

# Epistemic and Dialectical Regress

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**Abstract:** *Dialectical egalitarianism* holds that every asserted proposition requires defence when challenged by an interlocutor. This view apparently generates a vicious “regress of justifications,” since an interlocutor can challenge the premises through which a speaker defends her original assertion, and so on *ad infinitum*. To halt the regress, *dialectical foundationalists* such as Adler, Brandom, Leite, and Williams propose that some propositions require no defence in light of mere requests for justification. I argue that the putative regress is not worrisome and that egalitarianism can handle it quite satisfactorily. I also defend a positive view that combines an anti-foundationalist conception of dialectical interaction with a foundationalist conception of epistemic justification.

## I. The regress argument(s)

My topic is the perennial “regress of justifications.” If a proposition depends for its justification upon a second proposition, and that second proposition depends for its justification upon a third proposition, and so on, then infinite regress seemingly ensues. As Alston [1989: 26-32] and Audi [1993: 118-120] note, the regress arises in two versions: *epistemological* and *dialectical*. The first, concerning the structure of justification, emerges when we ask what justifies a given *belief*. The second, concerning the structure of rational dialectic, emerges when a speaker justifies an *assertion* to an interlocutor who persistently challenges her justifications. Recent attention has

focused mainly on the epistemological regress. But a few commentators, such as Brandom [1994], Klein [1999, 2003], Leite [2005], and Williams [1999, 2004], deploy the dialectical regress to support sweeping doctrines about dialectical interaction and epistemic justification. I will argue that this explanatory strategy is misguided. Unlike the epistemological regress, the dialectical regress is harmless. It does not expose significant features of either dialectical interaction or epistemic justification. It is a red herring.

Philosophers who study dialectical interaction often hope to derive epistemological conclusions. Sometimes the conclusions are sceptical, as with the Pyrrhonians, sometimes anti-sceptical, as with Austin [1979], Brandom [1994], Leite [2005], Klein [1999, 2003], and Williams [1999, 2004]. I will sketch a view that combines foundationalism about epistemic justification with anti-foundationalism about dialectical interaction. On the proposed view, doctrines about the structure of rational dialectic neither entail nor follow from doctrines about the structure of justification. Thus, investigating dialectical interaction is not a good method for establishing substantive epistemological conclusions. Alston, Audi, and many others have stressed the same point for decades. But philosophers seldom note a converse point: misplaced emphasis upon justification and knowledge yields a distorted picture of dialectical interaction. Specifically, I will argue that misplaced concern with scepticism leads Brandom, Leite, and Williams to impose a needless foundationalist structure upon rational dialectic. If we treat epistemic status and dialectical interaction as too closely connected, we impede our study of both phenomena.

## **II. The epistemological regress**

I begin with the epistemological regress. Because it is so familiar, I will be brief. An *evidential chain* is a sequence of beliefs, each justified by the preceding belief in the sequence.

How might evidential chains be structured? The only options are:

- (E1) There is an evidential chain that is infinitely long.
- (E2) There is an evidential chain that circles back upon itself.
- (E3) There is an evidential chain that begins with an unjustified belief.
- (E4) There is an evidential chain that begins with a belief (a so-called *epistemically basic belief*) that is justified but that does not depend upon any other belief for its justification.
- (E5) There are no justified beliefs, and hence no evidential chains.

Aiken [2005] and Klein [1999, 2003] endorse (E1): *infinetism*. While I know no conclusive argument against infinitism, most epistemologists deem it implausible. (E2) boasts some advocates, especially among *coherentists*, but most epistemologists again reject it.<sup>1</sup> (E3) seems incredible, although Wittgenstein [1969: §253] is sometimes interpreted as endorsing it. (E5) strikes virtually everyone as unacceptable. That leaves (E4), *epistemic foundationalism*, as the most promising option. But how should we develop it into a convincing position?

Alston [1989], Audi [1993], Peacocke [2004], Pryor [2000], and others argue that perceptual experiences provide immediate, *prima facie*, defeasible justification for associated beliefs. For instance, my perceptual experience of seeing that a red cube is located before me justifies the belief that a red cube is located before me. The justification does not depend upon ancillary beliefs, such as the belief that my perceptual systems are functioning reliably. However, suitable ancillary beliefs might support or defeat it. Memories, such as my memory of seeing a red cube, can likewise justify beliefs, such as my belief that I saw a red cube. Again, the justification depends upon no ancillary beliefs, although suitable beliefs might support or defeat

it. Thus, non-doxastic mental states, such as memories and perceptual experiences, can provide justification without themselves requiring justification. A belief that acquires justification in this way is epistemically basic.

I will assume that Alston, Audi, Peacocke, and Pryor are correct. Suitable relations to suitable non-doxastic mental states can confer justification upon a belief, without mediation by other beliefs.

### III. The dialectical regress

To examine the dialectical regress, I begin with Brandom [1994]. Following Sellars [1963], Brandom treats assertion as a move within “the game of giving and asking for reasons”: the activity through which we rationally assess propositions by providing one another with arguments and counter-arguments. I will refer to this activity as *reasoned discourse*. A key idea behind Brandom’s account is that assertion involves a commitment to defend what I say in response to challenges and counter-arguments [1994: 173]. Brandom countenances several ways I might discharge this commitment: by providing reasons to believe the asserted proposition; by noting that another speaker asserted the proposition; by citing the reliability of my perceptual faculties. For our purposes, such details are irrelevant. What matters is that defending an asserted proposition requires asserting additional propositions.

My interlocutor can challenge those additional assertions, which I may defend with further assertions. Infinite regress looms. To halt the regress, Brandom proposes that some propositions do not require defence in light of mere requests for justification [1994: 177].

Say that a proposition is *dialectically basic* iff it requires no defence in light of mere

requests for justification. Call the view that such propositions exist *dialectical foundationalism*. A dialectically basic proposition requires defence, if at all, only when my interlocutor offers *special* supporting considerations, such as reasons to doubt the proposition or reasons to doubt that I am justified in believing it. Dialectically basic propositions halt the regress by shifting the burden of proof from speaker to interlocutor. They provide a foundation of stable, if not immutable, resting points within conversation. This response to the dialectical regress stretches back to Aristotle [cf. Barnes 1990: 120-123]. Besides Brandom, contemporary advocates include Adler [2002], Leite [2005], Norman [1997], and Williams [1999, 2004].

Which propositions are dialectically basic? Aristotle regarded a privileged class of “first principles” as furnishing an axiomatic foundation for science. Adler [2002, pp. 159-160] holds that *every* proposition is dialectically basic. Brandom, Leite, and Williams regard the line between basic and non-basic as shifting with conversational context. For instance, Leite claims that it varies with the speaker’s epistemic circumstances [2005: 405].

Say that a challenge to some assertion is *legitimate* iff correct participation in reasoned discourse requires the speaker to meet the challenge by defending her assertion. Following Williams [2004], say that a challenge to an assertion is *brute* iff it is a mere request for justification, accompanied by no supporting considerations. Dialectical foundationalists claim that a brute challenge to a dialectically basic proposition is not legitimate. In contrast, *dialectical egalitarians* claim that all challenges are legitimate, including brute challenges. On this view, all assertions require defence when faced with brute challenges. Reasoned discourse does not assign any propositions a default role in our reasoning with one another, even relative to context. There are no privileged resting points in the game of giving and asking for reasons.

Historical advocates of egalitarianism include the Pyrrhonian sceptics and Neurath [1983]. Contemporary advocates include Klein [1999, 2003] and van Eemeren and Grootendorst [2004: 135-140]. Traditionally, the main motivation for it has been abhorrence of *dogmatism*. When arguing with another speaker, it seems arbitrary and dogmatic to refuse to defend some disputed premise. If there is nothing to be said in favour of  $p$ , how can I advance  $p$  as a reason for believing other propositions? And if there *is* something to be said in favour of  $p$ , shouldn't I say it? This worry is a constant refrain among egalitarians, from Sextus's attack on the "mode of hypotheses" to Klein's complaint that dialectical foundationalism 'appears to advocate a process of reasoning that relies upon arbitrary propositions at the base' [2003: 81].

Because all arguments employ premises, any theory of reasoned discourse must specify *which* premises speakers may invoke without defence during a given conversation. Dialectical egalitarianism provides an extremely simple answer: one may invoke without defence whichever premises one's opponent concedes. Dialectical foundationalism is more complicated. By insulating certain premises from brute challenges, it introduces additional structure into reasoned discourse. The question is whether we need this additional structure. Do we require a set of default propositions to halt the putative regress of justifications? I will argue that we do not. Dialectical egalitarianism can analyze the putative dialectical regress just as satisfactorily as dialectical foundationalism.

One might object to egalitarianism in various additional ways. For instance, one might cite a putative intuition that it is deviant to advance a brute challenge against a speaker who asserts that she has hands. I have addressed such intuitions elsewhere, arguing that dialectical egalitarianism can accommodate them quite satisfactorily [Rescorla forthcoming b]. The

intuitions are irrelevant to my discussion here, which focuses solely upon whether the regress of justifications supports dialectical foundationalism.

#### IV. Examining the dialectical regress

Let us examine more closely how the regress arises. Say that a speaker *vindicates an assertion* during a conversation if, by the conversation's end, she successfully meets all legitimate challenges her interlocutor advances to that assertion, all legitimate challenges her interlocutor advances to propositions asserted while meeting legitimate challenges to the initial assertion, all legitimate challenges her interlocutor advances to propositions asserted while meeting legitimate challenges to those latter propositions, and so on. Suppose I encounter an interlocutor who issues a brute challenge to some proposition I assert, then issues a brute challenge to the propositions I assert while defending the original proposition, and so on *ad infinitum*. Following Leite, call this individual *a persistent interlocutor*. What is the result of my dialectical interaction with a persistent interlocutor? The only options are:

- (D1) I vindicate my assertion by providing an infinite chain of arguments.
- (D2) I vindicate my assertion by providing a circular argument, i.e. an argument that invokes a previously asserted disputed proposition as a premise.
- (D3) I vindicate my assertion by providing a chain of argument that includes an undefended, disputed premise. The premise is not dialectically basic.
- (D4) I vindicate my assertion by providing a chain of argument that includes an undefended, disputed premise. The premise is dialectically basic.
- (D5) I do not vindicate my assertion.

(D1) is impossible, since human life spans are finite. (D2) is dubious. How could a circular argument discharge my dialectical commitments? Doesn't it just beg the question? (D3) is a contradiction. If my argument rests upon an undefended proposition that my opponents disputes, and if the premise is not dialectically basic, then the premise requires further defence, so I have not vindicated my original assertion. Thus, we may set aside (D1), (D2), and (D3), leaving only (D4) and (D5). Dialectical foundationalists affirm (D4). Dialectical egalitarians affirm (D5).

For the regress to support dialectical foundationalism, we require an argument against (D5). From the egalitarian perspective, however, (D5) is innocuous. If I encounter a sufficiently recalcitrant interlocutor, then she and I will fail to converge upon mutually acceptable, relevant premises. Either I provide a circular argument, or I provide no argument for some disputed premise, or I retract my assertion. What is wrong with saying that, on those occasions when I encounter a persistent interlocutor, I fail to vindicate my position? Either speaker and interlocutor agree upon mutually acceptable relevant premises, in which case the regress halts, or speaker and interlocutor do *not* agree upon mutually acceptable premises, in which case the speaker leaves certain dialectical commitments undischarged.

As the foregoing analysis suggests, dialectical egalitarianism entails

***The Vulnerability Thesis:*** When defending an assertion against a persistent interlocutor, one will fail to vindicate that assertion.

The Vulnerability Thesis is a dialectical analogue to (E5), the sceptical doctrine that no beliefs are justified. The difference is that, while (E5) is intolerable, the Vulnerability Thesis is plausible. It reflects the unfortunate fact that there is simply no reasoning with some people.

There are two main ways one might attack our egalitarian analysis of the dialectical regress: by arguing that the Vulnerability Thesis entails undesirable epistemological



consequences, and by arguing that, independently of epistemological considerations, it yields an untenable conception of reasoned discourse. In sections V and VI, I consider how egalitarianism relates to various epistemological doctrines. In section VII, I examine whether egalitarianism yields a viable conception of dialectical interaction.

## V. Scepticism and egalitarianism

It may seem that the Vulnerability Thesis engenders *global scepticism*, whereby one withholds judgment regarding virtually all propositions. The Pyrrhonians are often interpreted as arguing along these lines [Barnes 1990]. On this interpretation, the Pyrrhonians deployed the dialectical regress to induce global suspension of judgment. Crudely: they inferred global scepticism from dialectical egalitarianism. This crude description is a bit misleading, since global scepticism presumably involves withholding judgment from all philosophical doctrines, including dialectical egalitarianism and even the thesis that one should withhold judgment from all propositions. Nevertheless, many expositions of Pyrrhonism, including [Barnes, 1990], implicitly presuppose egalitarianism.<sup>2</sup> Dialectical foundationalists usually accept the inference from egalitarianism to scepticism, but they deploy it against egalitarianism. For instance, after outlining a Pyrrhonian argument for scepticism, Williams notes that we can defuse the sceptical argument by adopting a foundationalist conception of reasoned discourse [2004: 133].

The inference from egalitarianism to scepticism, whether deployed to support scepticism or rebut egalitarianism, presupposes something like:

***The Vindication Thesis:*** One is justified in believing  $p$  only if one can, at least in principle, vindicate  $p$ . (The qualification “at least in principle” is meant to handle

“performance” errors stemming from exhaustion, inebriation, etc.)

Dialectical foundationalists usually embrace the Vindication Thesis, either explicitly, as with Leite [2004] and Norman [1997], or implicitly, as with Brandom [1994] and Williams [2004]. Consider Williams’s diagnosis of how egalitarianism engenders scepticism: egalitarianism ‘allows the sceptic to enter brute challenges: challenges that are apparently presuppositionless... Since... presuppositionless challenges can be entered anywhere and everywhere... the impossibility of meeting them shows something about the epistemic standards of all our beliefs’ [2004: 134]. The impossibility of answering iterated brute challenges shows nothing about epistemic justification unless we assume the Vindication Thesis. Granting that iterated brute challenges are legitimate engenders scepticism only if we assume that justificatory status is tied to the ability to meet legitimate challenges.

Although Williams opposes Pyrrhonian scepticism, he shares with the Pyrrhonians a picture of how justification relates to reasoned discourse, encapsulated by the Vindication Thesis. Given this picture, the central question becomes which challenges are legitimate and hence what it takes to vindicate a proposition. An egalitarian answer leads to scepticism, while a foundationalist answer does not.

The Vindication Thesis is heir to a venerable philosophical tradition that elucidates justification by studying justificatory transactions between speakers. Proponents of this tradition include Austin [1979], Sellars [1963], Toulmin [1958], and Wittgenstein [1969]. Not coincidentally, all four philosophers espouse doctrines resembling dialectical foundationalism. In its most typical modern form, derived from Sellars, this tradition regards justification as explanatorily derivative from norms governing reasoned discourse. Williams, crediting Brandom, puts the point as follows: we should ‘think of “being justified” in one’s beliefs as

enjoying a certain normative status within “the game of giving and asking for reasons” [2004: 127]. Such a perspective renders the Vindication Thesis quite natural.

Yet many contemporary epistemologists reject the Vindication Thesis. For instance, Alston [1989: 70] and Audi [1993: 145] argue that justification is a positive epistemic status possession of which does not presuppose the ability to defend one’s beliefs. On this approach, we must sharply distinguish the state of holding a justified belief from the activity of justifying propositions to one another.

Following Alston and Audi, non-sceptical egalitarians should reject the Vindication Thesis and kindred doctrines. They can thereby escape the inference from egalitarianism to scepticism. When faced with a persistent interlocutor, I fail to vindicate my assertions. It does not follow that the corresponding beliefs are unjustified or that I should suspend them. From my inability to defend some proposition with reasons my opponent accepts, it does not follow that I lack any reason to believe the proposition.

A common objection to the Vindication Thesis is that ordinary speakers are seemingly justified in believing numerous propositions that they cannot defend against challenges [Alston 1989: 70; Howard-Snyder and Coffman 2006: 556]. For instance, if I learn a proposition through testimony (*Napoleon was defeated at the Battle of Waterloo*), I often cannot remember where exactly I learned it. So I cannot defend it. But I am seemingly justified in believing it. Beliefs based on perception (*There is a red cube in front of me*) or proprioception (*I am raising my arm*), along with background presuppositions of ordinary conversation (*The world has existed for more than five minutes*), offer further compelling examples.

Proponents of the Vindication Thesis can respond to such counter-examples by invoking dialectical foundationalism. Classify as dialectically basic any proposition that I am justified in

believing but that I cannot defend. Then the proposition is no longer an immediate counter-example to the Vindication Thesis, because a brute challenge to it does not require an answer. This manoeuvre does not completely defuse the objection, since it ignores the many cases where a speaker apparently cannot answer *any* challenge, no matter how well-motivated, to a proposition he justifiably believes. But the manoeuvre diminishes the objection's force. In this way, the Vindication Thesis and dialectical foundationalism "take in one another's washing." Dialectical foundationalism solves a problem, the inference from the Vulnerability Thesis to global scepticism, that arises only given the Vindication Thesis. And the Vindication Thesis becomes remotely plausible only if we accept dialectical foundationalism.

Another familiar objection to the Vindication Thesis is that young children, and possibly also non-linguistic animals, are justified in believing many propositions, even though they cannot mount sustained arguments.

In response to this objection, Leite concedes that there may be *some* sense in which young children and non-linguistic creatures have justified beliefs, but he insists that this sense is different than that in which normal adult humans have justified beliefs [2004: 243-245]. Although many philosophers would disagree, let us grant the point for the sake of argument. Once Leite concedes that there is *any* sense in which a creature can have a justified belief without being able to justify the belief, he can retain the Vindication Thesis only in a diluted form that applies to certain kinds of justification and not others. But then the Vindication Thesis no longer draws out devastating sceptical consequences from dialectical egalitarianism. At the worst, it entails that there is one kind of justification we never attain, leaving open that we attain the other kind already attained by young children and non-linguistic creatures. Thus, even if

Leite's approach is plausible on its own terms, it undercuts the argument against dialectical egalitarianism that we have been pursuing.

A final objection to the Vindication Thesis presupposes the version of epistemic foundationalism from section II. On the proposed foundationalist view, non-doxastic mental states, such as perceptual experiences and memories, *prima facie* justify associated beliefs. If we accept this view, as increasingly many contemporary epistemologists do, then the Vindication Thesis should not strike us as remotely plausible. A belief is justified if it is caused in a suitable way by a suitable non-doxastic mental state. This positive epistemic status does not constitutively involve an ability to defend what one says. It depends solely upon appropriate causal, cognitive, and epistemic relations between a belief and a non-doxastic mental state. Ability to participate a certain way in reasoned discourse seems irrelevant.

## **VI. Epistemic foundationalism and dialectical egalitarianism**

The previous section suggests a general moral. All too often, the debate between dialectical foundationalism and egalitarianism is conflated with some epistemological debate. But dialectical foundationalism and egalitarianism are rival views about the structure of reasoned discourse. They entail epistemological claims only when conjoined with additional doctrines relating reasoned discourse to epistemic status. One can reject most such doctrines, so one can coherently combine either dialectical foundationalism or egalitarianism with virtually any conception of epistemic justification.

Neurath combines egalitarianism with coherentism [1983]. Klein combines it with infinitism [1999, 2003]. Perhaps one cannot coherently *combine* egalitarianism with global

scepticism, since the latter presumably involves suspending judgment in all propositions. Nevertheless, the Pyrrhonians employed egalitarianism to *motivate* global scepticism.

As already indicated, I favour the epistemological thesis that certain non-doxastic mental states *prima facie* justify associated beliefs. I now want to sketch an account that combines this foundationalist epistemology with dialectical egalitarianism.

Suppose John has a perceptual experience that represents a red cube in front of him. The experience *prima facie* justifies the belief that a red cube is located in front of him. That belief is epistemically basic. But the corresponding assertion is not dialectically basic. Suppose John asserts ‘A red cube is located in front of me’ in the course of defending some other proposition (e.g. ‘There are red cubes in this building’). If an interlocutor challenges John’s assertion, then John must provide an argument for it, even if his interlocutor sees the cube. The interlocutor will not concede the premise, so it would be dogmatic to invoke it without further argument. John is justified in believing the premise, but that does not excuse him from defending it.

What about the assertion ‘I seem to see a red cube located in front of me’? Surely *it* requires no defence in light of a mere request for justification? Admittedly, dialectical egalitarianism looks less compelling when applied to propositions about one’s own mental states. Yet Klein [2003: 84] argues that even these propositions require defence when challenged, on pain of dogmatism. I have defended the same conclusion elsewhere [Rescorla forthcoming b]. What matters here is whether my proposed merger of epistemic foundationalism and dialectical egalitarianism convincingly handles the regress of justifications. Defending the proposed view against all other possible objections is a task much too large for a single paper.

Many philosophers seek a privileged class of *observation sentences*: sentences, about either one’s observable surroundings or one’s perceptual experiences, directly based upon

sensory input. The hunt for observation sentences preoccupied various logical positivists, especially Schlick [1979]. More recently, Brandom writes that observation sentences ‘can function as unjustified justifiers: claimings that are treated as having a defeasible default status as entitled... So observation provides regress-stoppers, and in this sense a foundation for empirical knowledge’ [1994: 222]. In contrast, I am proposing a view on which non-doxastic perceptual *experiences* can halt the epistemic regress, even though there are no privileged perceptual *reports* to halt the dialectical regress. On this view, empirical *knowledge* rests on a foundation provided by observation, but empirical *discourse* does not rest on a foundation of observation sentences.

The proposed marriage of dialectical egalitarianism and epistemic foundationalism may seem unstable. How can my belief in *p* depend upon no other beliefs for its justification if my assertion of *p* requires backing by additional assertions?

The answer is that cognition features non-doxastic mental states, such as perceptual experiences and memories, that justify beliefs without themselves requiring justification. These non-doxastic mental states halt the epistemic regress. Reasoned discourse features nothing that can play an analogous role. Speakers cannot somehow share the same perceptual experiences or memories. I have my perceptual experiences, and you have yours. My perceptual experience can justify my beliefs, but they cannot somehow justify my corresponding assertions. I can *describe* my perceptual experience, perhaps saying ‘I see a red cube’ or ‘I seem to see a red cube.’ But these are just further assertions, which may themselves be challenged.

In this connection, consider how Klein deploys the dialectical regress against epistemic foundationalism [2003: 82-83]. Klein imagines an epistemic foundationalist, Fred, who takes his belief that *p* to be epistemically basic. Fred asserts *p*, and a persistent interlocutor asks, ‘What makes you think *p* is true?’. According to Klein, Fred faces a dilemma. He may provide some

reason for thinking that  $p$  is true, in which case ‘the regress has not actually stopped... Fred has given up his foundationalism’ [2003: 83]. Or Fred may realize that he can offer his interlocutor no reason for thinking  $p$  is true, in which case he should suspend judgment in it. The first horn of the dilemma should lead Fred to abandon epistemic foundationalism, while the latter should lead him to abandon his belief in  $p$ . As Klein emphasizes, Fred cannot avoid the dilemma by claiming that his belief in  $p$  is epistemically basic. Fred’s interlocutor can reply, ‘So what? Either there’s a reason for believing  $p$ , or there isn’t. If there is, tell me. If not, your position is dogmatic.’

Klein draws several conclusions. First, epistemic foundationalism does not block the dialectical regress. Specifically, one cannot halt the regress merely by observing that some belief is epistemically basic. Second, epistemic foundationalism does not ‘provide a model of reasoning that can be rationally practiced’ [2003: 82]. Fred’s dilemma shows that, on pain of irrationality, the epistemic foundationalist must either abandon his foundationalism or else abandon his putative epistemically basic beliefs.

Klein’s first conclusion reflects a broadly egalitarian stance with which I am sympathetic. However, I reject Klein’s second conclusion, which he does not carefully distinguish from the first. I think that *neither* horn of Fred’s alleged dilemma should trouble epistemic foundationalists. The first horn attacks a straw man. Epistemically basic beliefs possess some justification that does not depend upon other beliefs. They may also possess *further* justification that derives from other beliefs. Thus, Fred can cite reasons for believing  $p$  without abandoning epistemic foundationalism [Alston 1989: 38]. The second horn of Klein’s dilemma moves without argument from claims about reasoned discourse to claims about what Fred should believe. From the fact that Fred cannot defend  $p$ , it does not follow that Fred should suspend judgment in  $p$ . That conclusion follows only if we accept one or another dubious thesis linking



epistemic status to one's standing within reasoned discourse. For similar criticisms of Klein, see [Howard-Snyder 2005; Howard-Snyder and Coffman 2006].

Largely on the basis of Fred's Pyrrhonian dilemma, Klein rejects epistemic foundationalism in favour a view that combines infinitism with dialectical egalitarianism: '[t]here is always another reason, one that has not already been employed, that can legitimately be required for each reason that is given for a belief. Only if there is an infinite set of non-repeating reasons available for a belief is it fully justifiable' [2003: 86]. Klein does not distinguish the infinitist component of his view (a justified belief rests upon an infinite evidential chain) from the much more anodyne egalitarian component (one can legitimately require that a speaker defend every asserted proposition). Once we distinguish the state of holding a justified belief from the activity of justifying claims to one another, the dialectical phenomena cited by Klein do not support infinitism over epistemic foundationalism.

What if Fred replicates the Pyrrhonian regress within his own thinking? He can demand of himself a reason for believing  $p$ , where he takes  $p$  to be epistemically basic. He can then recognize that he enters into some non-doxastic mental state, such as a perceptual experience, and that the state provides reason for believing  $p$ . Since the non-doxastic state does not stand in need of justification, the regress halts. Fred might ask himself the further questions: 'What is my reason for believing that I am in a non-doxastic state with certain properties?' and 'What is my reason for believing that the non-doxastic state provides any reason for believing  $p$ ?'. These are interesting questions. But Fred does not need to answer them to be justified in believing  $p$  or to be rational in retaining that belief. The non-doxastic state, not the higher-belief that he is in the state or the higher-order belief that the state provides reason for believing  $p$ , is Fred's reason for believing  $p$ . Even if Fred can think of no reason for holding either higher-order belief, it does not

follow that he should suspend his belief in  $p$ . That would follow only if we accepted one or another dubious thesis linking higher-order justification and first-order justification, such as ‘one is justified in believing  $p$  only if one is justified in believing that one is justified in believing  $p$ ’ [Alston 1989: 153-171].

Davidson famously claims that ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’ [2001: 141]. Following Alston, Audi, Peacocke, Pryor, and many others, I reject this doctrine. Perceptual experiences, among other non-doxastic mental states, can justify beliefs. However, one can reject the Davidsonian doctrine and simultaneously endorse an analogous doctrine regarding assertion: *only an assertion can serve as a reason for an assertion*. More precisely, although less pithily: only an assertion can serve as a premise in defending another assertion, and every assertion of a disputed proposition requires some defence.

One discharges a dialectical commitment by providing an argument. How does one provide an argument? *By asserting additional propositions*. Thus, as Brandom himself emphasizes [1994: 167], assertion occupies a dual role in reasoned discourse: through it, one both undertakes and discharges dialectical commitments. (See also [Rescorla forthcoming a].) This dual role generates a clear threat of regress. Brandom reacts by positing dialectically basic propositions, thereby qualifying the initial intuition that assertion involves a commitment to defend what one says. Dialectical egalitarians, untroubled by the regress, retain the intuition in its original form. Once we disentangle questions about reasoned discourse from questions about epistemic status, we can capture Brandom’s insights into assertion more faithfully than Brandom’s own theory does.

Cognition rests upon mental states, like memories and perceptual experiences, that justify while requiring no justification. Reasoned discourse involves a central speech act, assertion, that

both justifies and requires justification. A given thinker's *space of reasons* exhibits a pervasively foundational architecture, resting upon reason-giving items that do not themselves require further reasons. The *game of giving and asking for reasons* incorporates no comparable reason-giving items. While cognition is rationally constrained by non-doxastic mental states, conversation lacks any analogous boundary of non-assertoric speech acts. Dialectical foundationalists, seeking to mitigate this disanalogy between rational thought and rational dialectic, introduce a privileged class of foundational propositions that justify without requiring initial justification. But perhaps we should simply acknowledge that assertion occupies a different structural role within reasoned discourse than belief occupies within cognition.

## VII. A defective dialectical practice?

I turn now to non-epistemological arguments that the dialectical regress undermines egalitarianism. A practice that allows the regress to occur strikes some philosophers as 'degenerate' [Norman 1997: 485]. As Brandom puts it, 'nothing recognizable as a game of giving and asking for reasons results if justifications are not permitted to come to an end' [1994: 177]. I will pursue several worries in this vein.

**Objection:** If dialectical egalitarianism is correct, then it is impossible to vindicate any assertion within reasoned discourse.

**Reply:** Dialectical egalitarianism entails that one cannot vindicate any assertion against a persistent interlocutor. But most interlocutors are not persistent. In practice, speakers usually agree fairly easily upon many relevant propositions. Even when speakers disagree violently, they can usually fall back upon the vast range of background beliefs that we all share [Adler 2002:

135-185]. Vindicating a proposition requires responding to *actual* challenges, not to challenges someone might potentially offer. Thus, on the egalitarian model, it is both possible and routine to vindicate assertions.

**Objection:** ‘If a speaker both accepts a challenge (for free) and follows the rule that challenges require the production of specific reasons, the speaker will take a large range of his assertions to be asserted improperly, since he will lack those specific reasons’ [Adler 2002: 183]. So dialectical egalitarianism entails that most assertions are incorrect. Taken to its logical extreme, egalitarianism mandates ‘widespread withdrawal from assertion’ [Adler 2002: 181].

**Reply:** Egalitarianism entails nothing about the correctness or incorrectness of one’s initial assertion. It describes what one must do *after* the assertion is challenged. For instance, egalitarians can endorse Williamson’s [2000] proposal that the conditions for correct assertion are given by the *Knowledge Norm*: one should assert  $p$  only if one knows  $p$ . Assume that I can know some proposition  $p$  without being able to justify it to other speakers. Suppose I assert  $p$ . If another speaker challenges my assertion, then I fail to defend it. The proposed egalitarian view can say that my initial assertion was perfectly proper and correct, since it conformed to the Knowledge Norm, even though I subsequently failed to discharge the dialectical commitment I undertook by asserting  $p$ .

Dialectical egalitarianism entails that most (or all) of our assertions are incorrect only if we accept the following thesis: an assertion is correct just in case the speaker could, in principle, defend it in response to most (or all) legitimate challenges that might arise. There is no reason for egalitarians to accept this thesis. For further discussion, see [Rescorla forthcoming a].

**Objection:** According to egalitarians, assertion involves a commitment to the impossible feat of performing infinitely many tasks: justifying the asserted proposition, justifying the premises thereby employed, justifying the new premises, and so on.

**Reply:** By asserting a proposition, I commit myself to defending it with an argument *if challenged to do so*. The commitment is conditional. If I assert a proposition that my interlocutor does not challenge, my commitment to defend it is not activated. If it *is* activated, I can discharge it by providing an argument of some appropriate sort. In doing so, I undertake a new conditional commitment: to defend the premises asserted during my argument, if those premises are challenged. This process can continue indefinitely. At each stage, I undertake only a finitary conditional commitment. I never undertake a commitment whose content is that I perform some infinite range of tasks.

**Objection:** Egalitarianism entails that, by asserting a proposition, I *implicitly* commit myself to an indefinite series of justifications. If I encounter a persistent interlocutor, then at any stage I can avoid providing an argument only by shirking one of the commitments entrained by my initial commitment. Thus, the initial commitment has infinitary implications, even though they are not part of its explicit content.

**Reply:** There is nothing wrong with a practice that allows speakers to undertake commitments with infinitary implications. On the contrary, we know at least one perfectly respectable practice with this feature: *promising*. Take the genie who promises to perform any three actions commanded by his master. The master commands the magical genie to perform two desirable actions. As his final wish, the master demands that the genie promise to perform any additional three actions commanded by the master, a demand to which the genie must comply. This procedure can now iterate indefinitely. Thus, the genie's original promise contains the seeds

of an infinitary commitment, just as assertion, according to egalitarians, contains the seeds of an infinitary commitment. A practice that allows an implicitly infinitary commitment is not necessarily defective.

Admittedly, the genie is a special case. Most promises do not involve an implicitly infinitary commitment. In contrast, according to egalitarians, *every* assertion involves an implicitly infinitary commitment. However, this contrast is not worrisome. It reflects intrinsic differences between promissory and assertoric commitment. A promise involves a commitment to perform some action, not necessarily a further promise, under certain circumstances. An assertion involves a commitment to perform some action, *necessarily a further assertion*, under certain circumstances. Thus, the potential for infinitary commitment is essential to assertion in a way that it is not essential to promising. Each assertoric performance contains the seeds of an indefinite dialectical commitment, whereas only special promises contain the seeds of indefinite promissory commitment.

**Objection:** Dialectical egalitarianism leaves speakers at the mercy of a persistent interlocutor. As Norman puts it, egalitarianism ‘rig[s] the reason-giving game in the challenger’s favour’ [1997: 487]. Simply by the reiterating the question, ‘How do you know?’, interlocutors can enforce dialectical stalemate. Intuitively speaking, it should not be so easy to prevent a speaker from winning an argument.

**Reply:** The putative “intuition” has little force, since it amounts to an intuition that the Vulnerability Thesis is false. Dialectical egalitarians claim not to share this intuition. They acknowledge that their position entails the Vulnerability Thesis, and they accept that consequence with equanimity. The proposed objection does not so much *argue* against this position as announce that the objector disagrees with it. Rather than providing a non-circular

reason to doubt egalitarianism, the objection generates a Kuhnian stalemate of conflicting theory-laden intuitions.

To bolster this analysis, consider the following intuition: brute challenges to the assertion *I have hands* are somehow deviant. This intuition, which apparently supports dialectical foundationalism, strikes me as powerful and nearly unanimous. Any adequate egalitarian account must accommodate it, a task that I undertake in [Rescorla forthcoming b]. The intuition is a datum for philosophical theorizing, a kind of pragmatic analogue to the grammaticality intuitions that serve as data for generative linguistics. In contrast, a putative intuition that the Vulnerability Thesis is false amounts to little more than a judgment regarding whether some *philosophical* theory is plausible. An ordinary speaker would experience this intuition, if at all, only after exposure to suitable definitions, elucidations, arguments, and distinctions, that is, only after initiation into philosophical discourse. Such a speaker would experience the intuition not in her capacity as an ordinary speaker, but rather in her capacity as an amateur philosopher. Intuitions of this kind are certainly relevant to philosophical theorizing, but their force and interest rapidly diminish when they are not widely shared by rival philosophers.

The important issue here is not whether the Vulnerability Thesis strikes some philosophers as “counterintuitive,” but whether a dialectical practice to which the Vulnerability Thesis applies must exhibit some incontrovertible defect. We have yet to encounter any compelling argument that it must. I submit that, once we address the various worries enumerated earlier in this section and in previous sections, the spectre of a persistent interlocutor should not seem troubling. Even though such an interlocutor can easily bar speakers from vindicating assertions, that theoretical possibility has little practical import for quotidian linguistic interaction. Why should we condemn a dialectical practice as degenerate merely because it

countenances this possibility? Dialectical egalitarianism *does* leave us at the mercy of a persistent interlocutor, but that does not prevent ordinary speakers from exploiting reasoned discourse to resolve their disagreements in light of mutually accepted premises.

**Objection:** It is intuitively defective to offer iterated challenges without accompanying explanations or reasons for doubt [Williams 2004: 133]. Egalitarianism does not yield this intuitive verdict. It treats iterated brute challenges as perfectly acceptable.

**Reply:** There is something to this objection. But our intuitions are more nuanced than it allows. Although iterated brute challenges strike us as intuitively defective, we also recognize a sense in which they are perfectly appropriate. Leite captures the tension well: ‘the persistent interlocutor’s requests for reasons seem to be simultaneously licensed and misguided’ [2005: 398]. A good account should explain and preserve this apparent tension. It should isolate a sense in which the interlocutor’s questions are licensed, and another sense in which they are misguided. Dialectical foundationalists can accomplish the latter task, but it is doubtful that they can accomplish the former.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, as I will now argue, dialectical egalitarians can accomplish both tasks.

A basic purpose of reasoned discourse is to isolate mutually acceptable premises relevant to the truth of disputed propositions. Mutually acceptable premises provide a neutral evidentiary base for adjudicating disputes. A neutral evidentiary base may not decisively resolve a dispute, but it serves as common ground. By isolating it, speakers achieve what I will call *rapprochement*. Only by achieving *rapprochement* do they engage one another rationally. One might say that, if two speaker cannot agree on relevant premises, then they succeed only in talking *at* one another, rather than reasoning *with* one another. Thus, a speaker who recognizes no need to achieve *rapprochement* does not fully grasp the point of reasoned discourse. In this



sense, rapprochement is a *constitutive goal* of reasoned discourse. For further discussion of rapprochement, see [Rescorla 2007; van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 139].

We can now explain why the persistent interlocutor's conduct seems 'simultaneously licensed and misguided.' Iterated brute challenges are licensed, insofar as they violate no norm of reasoned discourse. But they are misguided, insofar as they flout a basic *point* of reasoned discourse: achieving rapprochement. The persistent interlocutor obeys the norms of reasoned discourse while subverting one of its goals.

**Objection:** How can one engage correctly in a practice while subverting one of its basic purposes or goals?

**Reply:** This is a widespread, harmless phenomena. Consider a tennis player who deliberately misses certain shots to let his opponent win. He plays the game in a deviant fashion, because he does not make a genuine effort to win. Yet his deviant conduct differs markedly from that of a player who *cheats*, perhaps by calling a ball out when it is in. He follows the *rules* of tennis while subverting the *point* of the game: winning [Raz 1990: 117-118].

As a closer analogy, consider the *filibuster*. A United States senator who gains the floor can hold it by talking continuously. Under Rule 22 of the Senate, no vote may occur until the senator cedes the floor or until 60 senators vote to end the filibuster. Theoretically, then, a persistent senator can prolong deliberations indefinitely, destroying a bill's chance to become law. Whether pursued nobly or ignobly, the filibuster is a technique for *manipulating* the Senate's rules. The rules promote free and open debate, culminating in a legislative verdict. A filibuster travesties this design, prolonging debate so as to forestall any legislative verdict. Such conduct is deviant, because it subverts the basic goal of any legislative body. As Senator Thomas Eagleton once complained, 'the Senate is now in a state of incipient anarchy. The filibuster...

has now become a routine frolic in almost all matters. Whereas our rules were devised to guarantee full and free debate, they now guarantee unbridled chaos' [*Congressional Record*, November 23, 1985, S33453].<sup>4</sup>

The persistent interlocutor manipulates reasoned discourse, much as filibustering manipulates the Senate's deliberative procedures. The norms of reasoned discourse promote free and open debate, hopefully culminating in rapprochement and possibly resolution of the dispute. The persistent interlocutor *stonewalls*, challenging everything his opponent says without asserting any propositions himself. He enforces dialectical stalemate, in which conversationalists converge upon no propositions relevant to their dispute. Such conduct is highly deviant, because it subverts a fundamental goal of dialectical interaction: rapprochement.

Dialectical foundationalism attempts to prohibit this deviant conversational behaviour. By classifying certain propositions as dialectically basic, it builds safeguards against stonewalling directly into reasoned discourse. The idea is that, because the persistent interlocutor presses his challenges too far, he no longer places the original speaker on the defensive. In contrast, I think that stonewalling places the original speaker on the defensive. That is why we find it so outrageous. The persistent interlocutor is maddening, not because he fails to raise legitimate challenges, but because he *succeeds* in raising legitimate challenges. He remorselessly forces the original speaker to discharge dialectical commitments, yet he offers no help in doing so, and he undertakes no analogous commitments of his own. Rather than erecting safeguards against stonewalling, we should admit that reasoned discourse, like almost any other practice, can be *abused*. Structural features of reasoned discourse do not ensure a well-conducted conversation, any more than the rules of the Senate ensure a well-conducted legislative deliberation.

**Objection:** A lingering sense may remain that dialectical interaction requires a foundation. How can we reason with one another if our reasoning does not include a neutral evidentiary base of propositions upon which we agree?

**Reply:** Fruitful reasoning requires that conversationalists identify mutually acceptable premises. Thus, participants in reasoned discourse must jointly strive for rapprochement. Since we share so many background beliefs, achieving rapprochement is usually quite easy. Occasionally, it is difficult or even impossible. Either way, reasoned discourse does not itself provide a neutral evidentiary base of propositions. Locating those propositions is up to the speakers. Rational dialectic, unlike rational cognition, involves a *clash* between opposing viewpoints. Nothing intrinsic to linguistic interaction ensures that the opposing viewpoints will isolate argumentative common ground [van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 134].

### **VIII. Reason and reasoned discourse**

Philosophers who study how we reason with one another often hope to illuminate reason itself. They seek to elucidate rational cognition by analyzing rational conversation. Brandom and Sellars illustrate this approach most clearly, urging that rational thought is constitutively tied to the game of giving and asking for reasons.

I think that any adequate account of how reason relates to reasoned discourse must cultivate a healthy appreciation of their differences. To highlight those differences, I have sketched a hybrid view that combines epistemic foundationalism with dialectical egalitarianism. On the proposed view, rational cognition exhibits a pervasively foundational structure, while rational conversation does not. Reasoned discourse is not just rational cogitation transplanted

into the public sphere, and rational cogitation is not just reasoned discourse internalized. They are two distinct modes of rational activity, with two very different architectures.<sup>5</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a sophisticated development of coherentism, see [BonJour 1985]. Rather than embrace (E2), BonJour rejects the choice between (E1)-(E5) as resting upon a spuriously “linear” and “non-holistic” conception of justification.

<sup>2</sup> According to “urbane” interpretations, Pyrrhonians intend their scepticism to apply only to philosophical propositions, not to ordinary non-philosophical propositions. Frede [1987] advocates the urbane approach, and Barnes [1990] opposes it. Fogelin [1994] offers a modern development of urbane Pyrrhonism.

<sup>3</sup> Williams [2004: 135-137] offers an error theory to *explain away* why we experience the intuition that iterated brute challenges are licensed.

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<sup>4</sup> For extensive discussion of the history and politics of the filibuster, see [Binder and Smith: 1997]. This discussion conclusively demonstrates that the rules of the Senate were *not* designed, as proponents of the filibuster sometimes allege, to safeguard minority rights by allowing the minority to filibuster.

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