CHAPTER 5

How a Pyrrhonian Skeptic Might Respond to Academic Skepticism

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How much do we know? My answer is that we do not know what the extent of our knowledge is. But since that answer is not *immediately* evident it will require us to employ our reasoning. Thus, the question really becomes this: can our reasoning ever give a definitive reply to the question about the extent of our knowledge? And that is just a specific instance of the general question: is our reasoning able to settle anything, where some claim is *settled by reasoning* just in case no further reasons are required to make the proposition completely justified? It is crucial to note that in the way in which I will be using "completely justified"; a proposition could be completely justified and false. Hence, I am not asking whether reasoning is infallible. In addition, a proposition could be completely justified and defeasible. Hence, I am not asking whether reasoning can produce indefeasible justifications. The question is whether reasoning – the process of producing reasons for our beliefs – is ever such that further, as yet unused, reasons cannot be legitimately required.

Although I will be arguing that reasoning cannot settle anything, there is a rather quick and dirty argument to that same conclusion that might seem obviously correct which I wish to reject at the outset. It is this: any argument for the claim that reasoning can settle matters will, of necessity, beg the question because one is employing the very capacity that is at issue in the argument.

Now, some might respond to that argument by saying that some circular reasoning is permissible – especially if it is logically impossible to avoid it.[1] But I believe all circular reasoning to a disputed conclusion that has no warrant aside from that provided by the argument is fallacious (more about this later). Thus, if "reasoning can settle matters" were undisputed and had some prima facie warrant not dependent upon an argument (or arguments), then perhaps the fact that it cohered with other propositions could raise its warrant. But I take it that neither of those conditions obtains. Since the pre-Socratics, the ability of reasoning to settle matters has been contested, and whatever warrant a favourable assessment of reasoning has derives from an argument (or arguments). Thus, if the argument(s) for the claim that reasoning can settle matters employed that very proposition as a premise, that argument (or those arguments) could provide no basis for thinking that our methods of arriving at beliefs can settle matters.[2]

But why should one think that all arguments to the conclusion that good reasoning is reliable must employ that proposition as a premise? Here is an argument that does not do that:

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1 Good reasoning satisfies conditions C.
2 Anything satisfying conditions C can settle matters.
3 Therefore, good reasoning can settle matters.

Is that argument circular? No. No premise employs the conclusion. And I can see no reason why a sub-argument for either premise (1) or for premise (2) must employ (3) in one of its premises and so on. I think that there might be such an argument with true premises that can provide us with some reasons for thinking that reasoning can settle matters (but those reasons would not *settle* whether reasoning settles matters).

So, what would lead anyone to think that such arguments must be circular? The answer, I believe, is that any prudent person who believes (3) will employ what he/she takes to be good reasoning in fashioning the argument for (3). But doing so does not commit the fallacy of circular *reasoning*. Indeed, doing so makes one's practices consistent with one's beliefs. As we will see, satisfying the belief/practice consistency requirement is a problem for the foundationalist but not for a type of skeptic – the Pyrrhonian type. My point here is that were I not to use what I took to be good reasoning in arguing for (3), I would legitimately be accused of not practising what I preach.

Nevertheless, I do believe (but am not prepared to say that I know) that our reasoning cannot settle anything, including the question about the extent of our knowledge. Pessimism, however, is not the proper response to that assessment of the power of reasoning. I value reasoning, as I think we all do. (The "we" in the previous sentence means "adult human beings".) What we value is having good enough reasons for our (actual) beliefs so that it is (i) more reasonable to hold them than to withhold them and (ii) more reasonable to hold them than to hold any contrary propositions. We might not value having such good reasons above all other things – like faith, or the pursuit of evil, or the satisfaction of our appetites. But even the religious, the wicked or the hedonist value reasoning instrumentally because they want their beliefs to be efficacious and they believe that reasoning will assist them in achieving that goal.

Wanting good enough reasons is one thing, but if we begin inquiry with the hope or expectation that reasoning can settle matters, pessimism or dogmatism will be the *likely* result. Pessimism, if we believe that our goal hasn't yet been satisfied; dogmatism, if we believe that our goal has been reached because we might then refuse to inquire further thinking that only misleading new information could be uncovered.[3] But if we set what I think is the only realistic goal, namely *provisionally justified belief*, that is belief in a proposition that, *as far as we have reasoned* satisfies (i) and (ii) above, we can – and at least sometimes will – recognize that further inquiry is always appropriate.

Thus, this chapter can be seen as a defence of a form of Pyrrhonism (named after Pyrrho, *c.*300 BC) which endorses neither the claim that we have knowledge nor the claim that we do not have knowledge. This must be carefully distinguished from the more common form of skepticism that many, if not most, contemporary philosophers find interesting primarily because it seems to them to be *both* highly implausible and perniciously difficult to reject once the argument for it is investigated. That form of skepticism has been called "Academic skepticism" because it was endorsed by members of the Late Academy founded by Plato, "Cartesian skepticism" because of the arguments investigated by Descartes and his critics in the mid-seventeenth century, and "switched world" skepticism by contemporary philosophers because it involves imaging oneself to be in some possible world that is both vastly different from the actual world and at the same time absolutely indistinguishable (at least by us) from the actual world. I will most often use "Academic skepticism" but in order to avoid wearisome repetition, I will occasionally refer to the same view with one of the other labels. Its central claim is that we do not (in fact, cannot) have knowledge or *any* type of justified belief – even provisionally justified belief. I will examine the standard argument for Academic skepticism from the Pyrrhonian perspective in order to illustrate my general claim that reasoning cannot settle matters.

Academic Skepticism

Here is a way of stating the standard argument for Academic skepticism:[4]

1 If a person, say S, is justified (to some positive degree, *d*) in believing that there is a table before her, then S is justified (to degree *d*) in believing that she is not in one of the skeptical scenarios in which there is no table but it appears just as though there were one.
2 S is never justified (to degree *d*) in believing that she is not in one of the skeptical scenarios in which there is no table but it appears just as though there were one.

Therefore, S is never justified (to degree *d*) in believing that there is a table before her.

This is deeply puzzling because it appears that the premises are true, that the argument is valid (that is, it is not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false) but, at the same time, the conclusion appears false. Further, it *seems* that there are only *three* possible responses: (1) deny at least one premise of the argument; (2) deny that the argument is valid; (3) accept the conclusion.[5] None of those options seems initially promising.

The belief that we have no knowledge seems preposterous and the argument certainly seems valid. Thus, the strategy of choice for rejecting Academic skepticism has been to deny at least one of the premises. But the prospects of finding a basis for rejecting a premise are dim because, on close inspection, the arguments for doing so seem to rest on assumptions that are both unmotivated and ones which the Academic skeptic should reject. There are many types of those arguments, but I will consider only one type in order merely to illustrate my point (as opposed to demonstrating it). I chose this argument against Academic skepticism because it has struck many as the most plausible and also because investigating it will prove to be very useful later.

To unbag the cat now: I do not think that there is a good response available within the three alternatives just mentioned but I will propose a *fourth* alternative response to Academic skepticism that employs the general considerations about the limits of reasoning which I will be exploring. But, for now, let us focus on what I think is the most plausible argument against Cartesian skepticism that can be given within the three options listed above.

It is an argument based upon some supposed counter-examples to the general principle underlying premise 1. That principle, called the closure principle, goes like this:

> *Closure principle*: if someone, say S, is justified (to any positive degree, *d*) in believing some proposition, say *p*, and if *p* strictly implies another proposition, say *q*, then S is justified in believing (to degree *d*) that *q*.

The issue is: does closure hold for justified belief? Closure certainly does hold for some properties, for example truth. If *p* is true and it strictly implies *q*, then *q* is true. It just as clearly does not hold for other properties. If *p* is a belief of mine, and *p* strictly implies *q*, it does not follow that *q* is a belief of mine. For I might fail to see the implication or I simply might be epistemically perverse or I might be "wired" incorrectly (from birth or as the result of an injury). I might, for example, believe all of the axioms of Euclidean plane geometry, but fail to believe (or perhaps even refuse to believe) that the exterior angle of a triangle is equivalent to the sum of the two opposite interior angles.

Since closure does not hold for belief, it probably doesn't hold for justified belief when that entails that S actually has the belief.[6] In addition, since a necessary truth is entailed by every proposition, if S were justified in believing any proposition, then S would be justified in believing every necessary truth. But these are matters of detail and the principle can be repaired to account for these minor problems. We could, for example, restrict the range of the propositions justifiably believed to contingent ones, and we could restrict the entailments to known ones, and we could stipulate that S could be justified in believing that *p* without actually believing that *p*. The real issue is this: does closure hold for what we are *entitled* to believe (even if we don't, in fact, believe it)?

It certainly seems that it does. For if I am entitled to believe *p* and *p* strictly implies *q*, then how could I fail to be entitled to believe *q*? If, for example, I am justified in believing that today is Wednesday, then I must be justified in believing that it is not Thursday. Nevertheless, the principle has been challenged. Consider this much discussed counter-example to the closure principle developed by Fred Dretske:

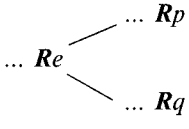
> something's being a zebra implies that it is not a mule ... cleverly disguised by the zoo authorities

> to look like a zebra. Do you know that these animals are not mules cleverly disguised? If you are tempted to say "Yes" to this question, think a moment about what reasons you have, what evidence you can produce in favor of this claim. The evidence you *had* for thinking them zebras has been effectively neutralized, since it does not count toward their *not* being mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras. (1970, pp. 1015–16)

Dretske is speaking of "knowledge" rather than beliefs to which one is entitled, but that seems irrelevant since the issue concerns the supposed lack of sufficient evidence or reasons for the claim that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule.[7] In other words, Dretske grants that there is an adequate source of justification for the claim that the animal is a zebra, but he claims that the adequate source of evidence that you have for identifying the animals as zebras is not an adequate source for determining that they are not cleverly disguised mules.

The crucial thing to note about this proposed counter-example is that it works only if the closure principle entails that the *very same* evidence that justifies S in believing that the animals are zebras *must* justify S in believing that they are not cleverly disguised mules because, it is presumed, that is the only evidence that we can be sure S has. To generalize, the purported counter-example depends upon the assumption that the closure of justified belief depends upon it being the case that the very same evidence, *e*, that justifies S in believing the entailing proposition, *p*, also justifies S in believing the entailed proposition *q*. Thus, letting "*x*Ry" mean that *x* is an adequate reason for *y*, the counter-example depends upon assuming that if closure holds between *p* and *q*, then the evidence "path" must look like this:

Pattern 1



Evidence paths specify what propositions serve as good enough reasons, *ceteris paribus*, for believing other propositions. So, in Pattern 1 type cases, if S has good enough reasons for believing the proposition *e*, then S is entitled to "take" the evidence path to proposition *p*, and S is entitled to take the path to proposition *q*. So if S can get to point *e* on the path, S can get to points *p* and *q*. This pattern illustrates the constraint on closure imposed by Dretske, namely that whenever *p* entails *q*, the adequate evidence, *e*, for *p* is the *very* same evidence that is adequate for *q*.

No doubt this constraint sometimes correctly portrays the relevant evidential relationships when some proposition, *p*, entails some other proposition, *q*. For example, suppose I have adequate evidence that Anne has two brothers, then it would seem that the very same evidence would be adequate for believing that Anne has at least one brother. But the Academic skeptic would (or at least should) point out that closure need not require that type of evidence path in all cases in which one proposition entails another.

There are two other possibilities for instantiating closure that can be depicted as follows:

Pattern 2 ... ***ReRp***... ***Rq***
Pattern 3 ... ***Re*** (where *e* includes *q*) ***Rp***

In Pattern 2 cases there is some adequate evidence, *e*, for *p*; and *p*, itself, is the adequate evidence for *q*, since *p* strictly implies *q*. For example, if I have adequate evidence for believing that 2 is a prime number, I can use that proposition as an adequate reason for believing that there is at least one even prime. In Pattern 3 cases the order of the evidence is reversed because *q* serves as part of the evidence for *p*. For example, I am justified in believing that water is present if I am justified in believing that there is present a clear, odourless, watery-tasting and watery-looking fluid at STP. This pattern is typical of abductive inferences.

Thus, showing that there is no Pattern 1 type evidence path available to S in the zebra-in-the-zoo case is not sufficient to show that closure fails. Indeed, I would suggest that the animals looking like zebras in a pen marked "zebras" are, *ceteris paribus*, adequate evidence to provisionally justify the claim that they are zebras; and once S is entitled to believe that the animals are zebras, S can reasonably deduce from that proposition that they are not cleverly disguised mules. That is, S can employ an evidence path like that depicted in Pattern 2.[8] Or alternatively, if S had *some* reason to think that the animals were cleverly disguised mules, then S would have to eliminate that possibility before she could justifiably believe that they are zebras. In other words, in that case S would

have to employ an evidence path like the one depicted in Pattern 3.

I think it is clear that this alleged refutation of Academic skepticism based upon the rejection of closure rests upon a premise that requires further reasons to support it, namely the premise that the appropriate evidential relationship between "the animals are zebras" and "the animals are not cleverly disguised mules" is that depicted in Pattern 1. There are other patterns of reasoning that instantiate closure and until some reason is given for thinking that the appropriate pattern in this case is Pattern 1, reasoning would have failed to settle whether closure should be rejected.

Thus, one of the purposes of exploring this argument against Academic skepticism has been fulfilled, namely to illustrate the general claim I will be defending shortly that our reasoning cannot settle matters. The other purpose was to gesture in the direction of a general claim that the prospects are dim for the success of any one of the three alternative responses to the argument for Academic skepticism mentioned above. I have certainly not demonstrated that there is no way to respond to the Academic skeptic within the three alternatives. But I have shown that one of the better known responses is not compelling.

So, here is what remains for me to do:

1 Argue that reasoning, in general, cannot settle matters, but that provisionally justified belief is still possible.
2 Apply that general conclusion to the arguments *for* academic skepticism in order to delineate the fourth alternative response mentioned earlier.

Pyrrhonian Skepticism

My belief that reasoning cannot settle matters can be traced to a famous passage in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in the chapter called "The Five Modes" in which he discusses the regress problem. Although the chapter title mentions five modes, two of them repeat those found elsewhere.[9] They are the modes of discrepancy and relativity and are important here because they provide the background for understanding the description of the three modes of reasoning. Specifically, it is presumed that the relevant object of inquiry is subject to actual or potential dispute and that reasoning is employed to resolve the dispute. The issue before us then is whether there is a mode of reasoning that can settle matters about which there is some dispute. Of those modes, Sextus writes:

> The Mode based upon regress *ad infinitum* is that whereby we assert that the thing adduced as a proof of the matter proposed needs a further proof, and this again another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that the consequence is suspension [of assent], as we possess no starting-point for our argument ... We have the Mode based upon hypothesis when the Dogmatists, being forced to recede *ad infinitum*, take as their starting-point something which they do not establish but claim to assume as granted simply and without demonstration. The Mode of circular reasoning is the form used when the proof itself which ought to establish the matter of inquiry requires confirmation derived from the matter; in this case, being unable to assume either in order to establish the other, we suspend judgement about both. (1993, I, pp. 166–9)

I will call the first account of the normative conditions required for complete justification "infinitism".[10] Today we commonly refer to the second account as "foundationalism". Finally, I will refer to the third possibility as "coherentism" – but some important distinctions between forms of coherentism will be discussed below.

The regress problem, then, can be stated briefly in this way: there is a trilemma facing all who attempt to use reasoning to settle matters. Either foundationalism, coherentism or infinitism is the appropriate method of responding to the regress of reasons. