Finite Reasons without Foundations

Ted Poston[*]

January 20, 2014

Abstract

In this paper I develop a theory of reasons that has strong similarities to Peter Klein's infinitism. The view I develop, Framework Reasons, upholds Klein's principles of avoiding arbitrariness (PAA) and avoiding circularity (PAC) without requiring an infinite regress of reasons. A view of reasons that holds that the 'reason for' relation is constrained by PAA and PAC can avoid an infinite regress if the 'reason for' relation is contextual. Moreover, such a view of reasons can maintain that skepticism is false by the maintaining that there is more to epistemic justification than what can be expressed in any reasoning session. One crucial argument for Framework Reasons is that justification depends on a background of plausibility considerations. In the final section, I apply this view of reasons to Michael Bergmann's argument any non-skeptical epistemology must embrace epistemic circularity.

1 Circularity & Arbitrariness

Peter Klein has rehabilitated the regress problem for foundationalism and has championed a novel infinitist solution.[1] The two key principles for the regress argument are the principles of avoiding circularity and avoiding arbitrariness. Both principles are supported by natural judgements. The principle of avoiding circularity is,

---

[1]See (Klein 2000, 2004, 2005, 2007b,a)

(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.[2]

This principle expresses the natural judgment that a proper defense of a claim must not rely on the claim at issue.

The principle of avoiding arbitrariness is

(PAA): For all propositions, x, if x is warranted for a person, S, at t, then there is some reason, r1, available to S for x at t; and there is some reason, r2, available to S for r1 at t, etc., and there is no last reason in the series.[3]

This principle holds that the relation "x is a reason available to S for y" requires a path that extends beyond the initial proposition that provides the reason. The propositions that stand in the 'reason for' relation are the *supported* and the *supporter*. PAA holds that all supporters must themselves by supported.

The combination of (PAC) and (PAA) are thought to generate an infinite regress. This does not follow if the 'reason for' relation is a contextual relation that is restricted to reasoning sessions. A reasoning session is a context in which one considers reasons for a particular claim. (PAC) and (PAA) do imply that reasoning-sessions aim for an ideal that can never be reached. The abstract structure that (PAA) and (PAC) characterize requires that reasons for a particular proposition form a connected graph without proper end nodes.[4] In a reasoning session the branches of the graph grow. (PAA) requires that the branches of the graph extend and (PAC) rules out the possibility of earlier nodes in the graph also occurring as later nodes.

Some reasoning sessions are better than others in that some have more branches than others. There may be in principle reasons why any reasoning session aims for an ideal that can never be met. As I argue there is another dimension to epistemic justification beyond what can be expressed in a reasoning session. This dimension is captured by our plausibility considerations. Some of these considerations can be given as reasons but it may be that we can never fully offer all plausibility considerations in any reasoning session. What follows is a view of reasons that is compatible with (PAC), (PAA), and a contextual understanding of the 'reason for' relation. Moreover, it is a view of reasons that captures the epistemic role of plausibility considerations.

---

[2](Klein 2005, 136)

[3](Klein 2005, 136)

[4]It is compatible with (PAA) and (PAC) that each claim requiring a reason has a different graph.

2 The argument against first philosophy

(PAC) and (PAA) foreclose the possibility of basic reasons. Does this imply skepticism or infinitism? There is an alternative that stresses all arguments rest on plausibility considerations. Plausibility considerations are background assumptions, often tacit, that support good reasoning. When a scientist reasons that a disease is caused by a virus rather than a defective gene, this reasoning is normally guided by a more global perspective comprised of three parts: a hardcore of commitments, a protective belt, and a positive heuristic. When a historian argues that her theory fits the available texts better than an alternative view she relies on the general standards of historical investigation: that some texts are credible, that historical truths can be known, that inference to the best explanation is reliable, and so on. When a testifier expresses confidence that the defendant is innocent he relies on general assumptions about the norms of assertion, the reliability of memory, personal identity across time, and so on. The propositions that comprise background assumptions are difficult to fully express. They are good candidates for the kinds of things that cannot be represented in a reasoning session.

How might one come to the view that there are plausibility considerations and that they cannot be fully captured by a reasoning session? One might come to this view by reflection on the failure of first philosophy, that is the attempt to fully articulate the justification we have for the falsity of radical skepticism. Begin with the notion of a basic reason. A *basic reason* is an assertive propositional content that need not receive support in order to justify other propositions. A basic reason p for a subject has two properties: (i) A subject has noninferential justification for p *direct ampliative inference.* This form of inductive inference is crucial for the project of fully articulating our justification for a non-skeptical view because we need information about the world that goes beyond what we have (putative) direct justification for. The inference requires that the premises of such an inference come from directly justified beliefs and that the premises *exhaust* all the information a subject has for the target claim.

There is a serious objection to the possibility of a justifying inference of this form. Consider the following example of a direct ampliative inference.

    (a) 100 black ravens have been observed.
    (b) No non-black ravens have been observed.
    Thus,
    (c) All ravens are black.

Suppose that a subject is directly justified in believing (a) and (b), and, further, that the subject has no more relevant information. In this special case is the inference

from (a) and (b) to (c) justifying? No. The subject needs justification for claims like 'the color of a raven is a natural kind property,' 'natural kind properties are stable in species,' 'if there were non-black ravens then they would have been observed,' and so on. But these claims are not ideal candidates for direct justification. The project of first philosophy is thus driven to incorporate anti-skepticism into its very core.[5]

There is a general argument in the neighborhood against the possibility of direct ampliative inference to the conclusion that all arguments require plausibility considerations.[6]

The 'No Escape' Argument

1. Any deductive argument can be transformed into an inconsistent set.

2. The fact that a certain set is inconsistent does not indicate how to resolve the inconsistency.

3. To resolve inconsistencies one needs plausibility considerations.

4. So, all arguments are explicit or implicit comparisons of plausibility.

Consider an argument in the form of a *modus ponens*. The premises have the form: $p, p \rightarrow q$. One is thus invited to accept q. An argument of this form can be transformed into an inconsistent set: $\{p, p \rightarrow q, \neg q\}$. The invitation is then extended to either reject one of the propositions in this inconsistent set. One might attempt to argue that one should not reject p because it is supported by another modus ponens style argument having as premises r and r implies p. But then we can transform this larger argument into the following inconsistent set: $\{r, r \rightarrow p, p \rightarrow q, \neg q\}$. An attempt to buttress any claim in that set by argument can be met with a similar transformation.

Does this 'no escape' argument pose a problem for infinitism? Suppose we have an infinite series of MP arguments for a target claim ψ. If we take its negation and the premises we end up with this infinite set: $\{ ..., \gamma \rightarrow \delta, ... , \phi \rightarrow \psi, \neg \psi \}$. Yet this set is consistent. Suppose, though, that we add ψ back into that set. We then have: $\{ ..., \gamma \rightarrow \delta, ... , \phi \rightarrow \psi, \psi, \neg \psi \}$. That set is inconsistent. How, according to the infinitist, should we resolve the inconsistency? Perhaps, the thought is that we accept ψ because it is the conclusion an infinite series of premises having the form

---

[5]This is the attraction to phenomenal conservatism since if there are seemings, pretty much anything can seem true to a person. Subjects can acquire direct justification for anything. Phenomenal conservatism, thus, constitutes a significant departure from a view like Bertrand Russell's.

[6]See (Lycan 1988) for a discussion of first philosophy

of modus ponens. But this isn't right. The infinite set of premises is not in the form of modus ponens because the antecedent of any conditional is never present. Moreover, the set of the infinite premises together with the denial of the conclusion is not inconsistent. So we are left with the question of why we ought to accept ψ rather than $\neg\psi$? If the thought is that it is more plausible to do so then there is a dimension of epistemic justification that is not captured by argument.

The argument that plausibility considerations are required for epistemic justification in the case of inductive arguments is straightforward. Consider a typical inductive argument.

1. I recollect having had oatmeal for breakfast two days ago.
   So,

2. I had oatmeal for breakfast two days ago.

Is it more plausible to accept 1 & 2 than 1 & $\neg$2 (or suspend judgement on 2)? Apart from plausibility considerations pertaining to the reliability of memory and the relevant base rates it is difficult to see that this has a positive answer. Some foundationalists reply that plausibility considerations are enabling conditions for justification but not justification conferring conditions.[7] For example, S's existence enables S to have a justified belief that there is a round, red object before him but S's existence is not part of the justification for S believing that there is a round, red object before him. This particular example does support *a* distinction between enablers and justifiers but its relevance to the above argument is not clear. The reliability of memory is a relevant justificatory factor for accepting 1 & 2 rather than 1 & $\neg$2 (or suspending judgement on 2). The reliability of memory is not simply an enabling factor.

Another attempt to escape the role of plausibility considerations is the Keynesian strategy.[8] According to this view there are necessarily true probability relations such that 1 makes 2 probable. The basic problem with this view is that it is dubious that there are such truths. Reflection on the failure of Hempel's instance confirmation shows that confirmation is a three-place relation holding between a supporter, a supported, and a body of background information.[9] Moreover, as Richard Fumerton acknowledges it is dubious that one is ever directly aware of such probability truths.[10] The Keynesian strategy is attractive but reflects prior plausibility judgements.

---

[7]See (Markie 2013)
[8]See (Fumerton 1995, Ch 7)
[9](Earman 1992, 67)
[10](Fumerton 1995, 218)

3 Framework Reasons

The 'No Escape' argument implies that there are no basic reasons by arguing that any epistemically justifying inference requires plausibility considerations. A good reason for another belief requires a framework of justified commitments which together support the inference. The property of being a reason is a property a proposition has only in relation to a background body of beliefs. Reasons occur only in perspective.

J.L. Mackie's analysis of the causal relation fits well with this analysis of the 'reason for' relation. Mackie analyzed the causal relation by way of INUS conditions.[11] X is a cause of y if and only if x is an Insufficient, Nonredundant condition of a larger Unnecessary but Sufficient condition for y. A cause requires a larger number of background conditions that by themselves aren't sufficient for the effect but by working together are sufficient. A spark, for instance, is a cause of a fire, even though by itself it is not sufficient for fire. Rather the spark in a certain environment of background conditions is one way to get fire.

J.L. Kvanvig picks up on Mackie's analysis to provide a coherentist account of how appearance states can be factors in a belief's justification.[12] Kvanvig argues that an appearance state is an INUS condition for a belief's justification. The state of it appearing that there is a glass before one is not sufficient itself for the justification of the belief that there is a glass before one, but together with a host of background beliefs it is a crucial piece of information that justifies the belief that there is a glass before one.

We can use these insights to formulate a general account of reasons.

> **Framework Reasons**: A proposition p is a good reason for a proposition q for a subject S at time t if and only if
>
> 1. S is justified in believing p at t,
> 2. p is an INUS condition for q's justification, i.e.,
>   (a) p is insufficient for q's justification,
>   (b) p is a nonredundant part of a larger set of propositions that are unnecessary but sufficient for q's justification, and
> 3. S is justified in believing at least one of those larger sets of propositions at t.

---

[11]see (Mackie 1974)

[12]For details, see (Kvanvig and Riggs 1992; Kvanvig 1995)

Framework Reasons is compatible with both (PAA) and (PAC). The principle of avoiding arbitrariness requires that the supporters are themselves supported. Framework Reasons is consistent with this in virtue of the back that the supporter must be a member of a larger set of propositions that themselves are sufficient for q's justification. Those propositions may themselves be individual reasons. Framework Reasons is compatible with the principle of avoiding circularity in virtue of denying that the 'reason for' relation is a two-place relation. What is problematic about circularity is the idea that a simple loop captures all there is to epistemic justification. Framework Reasons requires that there is a large body of information that undergirds reasons.

Framework Reasons is likewise compatible with the claim that the 'reason for' relation is contextual. A reasoning session aims to capture many of the supporters for the claim at issue. A very good reasoning session will uncover many of the propositions in the larger set of propositions that provide justification. As more and more information is expressed in the reasoning session the connected graph grows beyond our ability to represent it in its entirety. We thus lose the ability to fully capture our reasons. This captures one of Keith Lehrer's insights that "the complete justification of our ... beliefs depends on a myriad of other beliefs, about ourselves, about others, about experience, and about the entire universe"[13] Lehrer might be forgiven some embellishment since it plausible that the complete justification of our beliefs may only extend to our local galaxy cluster.

Are there reasons for thinking that we cannot fully express plausibility considerations apart from the limitations of time and mental energy?[14] One response is that there is not any 'in principle' reason. It is a fact about finite agents that the resources some have to drawn on extend beyond what can be expressed in a reasoning session. The attempt to express reasons fully is then a social project that no one individual can accomplish. This view makes sense of the health of the philosophical endeavor. Reasons are ought there and may, given enough time, find full expression. This is an optimistic form of the 'no escape' argument.

Another response holds that it may not be possible to fully express one's beliefs.[15] Conceptual role semantics makes sense of this possibility. What it is to have a belief with a specific content is to be disposed to make certain inferences. What occurs in a reasoning session is that one makes certain inferences and offers support for belief in various ways. As inquiry extends one continues to reason but at any stage there are always more inferences that one is disposed to make such that they partially constitute the meaning of the target belief. At some point in an elaborate reasoning

---

[13](Lehrer 1974, 199).

[14]Thanks to Holly Smith for vigorously pressing this question.

[15]Thanks to Michael Williams for suggesting this possibility.

session it ceases to be a reasoning session and begins to be a language learning game. At such a point the distinction between offering reasons and acquiring a form of life breaks down. As I understand it this view has similarities with Wittgenstein's remarks on the connection between evidence and meaning.[16]

4   Framework reasons and epistemic circularity

I close this paper by applying this general account of reasons to Michael Bergmann's argument that any epistemological view that denies that there are non-inferentially justified beliefs lands in radical skepticism. Moreover, Bergmann argues that the cost of avoiding radical skepticism is accepting epistemic circularity.[17] I argue that the Framework Reasons account avoids Bergmann's dilemma of either radical skepticism or epistemic circularity.

