thing I find definitive of philosophy well done is clarity about what is at stake. I will try here to live up to that ambition, and in the service of doing so, I want to make explicit the ten theses I think I’m on the hook for in this book. I want to accomplish something, namely, to provide a good case for a set of interrelated views that constitute the philosophical position, epistemic infinitism. I will list them here, along with the sections of the book where I think I make good on my promises.

1. The Regress Problem is a real problem for epistemology (1.4–1.6).
2. The constitutive norm driving the regress problem is the requirement of inferential support only from justified commitments (1.2–1.5).
3. Infinitism is a defensible solution to the regress problem (2.2–2.4).
4. Infinitism may entail skepticism. But that is not yet a refutation of the view, as there is a difference between meta-epistemic theses and antiskeptical theses (1.6, 2.6, 5.3).
5. Impure infinitisms (consistent with foundationalism) solve the modus ponens reductio (2.2, 3.5).
6. Impure infinitisms are the best bet for epistemic infinitism (3.1–3.5).
7. Foundationalism can be defended from the arguments deployed against it by infinitists, but only if it functions in an impure infinitism (4.9).
8. Givenism and the intuitions driving inferentialist antifoundationalism are synthesizable (4.4–4.5).
9. Infinitism provides a model for properly run argumentation (5.1–5.3).
10. Epistemic infinitism is a form of anti-dogmatism (5.3).

I’ve framed the project in three phases, the first that infinitism is a worthy player in epistemology, the second that there is room for debate within the infinitist program, and the third that infinitism has appealing applications. I see theses 1–5 as in the service of the first phase, 5–8 as in the service
of the second phase, and 9 and 10 as in the service of the third phase of application. There are many other commitments I am on the hook for here, for example, that Sellars’s dilemma for the Myth of the Given admits of a tertium quid, that Peter Klein’s infinitism has a tacit foundationalist element, that McGrew’s dilemma for modest foundationalists is precisely an argument that foundationalism is dependent on infinitism, that acquaintance yields conditionally infallible epistemic support, and that a pragmatic theory of reason giving is an essential account of our cognitive rationality. But these are commitments that, though plenty contentious, I will have to give short attention to in the service of the larger project. There’s much to be done here, and a whole tradition and long-standing prejudice to answer. This book is only the start.
1 The Regress Problem

In this chapter, I have two objectives. The first is to make a case for an aspirationalist conception of justification. My second objective is to present the epistemic regress problem. On the one hand, I will argue that the problem is pressing for nonaspirationalist conceptions of justification; on the other hand, I will argue that the regress problem is of even greater concern for the aspirationalist program.

1.1 JUSTIFICATION AND ITS DESIDERATA

Having good reasons for our views is a good thing. This seems uncontroversial and perhaps tautological, but let me make the case. First, it seems clear that good reasons are simply valuable to us. Now, that good supporting reasons are valued may not yet show that they are valuable (or better, worthy of that valuing), but showing that we value them for good reasons does. On the assumption that a good reason for a commitment is a reason counting in favor of its truth, believing for good reasons is a means for having true beliefs. At least it is as good a means as we can come up by our own lights. And truth, simply, is what is good in the way of belief. This goodness is both instrumental and intrinsic. Moore’s paradox, that our esteem for truth constrains how we attribute beliefs to ourselves, supports this dual valuing of good supporting reasons. That is, it would be a conflicted thought for you to attribute a belief to yourself that you currently deem false. Moore holds that such a move would be a ‘contradiction in thought,’ because our beliefs, insofar as we believe them, are transparent to us—what it is to believe something is to take that content as true. Moore’s example is the thought “I believe it is raining, but it is not” (1942, 543). Even if it is true (and it could be, as Moore could believe falsely that it’s raining), it would nevertheless be incoherent to think in the first person. Our beliefs are internally related to how we think reality is, and because good reasons are our best tools for reflecting what’s real, it seems clear it would be silly to ignore them while still taking our beliefs as the sorts of things that we reflectively would endorse as true. We may believe these things, but
under such a description (perhaps that I believe it is raining, but against overwhelming evidence that it is not), we view our beliefs less as contents we endorse, but as inclinations we have, more akin to symptoms or syndromes we wish we didn’t have. Our integrity as cognitive agents depends on this reflective test we can perform on our beliefs—whether, after having assessed how the belief was formed, how it is currently maintained, and what evidence counts for it and against it, we endorse the belief.

It is not just because we care for the truth of our beliefs that we care about those reasons. It is, second, that with this reflective endorsement of our commitments, we are caretakers of ourselves as thinkers. We are intellectually autonomous. The world is chock-full of crazy and stupid people, and they have the correlate habits of saying crazy and stupid things. Part of what it is to be a cognitively responsible person is to do one’s right best not to develop those habits, to manage one’s beliefs and one’s correlate assertions in a way that eliminates (or at least mitigates) the wildly false, unfounded things we may believe otherwise. We must have skills of cognitive management, and one skill of utmost importance is that of assessing the reasons one has for one’s beliefs, assessing the reasons others give against one’s commitments, and having, on balance, the best of the competing stories. We must sort the contents worthy of our commitment in a way that is reflective of the standing dialectical situation with regards to reasons for and against the issues. That is, in order to be justified, we must not only have a story to tell as to why the things we accept are reasonable from our perspective, but we must also be capable of addressing and answering not just the crazy and stupid, but also the reasonable yet wrong.

Justified commitments are those that, given what else we know, what reasons are on the table, and how the dialectical situation has shaken out, deserve our assent. Justifying reasons are, then, what we look for when we sort the various propositions worthy of our commitment from those that are not. Here is a rough list of beliefs I think I’m in a pretty good position to say I’m justified in believing:

**LIST I:** 2 + 2 = 4. I have hands. Freedom is valuable. Knowledge is valuable. One should not kill random people. My wife hates my beard. God does not exist.

In fact, I don’t just think the balance of reasons favors these beliefs; I think I am in my rights to say I know them true. But that’s another story as to how justification and knowledge are tied, and I will not be telling that story here. Instead, the point of LIST I is to set out a number of cases of commitment that are the result of some diligent sorting. And the sorting yields another list, which are the propositions inconsistent with LIST I’s members and their dialectical competitors, a list of propositions the balance of reasons counts against: