

Can Perception Halt the Regress of Justifications?

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§1. The justificatory question

What makes it the case that a thinker has justification for a given belief? Call this *the justificatory question*. I will not attempt to define “justification.” I doubt that a non-circular definition is possible. Roughly speaking, one has justification for a belief just in case one is “epistemically licensed” in forming the belief. As Pryor puts it, “*you have justification to believe P* iff you are in a position where it would be epistemically appropriate for you to believe *P*” (2005, p. 181). Thus, I use “justification” in a broad sense that encompasses all epistemic warrant. Justification in this broad sense is widely instantiated by normal adults and even young children.¹

I will apply the justificatory question to *perceptual beliefs*, i.e. beliefs based upon perception. To illustrate, consider a thinker who sees a green cube, thereby forming a belief one might paraphrase as *That cube is green*. Perceptual conditions are optimal: the light is normal, she is not under the influence of any drugs, and so on. I assume that she has justification for her perceptual belief, even if she is only five years old. There are philosophers who reject this assumption, perhaps because they use the term “justification” in a more demanding way than I do. I think there is a clear sense in which the child is epistemically licensed in believing *That cube is green*. In my sense, she has justification for her perceptual belief. The justificatory

¹ Thus, I use the term “justification” to include both what Burge (2003) calls “justification” and what he calls “entitlement.”

question invites us to elucidate her justification. What makes it the case that she has justification for her perceptual belief?

The justificatory question is distinct from various questions frequently posed by philosophers, including:

How might one convince a skeptic that there is a green cube?

How might one acquire justification for believing that one has justification for believing

That cube is green?

How might one convince others that one has justification for believing *That cube is green?*

In answering such questions, we will surely cite cognitive resources unavailable to a normal child. Yet I assume that children have justification for suitable perceptual beliefs. A good answer to the justificatory question should not *hyperintellectualize* justification by citing overly sophisticated mental capacities.²

This paper compares two approaches to perceptual justification: *infinetism* and *dogmatism*. I will argue that dogmatism offers a far more compelling analysis (§§2-3). I will then critique Klein's (2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) attempt to motivate infinitism through the specter of *epistemic regress* (§§4-5). My central criticism is that Klein adopts a mistaken hyperintellectualist approach to justification.

§2. Infinitist justification for perceptual belief

² Many previous philosophers, especially Burge (2003), have warned against hyperintellectualization in epistemology.

According to infinitism, every justified belief is associated with an infinite *epistemic chain*: an infinite chain of reasons, each element justified by the next element in the chain. Klein summarizes infinitism through two doctrines (2005a, p. 136):

Principle of Avoiding Circularity (PAC): for all propositions, x , if x is warranted for a person, S , at t , then for all y , if y is in the reason-ancestry of x for S at t , then x is not in the reason-ancestry of y for S at t .

Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness (PAA): for all propositions x , if x is warranted for a person S , at t , then there is some reason, r_1 , available to S for x at t ; and there is some reason, r_2 , available to S for r_1 at t , etc., and there is no last reason in the series.

Thus, every justified belief is associated with an infinite, non-repeating chain of reasons. As Klein (2007, p. 11) puts it, “a proposition, p , is justified for S iff there is an endless series of non-repeating propositions available to S such that beginning with p , each succeeding member is a reason for the immediately preceding one.” A “reason for x ” is a proposition that bears some desirable epistemic relation to x . Klein remains neutral regarding the precise nature of this desirable epistemic relation.

Through his prodigious efforts, Klein has established that infinitism demands far more serious attention than epistemologists previously accorded it. Specifically, Klein convincingly shows that the widely promulgated “finite minds” and “no starting points” objections to infinitism exert little force. Nevertheless, I think that a basic worry remains: infinitists have yet to provide a single concrete, plausible example of infinitist justification.

We can easily imagine an infinite sequence of propositions, each logically entailed by the next element in the chain. Given any proposition p_1 , consider

p_1

$p_2 \ \& \ (p_2 \rightarrow p_1)$

$p_3 \ \& \ (p_3 \rightarrow p_2) \ \& \ (p_3 \rightarrow (p_2 \rightarrow p_1))$

.

.

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Similarly, Peijnenburg (2007) argues that probability theory allows us to construct an infinite sequence of proposition E_1, E_2, \dots , such that

E_2 makes E_1 probable

E_3 makes E_2 probable

E_4 makes E_3 probable

.

.

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In themselves, however, these abstract schemata provide little if any support for infinitism. The question is whether there exists an infinite non-repeating chain of *specific* propositions that yield a plausible epistemological analysis.

Consider an ordinary thinker who forms a justified belief *That cube is green* on the basis of perceiving a green cube. What relevant infinite epistemic chain is “available” to the thinker? Infinitely many sequences instantiate our abstract logical or probabilistic schemata. For instance, there is an absurd sequence that begins:

That cube is green

The moon is made of cheese & (The moon is made of cheese \rightarrow That cube is green)

Napoleon was born on Mars & (Napoleon was born on Mars → The moon is made of cheese) & (Napoleon was born on Mars → (The moon is made of cheese → That cube is green))

.
.
.

Clearly, this absurd sequence provides no insight into an ordinary thinker's justification for perceptual beliefs.

Somewhat more realistically, consider an example offered by Turri (2009). Fran justifiably believes *It is past 2:05 p.m.* (based on observing her watch). She asserts *It is past 2:00 p.m.*, an assertion she can defend through the following infinite chain: *It is past 2:04 p.m.*, *It is past 2:04:30 p.m.*, *It is past 2:04:45 p.m.*, and so on. Each member of the chain is justified by her belief *It is past 2:05 p.m.*

I deny that Turri's example provides any support for infinitism. Fran's belief *It is past 2:00 p.m.* is justified by her belief *It is past 2:05 p.m.*, not by the infinite chain that Turri cites. Fran's assumed ability to pursue this infinite chain does not strengthen her justification for believing *It is past 2:00 p.m.* Each element in the chain is justified simply by her belief *It is past 2:05 p.m.* No element in the chain derives additional epistemic support from the next element in the chain. Specifically, her belief *It is past 2:00 p.m.* receives no epistemic support from her belief *It is past 2:04 p.m.* Of course, the latter belief entails the former belief. But it does not follow (and it is not true) that the latter belief provides any additional support for the former belief beyond the support already provided by her belief *It is past 2:05 p.m.* The infinite chain cited by Turri does not illuminate Fran's justification for believing *It is past 2:00 p.m.*

A credible version of infinitism must provide compelling details for specific beliefs. Infinitists must indicate a specific infinite epistemic chain that is “available” to an ordinary thinker, and they must show why this chain illuminates the thinker’s justification for the first belief in the chain. Infinitists have not discharged this burden. In particular, they have not indicated any infinite epistemic chain that illuminates why an ordinary thinker has justification for an ordinary perceptual belief.

Ginet (2005) raises a similar challenge. Klein (2005b) responds that one can continue the regress by adducing a previously tacit belief that perceptual experiences are likely to be veridical. Subsequent steps involve defending that previously tacit belief. As Klein (2005b, pp. 151-152) notes:

Descartes was faced with just this problem in the *Meditations*, namely: Do we have any reason for thinking that our perceptual equipment typically yields the truth? We know his type of answer: there are *a priori* reasons available that show that the equipment is reliable. The currently more fashionable type of answer is based upon *a posteriori* reasoning involving mechanisms posited by evolutionary biology. Thus, I suggest it is easy to image how the reasoning could continue because we have good examples of such reasoning. Will reasoning in support of *that* tacit reason ultimately beg the question? I don’t believe it need do so.

According to Klein, philosophical tradition furnishes a tangible model for continuing the regress indefinitely.

Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that Klein is correct. The question remains whether this tangible model illuminates the justification of ordinary perceptual beliefs. Even if *philosophers* can continue the regress indefinitely, how does that help *non-philosophers*?

Imagine an uneducated human living thousands of years ago. She perceives a green cube. She has justification for the perceptual belief *That cube is green*. Yet I see no relevant sense in which abstract philosophical arguments are “available” to her.³ I therefore charge Klein with *hyperintellectualism*. Klein elucidates justification by citing sophisticated cognitive maneuvers far beyond the capacities of normal human adults, let alone young children.

Klein often insists that his primary concern is a sophisticated epistemic status that outstrips “justification” as I characterized that term in §1. He stipulates that his topic is “real knowledge” or “distinctive adult human knowledge,” which is “the highest form of knowledge” and is “akin to the traditional concept of *scientia*. It is knowledge that results from carefully examining our beliefs in order to determine which, if any, deserve to be maintained” (2007, p. 4). He labels this desirable epistemic status “knowledge_c.” He denies that young children attain knowledge_c. He acknowledges that ordinary language uses the word “knowledge” more liberally than “knowledge_c” (2007, p. 5):

In the right sort of environment, dogs, small children and security devices are good detectors of hands. They can even discriminate between the hands of one person and the hands of another. In general, I see no reason to deny that such detectors have some sort of knowledge.

According to Klein, a security device has knowledge but not knowledge_c. Knowledge_c requires an infinite non-repeating chain of reasons. Knowledge *simpliciter* does not.

I contest several aspects of Klein’s analysis. First, I deny that there is any literal sense in which a security device “knows” propositions. Security devices do not have propositional

³ Klein does not say exactly what he means by “available.” One can formulate my objection as a dilemma. Either infinite epistemic chains are not “available” (in Klein’s sense) to ordinary thinkers, or else they *are* “available” (in Klein’s sense). In the latter case, Klein’s notion of “availability” is so permissive that it is irrelevant to answering the justificatory question.

attitudes. Second, I submit that we must recognize substantial middle ground between an automated security device and sophisticated adult critical reasoning. Young children occupy this middle ground, as do many relatively unsophisticated adults. Klein acknowledges no such middle ground. He simply assimilates young children to security devices. As a result, he ignores a vast range of cognitive phenomena that are less sophisticated than full-blown adult critical reasoning yet that merit a central place within any complete epistemology.

I set these worries aside. My main objection is that Klein's infinitist account does not seem correct even as applied to knowledge_c. A mature non-philosopher can reflect upon whether to retain her perceptual beliefs. Presumably, she can elevate those beliefs to knowledge_c. Yet a mature non-philosopher cannot pursue the infinite chain proposed by Klein. Abstruse philosophical arguments are not "available" to her.⁴ Apparently, Klein renders knowledge_c the exclusive perquisite of an intellectual elite initiated into abstract philosophical reasoning. He thereby thwarts a fundamental goal of epistemology: to illuminate the epistemic status of an ordinary non-philosopher's perceptual beliefs.

I conclude that we lack a single compelling example of infinitist justification for ordinary perceptual belief. In that respect, infinitism contrasts sharply with the dogmatist analysis that I will pursue in the next section.

§3. Dogmatist justification for perceptual belief

⁴ At one point, Klein suggests that "a proposition, *p*, is available to *S* just in case there is an epistemically credible way of *S*'s coming to believe that *p* given *S*'s current epistemic practices" (2007, p. 13). He does not endorse this suggestion, but suppose we adopt it for the sake of argument. I doubt that an ordinary non-philosopher's "current epistemic practices" provide her with an "epistemically credible way" of arriving at abstruse philosophical arguments. Even a very educated, intelligent adult may be unfamiliar with Cartesian and post-Cartesian epistemology. Of course, if she suddenly developed an interest in philosophy, then she might eventually formulate the abstruse philosophical arguments adduced by Klein. But how does that remote possibility bear upon the justification for her perceptual beliefs *before* she develops any philosophical inclinations?

A *perceptual experience* represents the world as being a certain way. The experience is veridical just in case the world is the way that the experience represent it as being. In that sense, the experience has veridicality-conditions. For instance, one can have a perceptual experience that is veridical only if some perceived object is green, cubical, and located at a certain spatial position.⁵

An increasingly popular view holds that perceptual experience can provide *prima facie*, immediate, defeasible justification for perceptual belief. Alston (1989), Audi (1993), Burge (2003), Matthen (forthcoming), Peacocke (2004), Pryor (2000), and many others advocate this view. Pryor resurrected the term *dogmatism* to describe it. To illustrate, suppose that Jane has a perceptual experience as of a green cube. According to dogmatists, the experience provides *prima facie*, immediate, defeasible justification for the belief *That cube is green*, where the mental demonstrative *that cube* refers to the perceived cube. This justification does not depend on other beliefs, including beliefs such as:

My perceptual system is functioning reliably.

I am not in the Matrix.

I am not being deceived by an evil demon.

I have not ingested a pill that distorts my color vision.

If Jane acquires evidence for those additional beliefs, then that evidence can strengthen the justification provided by her perceptual experience. Conversely, if she acquires evidence against one of those additional beliefs, then that evidence can defeat the justification provided by her

⁵ Recently, some philosophers have denied that perceptual experiences have veridicality-conditions (Brewer, 2007), (Campbell, 2010), (Martin, 2004), (Travis, 2004). I believe that this view clashes both with common sense (McLaughlin, 2010) and with contemporary perceptual psychology (Burge, 2010). Of course, simply saying that perceptual experiences have veridicality-conditions leaves many questions unanswered. For instance, is perceptual content conceptual or non-conceptual? Object-dependent or object-independent? A complete account must address these and many other questions. For present purposes, we may ignore such questions.

perceptual experience. Lacking defeating factors, she has all things considered justification for the belief *That cube is green*.

Dogmatists can cite numerous plausible examples. Consider the following perceptual beliefs, formed in response to appropriate perceptual experiences:

That long slender cylinder is oriented vertically.

That loud noise is located to my left.

This body is heavy and smoothly-textured.

That₁ large sphere is located farther away than that₂ small cube.

That₁ yellow sphere is moving faster than that₂ red cube.

The subscripts indicate distinct demonstrative elements in thought. In each case, it is highly plausible that a perceptual experience with an appropriate veridicality-condition provides *prima facie*, immediate, defeasible justification for the relevant belief. Dogmatists can also extend their analysis from demonstrative thought to existentially quantified thought. For instance, a perceptual experience as of a green cube provides justification for the existentially quantified belief *There is a green cube before me*, either directly or else by way of a demonstrative belief (*That cube is green*) and deductive reasoning.

§3.1 The demarcation problem

As Wright (2007) observes, dogmatism faces a *demarcation problem*. Which beliefs can receive immediate perceptual justification? Here are some problematic cases:

Causal beliefs (e.g. *That₁ red cube caused that₂ yellow sphere to move*)

Beliefs about other people's mental states (e.g. *He is sad*)

Beliefs about natural kinds (e.g. *That is an apple*)

Obviously, one can form these beliefs based on perception. The question is whether perceptual experience can *immediately* justify such a belief, without any dependence upon other beliefs. For instance, does the belief *That is an apple* depend for its justification on a further belief that apples have certain distinctive visual features? Or can it receive justification solely from a perceptual experience of an apple?

In my view, any solution to the demarcation problem must include a substantial empirical component. When evaluating whether perception can immediately justify a belief, we should ask whether perception can represent the properties represented by that belief. Take a belief that one object caused another to move. To decide whether perception can immediately justify this belief, we should evaluate whether perceptual experiences can represent causality. If they cannot, then a dogmatist analysis does not seem very plausible. Most likely, collateral beliefs underwrite the transition from perception to causal beliefs. On the other hand, if perceptual experiences can represent causal relations, then a dogmatist analysis may prove compelling. Whether perception represents causality is an empirical question that psychologists continue to debate (Rips, 2011). Hence, one cannot settle the demarcation problem from the armchair.⁶

Despite these complexities, I think that dogmatism can offer numerous convincing examples. Common sense and contemporary science both confirm that perceptual experience represents various distal properties, including shape, color, size, depth, location, motion, slant, texture, orientation, loudness, pitch, weight, and many others (Burge, 2010). Perceptual beliefs involving these properties are plausible candidates for a dogmatist epistemology. Dogmatists should regard the demarcation problem as an impetus to further research, not a serious challenge to their view.

⁶ This paragraph isolates a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for receiving immediate justification from perceptual experience. Burge (2003) suggests possible examples where perceptual experience can represent a property without providing immediate justification for beliefs involving that property.

Wright (2007) offers a different assessment. He holds that the demarcation problem poses a serious challenge to dogmatism. He claims that dogmatists should accept the following constraint (p. 46):

An experience dogmatically warrants the belief that *P* just in case, should the belief be false, the explanation must include misperception or some other form of illusion.

Call this *the Misperception Constraint*. Wright holds that the Misperception Constraint undercuts dogmatism. He illustrates through the belief *There is a red wall before me*: “it does not follow from my being mistaken about there being a red wall before me that my receiving the appearance of a red wall involved misperception --- there need be no misperception precisely when what I am seeing is a white wall cunningly illuminated by red light” (p. 46). Since the belief *There is a red wall before me* violates the Misperception Constraint, we cannot apply a dogmatist analysis to it. Wright contends that his critique extends to virtually all beliefs about the distal environment.

Wright’s specific example --- *There is a red wall before me* --- strikes me as ill-chosen. It is hardly clear that perception can represent the property *wall*. Thus, it is hardly clear that dogmatists should *want* to say that perception immediately justifies the belief *There is a red wall before me*. Let us change the example from *red wall* to *red cube*. Presumably, that change does not bias my case against Wright.

What does Wright mean by “misperception”? On one natural reading, “misperception” arises when a perceptual experience inaccurately represents the world. For instance, misperception occurs when I mistakenly perceive a white cube *as* a red cube. On this reading, my belief *There is a red cube before me* satisfies the Misperception Constraint. We explain the belief’s falsity by observing that the relevant perceptual experience is non-veridical. The

experience represents the cube as being red, whereas the cube is actually white. By interpreting the Misperception Constraint in this way, we can offer the standard dogmatist analysis of *There is a red cube before me*. We can say that the perceptual experience immediately justifies the belief.

On a second interpretation, which seems to be the one favored by Wright, “misperception” involves malfunction or sub-optimal performance by the perceptual system. On this second interpretation, no misperception need occur when I perceive a white cube bathed in red light *as* red. The perceptual system may be functioning quite optimally while nevertheless misattributing redness to the white cube. If we embrace the Misperception Constraint as interpreted in the second way, then we can no longer offer the standard dogmatist analysis of *There is a red cube before me*. We can no longer say that perceptual experience immediately justifies the belief. But why should dogmatists accept the Misperception Constraint, as interpreted in the second way? Wright provides no argument that they should. He provides no argument that a dogmatist solution to the demarcation problem must even mention perceptual malfunctioning or sub-optimal processing. I think that dogmatists should simply reject the Misperception Constraint (under the second interpretation). The white cube bathed in red light is a counter-example to any such constraint.

Wright does not parlay the demarcation problem into a compelling argument against dogmatism. Despite what he maintains, dogmatists can illustrate their position through numerous plausible examples.⁷

§3.2 Propositional versus doxastic justification

⁷ Wright offers additional arguments against dogmatism. See also (White, 2006) for various anti-dogmatist arguments. I cannot discuss these additional anti-dogmatist arguments here, except to state without defense that in my opinion the dogmatist has resources to answer all of them.

Epistemologists frequently distinguish between *having justification for the belief that p* and *having a justified belief that p*. Following standard practice, I mark this distinction through the labels *propositional* and *doxastic* justification. Even if one believes *p* and has justification for believing *p*, one's belief that *p* may not be justified. For example, I may believe that Smith is the murderer based upon my reading of tarot cards, rather than upon my abundant solid evidence. Thus, a belief that *p* is justified only if it is “based” on grounds that provide justification for *p*.⁸ In other words, propositional justification yields doxastic justification only when one's belief is based on the right grounds. Pryor (2004) and Turri (2010) argue that a belief must also satisfy certain further constraints to count as doxastically justified. In this paper, I take no stand regarding the precise requirements for doxastic justification.

Dogmatism claims that, in certain cases, a perceptual experience can provide propositional justification for an appropriate belief. Strictly speaking, dogmatism does not address doxastic justification. Nevertheless, dogmatists usually extend their analysis to encompass doxastic justification. The basic idea is that, in a wide variety of situations, a belief based upon an appropriate perceptual experience is doxastically justified. To develop this idea more systematically, we would need to investigate the relation between doxastic and propositional justification. Clarifying that relation is pressing topic not just for dogmatists but for epistemologists more generally. For present purposes, then, we may set these important issues aside.

§3.3 Dogmatism and foundationalism

Say that a belief is *epistemically basic* just in case the belief has some justification that does not depend upon any other beliefs. An epistemically basic belief may receive

⁸ The nature of the “epistemic basing relation” is a central topic for epistemology. For discussion, see (Turri, 2011).

supplementary justification from other beliefs. But at least one strand in its justification involves no other beliefs. According to dogmatism, various perceptual beliefs are epistemically basic: each belief derives immediate justification from an associated perceptual experience, without relying upon any other beliefs for that justification. Precisely *which* perceptual beliefs are epistemically basic depends upon how we solve the demarcation problem. All versions of dogmatism agree that diverse perceptual beliefs are epistemically basic.

For that reason, dogmatism is a kind of *foundationalism*. Dogmatists hold that certain perceptual beliefs occupy a foundational epistemic role. So dogmatists hold that a broadly foundational picture applies to a large and important sector of empirical cognition. However, dogmatism is an extremely weak kind of foundationalism. Dogmatists need not embrace various tenets of “classical” foundationalism, such as the infallibility, indefeasibility, or indubitability of epistemically basic beliefs. Nor need dogmatists endorse the “modest foundationalist” thesis, defended by Alston (1989) and Audi (1993), that all justified beliefs derive their justified status from justificatory relations to epistemically basic beliefs. Dogmatists need not say that all justified belief has a foundational structure. They claim only that a large and important class of perceptual beliefs has a foundational structure.

§4. Regress? Which regress?

I now want to compare how dogmatism and infinitism handle the notorious *regress of justifications*. I take Klein’s discussion as my starting point.⁹

Klein imagines Fred, a *foundationalist*, debating Doris, a *doubter*. Klein emphasizes that Fred and Doris “could be sub-personal if we are envisioning a Cartesian-style, *sotto voce* meditation” (2005a, p. 133). Doris’s persistent challenges eventually lead Fred to assert a

⁹ For additional criticism of Klein on the regress argument, see (Turri, 2009).

proposition *b* that he takes to be epistemically basic. If Doris demands Fred's reason for believing *b*, then Klein (p. 133) says that

Fred, being a self-conscious circumspect foundationalist, will tell Doris that *b* doesn't need a reason in order to possess the autonomous bit of warrant. He will say that her question "Why you believe that *x*?" though appropriate up to this point is no longer appropriate when "*b*" is substituted for "*x*" because *x* is basic.

Klein concedes that Fred's reply is correct. He concedes that Fred's belief in *b* is epistemically basic (or, in Klein's terminology, *autonomously warranted*). Nevertheless, Klein insists that the regress continues (p. 133):

Doris should say to Fred, "I grant that *b* has autonomous warrant. But what I want to know is whether autonomously warranted propositions are, in virtue of that fact, somewhat likely to be true." Her worry becomes a "meta." But she went meta, so to speak, because Fred went meta first.

According to Klein, Fred now has three options, centered on the following proposition:

(*) Autonomously warranted propositions are somewhat likely to be true in virtue of the fact that they are autonomously warranted.

Fred can assert (*), or he can deny (*), or he can withhold judgment. Klein thinks that all three options are disastrous. If Fred denies (*), then "how could he think that *b* could provide a good reason for thinking that the penultimate proposition was likely to be true?" (p. 134). How can Fred reasonably adduce *b* as a reason for believing other propositions, if he has no reason to believe that *b* itself is likely to be true? A similar worry arises if Fred remains agnostic about (*). On the other hand, if Fred affirms (*), then "*the regress has continued*" (p. 134). Fred must now

defend (*) in response to Doris's renewed challenges. Klein concludes that "foundationalism cannot solve the regress problem" (p. 134).

Klein cites "the" regress problem. I think that there are at least four distinct regress problems in this vicinity. I draw two distinctions: *epistemic* versus *dialectical* regress; and *static* versus *dynamic* regress. These two distinctions yield four possible regress problems, which I summarize through the following table. Each box contains a question that initiates the relevant regress:

	<i>Epistemic</i>	<i>Dialectical</i>
<i>Static</i>	What makes it the case that a thinker has justification for believing <i>p</i> ?	What makes it the case that a speaker is warranted in asserting <i>p</i> ?
<i>Dynamic</i>	What happens when a thinker evaluates whether to believe <i>p</i> ?	What happens when one speaker challenges another speaker's assertion that <i>p</i> ?

I examine each regress, beginning with the static epistemic regress and proceeding clockwise.

Much of what I will say applies to all justified belief, not merely perceptual belief. But I continue to focus on perceptual belief as my primary case study.

§4.1 The static epistemic regress

In my view, the static epistemic regress is by far the most important of the four regress problems. It arises when we examine *the fixed justificatory structure of a given thinker's beliefs at a given moment*. What makes it the case that thinker *X* currently has justification for believing *p*? In §1, I called this *the justificatory question*. In some cases, the answer to the justificatory question is that *p* derives its justification from additional propositions that *X* believes. But what

provides X with justification for believing those additional propositions? We can iterate the justificatory question, thereby generating a regress regarding X 's justification for believing p .

Dogmatism resolves the static epistemic regress for a large class of perceptual beliefs. Dogmatists can say that many beliefs derive immediate justification from perceptual experience. The static epistemic regress halts at any such belief: the belief receives justification not from other beliefs but from a perceptual experience, which does not itself require any justification. Thus, the belief is epistemically basic. Of course, we must solve the demarcation problem to say precisely *which* perceptual beliefs halt the regress in this manner. But the key point for present purposes is that dogmatism defuses the static epistemic regress *for a wide variety of important cases*.

Klein says nothing to cast doubt upon this dogmatist solution to the static epistemic regress. On the contrary, he appears to concede that epistemically basic beliefs can halt the static epistemic regress. Let us therefore press onwards.

§4.2 The static dialectical regress

To generate the static dialectical regress, we presuppose some notion of “warranted assertability.” Certain assertions are “warranted,” while others are not. What makes a speaker “warranted” in asserting a proposition? To a first approximation, Brandom holds that a speaker is “entitled” to assert a proposition just in case the speaker can defend that proposition in response to challenges (1994, pp. 176-178). Any defense will require asserting additional propositions, so one naturally asks what would make the speaker entitled to assert those additional propositions. Thus, “tracing back an entitlement... potentially sets off a regress” (Brandom, 1994, p. 176).

The static dialectical regress arises only under specific assumptions about warranted assertion. We generate an apparent regress by postulating that assertion falls under a constitutive norm along the following lines:

The Defensibility Norm: One should assert only propositions that one can “adequately” defend.

Yet many philosophers reject anything like the Defensibility Norm. Williamson (2000) favors:

The Knowledge Norm: One should assert only propositions that one knows.

Other candidate norms of assertion include:

The Honesty Norm: One should assert only propositions that one believes.

The Truth Norm: One should assert only true propositions.

The Warrant Norm: One should assert only propositions that one believes with “sufficient” warrant.

It is not clear that these alternative norms generate a comparable regress.

In (Rescorla, 2009a), I contest all the foregoing putative norms of assertion. I argue that the constitutive norms of assertion do not restrict which propositions a speaker should assert. Rather, the norms govern how a speaker should respond when other speakers contest her assertion. One possible norm along these lines runs as follow:

The Defense Norm: When challenged to defend an asserted proposition, one must either provide a cogent, non-circular argument for the proposition or else retract it.

The Defense Norm does not entail the Defensibility Norm, let alone the other restrictive norms mentioned above. If my position is correct, then there is no static dialectical regress, because there is no viable notion of “warranted assertion.”

I set these points aside. Let us assume that something like the Defensibility Norm is correct. In that case, regress looms. Nevertheless, the regress seems *explanatorily derivative*. An adequate solution to this regress must emphasize what happens when a speaker provides arguments aiming to vindicate her initial assertion.¹⁰ The explanatorily fundamental regress here is dynamic, not static. We may safely ignore the static dialectical regress, turning instead to the dynamic dialectical regress.

§4.3 The dynamic dialectical regress

Suppose that a speaker asserts a proposition p . Her interlocutor persistently demands justification for p and for subsequent propositions asserted in p 's defense. Thus, the speaker never vindicates p . She never provides an argument for p based on premises that her interlocutor accepts.

Many philosophers claim that the persistent interlocutor's challenges eventually become illegitimate (Brandom, 1994, pp. 176-178), (Leite, 2005), (Williams, 1999, 2004). On this view, certain propositions are *dialectically basic*. A mere request for justification does not obligate the speaker to defend a dialectically basic proposition. Plausible dialectically basic propositions include:

I have hands.

I have a headache.

$2+2=4$.

The world has existed for more than five minutes.

¹⁰ For example, Brandom tries to defuse the static dialectical regress by claiming that, in certain circumstances, one is entitled to assert a proposition that one cannot defend through further argumentation. To develop this solution, Brandom argues that one need not answer unmotivated challenges to certain propositions. Thus, Brandom's solution to the *static* dialectical regress hinges upon his treatment of *dynamic* dialectical interaction.

That cube is green (asserted while observing a green cube).

Thus, the basic idea is to replace the Defense Norm with

The Default-Challenge Norm: When faced with a *legitimate* challenge to defend an asserted proposition, one must either provide a cogent, non-circular argument for the proposition or else retract it.

A mere request that the speaker justify a dialectically basic proposition is not a *legitimate* challenge, so it does not obligate the speaker to respond. Dialectically basic propositions halt the dynamic dialectical regress.

I suspect that *a few* propositions are dialectically basic, including elementary logical, mathematical, or conceptual truths. But I deny that any ordinary empirical propositions are dialectically basic. Contrary to Brandom, Leite, and Williams, all such propositions require defense when challenged. In particular, a speaker who asserts *That cube is green* must defend her assertion when challenged, even though the corresponding belief is epistemically basic. One cannot halt the dynamic dialectical regress simply by asserting a proposition such as *That cube is green*. For defense of my analysis, see (Rescorla, 2009c).

Klein also denies that epistemically basic beliefs halt the dynamic dialectical regress: if Fred asserts *That cube is green*, and even if Fred notes that the corresponding belief is epistemically basic, then Doris can continue the regress simply by demanding why epistemically basic beliefs are likely to be true. As we have seen, Klein invests these dialectical maneuvers with considerable epistemological significance. He places great weight upon the thesis that epistemically basic propositions do not halt the dynamic dialectical regress. He deploys that thesis to support infinitism.

I reject Klein's argumentative strategy. In my view, nothing of epistemological significance follows from denying that epistemically basic beliefs can halt the dialectical regress. The dialectical regress concerns the norms governing rational dialectic. There is no reason to expect that dialectical norms align straightforwardly with epistemic norms. An inability to continue the dynamic dialectical regress does not suggest that the corresponding beliefs are unjustified (Rescorla, 2009b).

More concretely, consider a speaker who asserts *That cube is green*. Her interlocutor challenges her to defend the assertion. She replies "Well, I see that it's green." The interlocutor challenges this assertion. The speaker is flummoxed. In my view, the speaker has somehow *failed*. She has fallen short of some normative standard intrinsic to rational dialectic. It does not follow that she lacks any justification for believing *That cube is green*. As Alston (1989), Audi (1993), and many others have urged, we must sharply distinguish the *process of justifying* from the *state of being justified*. The latter is a positive epistemic status that certain beliefs have and that other beliefs do not have. Why should we suspect that a belief has this positive epistemic status only if the speaker can successfully *defend* the corresponding assertion to other speakers? Most ordinary speakers are quite poor at defending their beliefs. Why should lack of dialectical skill impugn justification? To posit any intimate link between justification and dialectical performance is rampant hyperintellectualism.

The Fred-Doris dialogue illustrates Klein's hyperintellectualist tendencies. Fred asserts a proposition *b* and then asserts that his belief in *b* is epistemically basic. Klein holds that Fred does not thereby halt the dialectical regress. I agree. But how does Klein's imagined scenario bear upon the epistemic justification enjoyed by mature non-philosophers, let alone young children? Non-philosophers cannot even approximate the rarefied dialectical maneuvers that

Klein attributes to Fred. Certainly, a non-philosopher will not assert propositions that attribute epistemic basicness to beliefs. A non-philosopher will not get much farther than saying something like, “I see the green cube,” or at best “It *looks* as if I’m seeing a green cube, and my visual system has been reliable so far.” The Fred-Doris dialogue is irrelevant to ordinary perceptual justification.

Philosophers often motivate epistemological positions by adducing imaginary reason-giving dialogues. This methodology is unsound. It conflates intuitions about epistemic norms and intuitions about dialectical norms. Epistemology studies the epistemic status of mental states, not the propriety of linguistic performances. If our interests are epistemological, then we should ignore reason-giving dialogues, except insofar as we are studying epistemological issues specific to linguistic interaction. We should not study justification by examining “the game of giving and asking for reasons.” Epistemologists should not take as their paradigm a situation where one speaker tries to convince another speaker of a proposition.

Klein claims that his appeal to two speakers is inessential, since an individual thinker could just as easily replicate the Fred-Doris dialogue within his own *sotto voce* reasoning. Let us therefore consider how Klein analyzes *sotto voce* reasoning.

§4.4 The dynamic epistemic regress

Suppose Fred examines a proposition p to evaluate whether it merits belief. He identifies a proposition q that supports p , another proposition that supports q , and so on. Either the regress continues indefinitely, or else it circles back on itself, or else Fred reaches some proposition in whose support he can enlist no further proposition.

More concretely, consider the perceptual belief *That cube is green*, formed while visually inspecting a green cube. According to Klein, it would be *arbitrary* for Fred to halt the dynamic epistemic regress at this perceptual belief *b*: “[h]opefully the sometimes muted inner voice of epistemic responsibility would speak up and say to Fred: ‘Fred, this is mysterious. It looks arbitrary. Why do you think it is permissible to stop at *b*, when you kept tracing reasons back many, many steps?’” (2007, p. 14). Klein maintains that Fred can remove the taint of arbitrariness only by continuing the regress. If Fred cannot continue the regress, then he should withhold judgment from the perceptual belief. Were Fred to retain his belief in *b* absent any ability to continue the regress beyond *b*, his conduct would not be “epistemically responsible.”

Let us distinguish two questions raised by the dynamic epistemic regress. If Fred cannot continue the regress beyond a perceptual belief *b*, then we may ask:

Does Fred have justification for believing *b*?

Does “epistemic responsibility” require that Fred suspend belief in *b*?

I address these questions in §4.4.1 and §4.4.2, respectively.

§4.4.1 Justification for believing *b*

In my view, Fred’s inability to continue the dynamic epistemic regress beyond the perceptual belief *b* does not even suggest that Fred lacks justification for believing *b*. Fred’s belief derives immediate justification from his perceptual experience. If no defeating evidence arises, then the perceptual experience provides all things considered justification for Fred’s belief. The belief retains this justification whether or not Fred can continue the dynamic epistemic regress.¹¹

¹¹ Klein might reply that inability to articulate one’s justification for believing *b* counts as defeating evidence. However, this position strikes me as implausible. Even mature human adults have many justified beliefs whose

Contrary to what Klein suggests, Fred's perceptual belief is not arbitrary. It is non-arbitrarily related to Fred's perceptual experiences. Fred may lack the cognitive resources to explain to himself or to others what makes the perceptual belief non-arbitrary. So Fred may not be justified in believing that his perceptual belief is non-arbitrary. But this is consistent with the perceptual belief being non-arbitrary. As Alston (1989) emphasizes, we must sharply distinguish *first-order* and *higher-order* epistemological questions. First-order questions concern the epistemic status of ordinary non-epistemic beliefs (e.g. *That cube is green*). Higher-order questions concern the epistemic status of epistemological beliefs (e.g. *My belief that that cube is green is non-arbitrary* or *My belief that that cube is green is justified*). It is a level confusion to slide from higher-order justificatory questions to first-order justificatory questions. In particular, it is a level conclusion to infer that Fred's belief is arbitrary from Fred's inability to explain why it is non-arbitrary.

Bergmann (2004) presses a similar objection to Klein. In response, Klein concedes that “[p]erhaps... there is a good sense of ‘arbitrary’ in which believing *b* is not arbitrary” (2004, p. 170). Nevertheless, Klein insists, this concession “will not help in resolving any misgivings about *p*'s truth unless one thinks that Fred's entitlement to believe that *b* is connected to *b*'s truth” (p. 170). If Fred is attempting to defend *p* against a skeptical interlocutor Sally, then *b* is just as arbitrary a stopping point as any other: “even if one is a modest foundationalist... the point of the why-game is to give Sally a basis for believing *p*” (p. 171), and that goal is not achieved simply by adducing *b*. Klein (p. 171) contends that a similar point persists

if the dialogue is an inner, solipsistic one --- a meditation. Suppose I think I need

justification they cannot articulate. For example, one may completely forget how one learned a proposition (e.g. *The Battle of Waterloo occurred in 1815*). Having justification for a belief does not require an ability to articulate one's justification, just as acting morally does not require an ability to explain why one's conduct is moral. So there is no evident reason why inability to articulate one's justification for a belief should defeat one's justification for that belief. (Thanks to John Turri for suggesting that I discuss this issue.)

a reason for p and I give (myself) the reason q ...and finally arrive at a basic proposition, b . Even if I were entitled to believe that p , why should I think I have provided any warrant for p by my reasoning unless I thought that b 's possession of basic-warrant was truth-conducive?

An epistemically basic belief provides an arbitrary stopping point within the “why-game.” Thus, foundationalism “cannot provide a basis for Fred to solve the regress problem --- the problem of making beliefs doxastically justified” (Klein, 2007, p. 15).

Klein says that “the” regress problem is “the problem of making beliefs doxastically justified.” Non-philosophers sometimes face a problem along these lines. For instance, one can evaluate a mathematical proposition by trying to prove it. To some extent, all normal adults can generate justification for propositions by tracing justificatory relations to other propositions. But why should we assume that the capacity to trace these justificatory relations bears directly upon ordinary perceptual justification? An ordinary thinker does not need to *make* her perceptual beliefs justified. The beliefs *are* justified. She forms countless justified perceptual beliefs every hour, without even momentarily reflecting upon justificatory relations to other propositions. Having a justified perceptual belief does not require one to embark upon the dynamical epistemic regress.

Klein’s focus upon “making” beliefs justified exemplifies his hyperintellectualist orientation. He emphasizes two paradigms:

A speaker trying to convince a skeptical interlocutor.

An isolated thinker who evaluates her beliefs by assuming the roles of both speaker and skeptical interlocutor.

I think that neither situation is paradigmatic for epistemology. Of course, every normal human adult has some capacity to engage in rational dialectic, whether externalized or internalized. Some adults have very sophisticated cognitive and dialectical capacities. Those capacities deserve careful philosophical scrutiny. But they are not central to ordinary perceptual justification. Our most fundamental concern is the *fixed justificatory structure of an ordinary thinker's mental states at a given moment*. We are not studying the *dynamic process through which a sophisticated thinker evaluates a proposition's epistemic credentials*, let alone *sophisticated dialectical interaction between two speakers*. Klein's emphasis upon the "why-game," whether between two speakers or within *sotto voce* reasoning, illicitly imports dialectical considerations into epistemology.

§4.4.2 Epistemic responsibility

Klein says that *epistemically responsible* agents are those who "examine their beliefs in order to determine which, if any, are worthy of being kept" (2007, p. 6). He offers the following definition: "[a] belief that *h* is doxastically justified for *S* when and only when *S* is acting in an epistemically responsible manner in believing that *h*" (2007, p. 6). He claims that doxastic justification, in his sense, is necessary for knowledge_c. Furthermore, he claims that Fred is epistemically responsible in retaining an epistemically basic belief *b* only if Fred can continue the regress beyond *b*: "if Fred is to be epistemically responsible in holding his beliefs, he will have to provide a reason for thinking that *b* is true" (2007, p. 15).

Klein's definition of "epistemic responsibility" seems far too demanding. In *some* cases, an epistemically responsible agent will consider whether to retain a belief. For instance, an epistemically responsible agent raised in a bigoted society will question his racial stereotypes.

But why must an epistemically responsible agent systematically examine his *perceptual* beliefs? Suppose Fred perceives a green cube. Why does epistemic responsibility require Fred to consider, even for a moment, whether the belief *That cube is green* is “worthy of being kept”? Carefully examining the belief’s epistemic credentials seems less like a normative ideal than a waste of time.

According to Klein, the “‘starting point’ of reasoning... is doubt. A proposition becomes questionable and consequently, it lacks the desired rational credibility. Reasoning scratches the itch” (2005a, p. 137). This description has impeccable Pyrrhonian and Cartesian lineage. Nevertheless, it strikes me as mistaken. One can certainly doubt a proposition. Doubt can lead one to inspect a proposition’s epistemic credentials. However, when inspecting those credentials, one almost invariably assumes other propositions, including propositions based upon perception. Doubting one’s own perceptual beliefs is not the usual “starting point” of reasoning. Nor is there any obvious reason why reasoning *should* begin by doubting one’s perceptual beliefs. In many circumstances, the most rational strategy is to assume one’s current perceptual beliefs, using them as a springboard for further inquiry.

Let us set these points aside. Suppose Fred wants to achieve “epistemic responsibility” *in Klein’s sense*. In particular, suppose Fred is pondering whether some perceptual belief is “worthy of being kept.” How can Fred proceed? He can execute what Matthen (2012) calls *sensory exploration*. During sensory exploration, an agent evaluates her perceptual beliefs by manipulating the environment or her relation to the environment. To illustrate, suppose Fred is evaluating whether to retain the perceptual belief *That is a green cube*. The perceived object looks cubical, but looks can be deceiving. It might be a hologram. It might be a two-dimensional facade that appears three-dimensional. It might have an irregular shape that looks cubical from

Fred's current vantage point. To eliminate these possibilities, Fred can inspect the object from various angles. If the object is small enough, then he can explore its shape through haptic perception. Similarly, the object looks green, but it might be a white cube bathed in green light. Fred can eliminate the latter possibility by changing the lighting in the room or, if the cube is transportable, moving it to environments with different lighting. If the cube continues to look green under diverse lighting conditions, then the resulting perceptual experiences provide further justification for believing that the cube is green.

As Matthen emphasizes, there are certain possible sources of perceptual error that sensory exploration cannot eliminate. Fred cannot establish through sensory exploration that he is not trapped in the Matrix or that there is no evil demon. But sensory exploration can eliminate *many* possible sources of perceptual error. It can thereby strengthen Fred's justification for his perceptual beliefs.¹²

In many circumstances, appropriate sensory exploration confirms that a perceptual belief deserves continued credence. Epistemic context determines the extent and nature of the requisite sensory exploration. Admittedly, there are certain epistemic contexts in which sensory exploration does not suffice. Fred might know that he has ingested a pill that sometimes distorts color vision. He might have reason to believe that he is in the Matrix. In these unusual epistemic contexts, Fred should supplement sensory exploration with more sophisticated reasoning and hypothesis-testing. But suppose that no such unusual defeaters are present. Suppose that Fred has no reason to believe that he is enmeshed in anything resembling a Cartesian skeptical scenario. Suppose that Cartesian doubts do not even cross Fred's mind. Then it seems to me that appropriate sensory exploration suffices for evaluating whether Fred's perceptual belief is

¹² See (Matthen, 2010) for extensive discussion of these issues and how they relate to Cartesian skepticism.

“worthy of being kept.” In other words, appropriate sensory exploration suffices for “epistemic responsibility” *in Klein’s sense*.¹³

Sensory exploration does not typically involve reason-giving, either to oneself or to others. For example, inspecting a cube from different angles does not typically involve explicit reasoning about the cube’s shape. Sensory exploration is a fairly primitive strategy, routinely displayed by young children who cannot execute the sophisticated reasoning emphasized by Klein. Explicit reasoning modeled after rational dialectic is not the only epistemically responsible way to evaluate beliefs.

I therefore reject Klein’s claim that “epistemic responsibility” requires Fred to “provide a reason for thinking *b* is true.” This position is hyperintellectualized. It assimilates epistemic responsibility to reason-giving within rational dialectic. Fred can evaluate whether a proposition is “worthy of belief” without offering any arguments (to himself or others) for the proposition. Rather than ponder how to convince a skeptical interlocutor, Fred can pursue sensory exploration. By doing so, he eliminates various possible sources of perceptual error, thereby strengthening his justification for the relevant perceptual belief. In this manner, Fred can halt the dynamic epistemic regress. As already emphasized, sensory exploration cannot eliminate all possible sources of perceptual error. But why must Fred eliminate all possible sources of perceptual error in order to establish that a proposition is “worthy of belief”?

§5. The regress argument defused

¹³ Suppose Fred has no reason to believe that he is trapped in a skeptical scenario yet persists in worrying that he is trapped in such a scenario (e.g. he doubts that his color vision is functioning normally). In that case, Pryor (2004) argues, Fred has propositional justification for his perceptual belief, but the belief is not doxastically justified. One might likewise argue that, in this case, epistemic responsibility requires more than sensory exploration (e.g. it requires Fred to dispel his own doubts about his color vision). I remain neutral on these issues. In any ordinary epistemic context, thinkers have no reason to entertain Cartesian doubts, and they do not in fact entertain those doubts. I claim that, *in such a context*, appropriate sensory exploration suffices for evaluating whether one’s perceptual belief is “worthy of being kept.”

Here is my verdict for each of the four regress problems considered above:

- *The static epistemic regress* is the key regress for understanding the structure of justification. In many important cases, this regress halts with epistemically basic beliefs that receive immediate justification from perceptual experience.

- *The static dialectical regress* is the least important of the four regress problems. To the extent that there is a genuine regress here, it seems explanatorily parasitic upon the dynamic dialectical regress.

- *The dynamic dialectical regress* is the key regress for understanding the structure of rational dialectic. Epistemically basic beliefs do not halt this regress. Their failure to halt the regress shows nothing about the epistemic justification of perceptual beliefs.

- *The dynamic epistemic regress* is the trickiest case. Typically, there is no reason to embark upon this regress. Having justification for a perceptual belief does not require an ability to execute sophisticated *sotto voce* reasoning. If one *does* embark upon this regress, then one can often “responsibly” halt the regress through appropriate sensory exploration.

I conclude that the regress of justifications poses no serious threat to a foundationalist analysis of perceptual justification.

To make my case, I have critiqued three epistemological mistakes. The first mistake is to blur the distinction between *the state of being justified* and *the process of justifying*. The second mistake is to elide *epistemic* and *dialectical* considerations. The third mistake, which underlies the first two, is to *hyperintellectualize* justification. Various philosophers have highlighted these mistakes for several decades. Nevertheless, all three mistakes persist in the current literature. We should not let fascination with sophisticated cognitive and dialectical capacities detract attention from epistemology's core subject matter: the epistemic properties of unsophisticated non-philosophers.

Despite my criticisms, I agree with a crucial aspect of Klein's discussion. Dogmatists should go beyond stating that perceptual experience immediately justifies perceptual belief. They should also explain *which features* of perceptual experience enable it to provide immediate justification for perceptual belief. They should supplement their dogmatist epistemology with a convincing meta-epistemology. Quite plausibly, an adequate meta-epistemology will cite "truth-conducive" properties of perceptual experiences. Quite plausibly, then, dogmatists should undertake the task highlighted by Klein. They should demonstrate that appropriate perceptual experiences render perceptual beliefs more "likely" to be true. But they should not undertake this task for the reason articulated by Klein. They should not undertake it so as to strengthen their *justification* for perceptual beliefs. Rather, they should undertake it so as to achieve greater *philosophical understanding*. Burge (2003) and Peacocke (2004) have recently supplemented dogmatism with meta-epistemological theories that emphasize truth-conducive aspects of perceptual experience. Additional philosophical research in this vein might illuminate the links between justification and perception.¹⁴

¹⁴ Thanks to Anthony Brueckner and John Turri for comments that improved this paper. I am also indebted to Peter Klein for his enormously stimulating writings on infinitism.

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