Bergmann's thesis (F), that there can be non-inferentially justified beliefs, is initially explicated as claiming that there are beliefs that are justified but "not in virtue of being inferred from or based on another belief."[18] This is a negative characterization of foundationalism. It is similar to William Alston's view that there are some beliefs that are immediately epistemized. These beliefs are "epistemized by something other than some relation this belief has to some other epistemized belief(s) of S."[19] Bergmann, though, later shifts to a positive characterization of non-inferential justification. This is a shift from his thesis (F) to his thesis (a). This latter thesis is "A subject S has belief sources, X_1-X_n, each of which directly produces noninferentially justified beliefs."[20] Bergmann does not say how one gets from (F) to (a) but his argument that denying (F) lands one in radical skepticism and consequently affirming (F) requires epistemic circularity depends on substituting (a) with (F).

He offers the following argument that denying F lands in radical skepticism.

1. A belief can be justified only if it is inferentially justified. [i.e. ¬F]

2. A belief can be inferentially justified only if the belief from which it is inferred is a justified belief.

3. Therefore, a belief is justified only if it is justified via logically circular reasoning or it is justified via an infinite chain of reasoning. [from 1 and 2]

---

[16]See (Wittgenstein 1969)
[17](Bergmann 2006, Ch 7)
[18](Bergmann 2006, 184)
[19](Alston 1983, 75)
[20](Bergmann 2006, 190)

4. No beliefs can be justified via logically circular reasoning.

5. None of our beliefs are justified via infinite chains of reasoning.

6. Therefore, none of our beliefs are justified. [from 3, 4, and 5][21]

As Bergmann intends this argument to go if we are to avoid the conclusion of radical skepticism we must accept that some of the causal sources of belief–e.g., perception and memory–directly produce justified beliefs. But on the account of reasons I've offered a general commitment to the reliability of causal sources of belief is part of the background and it is something that we can rightly require to be supported by reasons.

So where does Bergmann's argument go astray? There are two spots the argument misleads. First, the step from 1 and 2 to 3 is not valid because mutual support may justify belief without requiring either logically circular reasoning or an infinite chain of reasons. Second, a denial of (a) is not equated with a denial of (F). The view of reasons I have offered is compatible with the possibility of non-inferential justification without thereby affirming that causal sources of beliefs are sources of direct justification. On my preferred view we have some non-inferential justification by epistemic conservatism but we have reasons for belief only when those non-inferentially justified beliefs are parts of a virtuous explanatory system that is mutually supporting.[22] This view does not require endorsing epistemic circularity about the causal sources of belief. It therefore avoids Bergmann's dilemma between either radical skepticism or epistemic circularity.

References

Alston, W. (1983). What's wrong with immediate knowledge?, *Synthese* **55**(73-95).

Bergmann, M. (2006). *Justification without awareness*, Oxford University Press.

Earman, J. (1992). *Bayes or Bust?*, MIT Press.

Fumerton, R. (1995). *Metaepistemology and skepticism*, Rowman and Littlefield.

Klein, P. (2000). The failures of dogmatism and the new pyrrhonism, *Acta Analytica* **15**: 7–24.

---

[21](Bergmann 2006, 185)

[22]See (Poston forthcoming) for a development of this view.

Klein, P. (2004). What is wrong with foundationalism is that it cannot solve the epistemic regress problem, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **68**: 166–171.

Klein, P. (2005). Is infinitism the solution to the regress problem?, *in* Sosa and Steup (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, Blackwell, pp. 131–40.

Klein, P. (2007a). How to be an infinitist about doxastic justification, *Philosophical Studies* **134**: 25–29.

Klein, P. (2007b). Human knowledge and the infinite progress of reasons, *Philosophical Studies* **134**: 1–17.

Kvanvig, J. (1995). Coherentists' distractions, *Philosophical Topics* **23**: 257–275.

Kvanvig, J. and Riggs, W. (1992). Can a coherence theory appeal to appearance states?, *Philosophical Studies* **67**: 197–217.

Lehrer, K. (1974). *Knowledge*, Oxford University Press.

Lycan, W. (1988). *Judgment and Justification*, Cambridge University Press.

Mackie, J. (1974). *The cement of the universe: A study of causation*, Oxford University Press.

Markie, P. (2013). Searching for true dogmatism, *in* C. Tucker (ed.), *Seemings and Justification*, Oxford University Press, pp. 248–269.

Poston, T. (forthcoming). *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism*, Palgrave MacMillan.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*, Harper and Row.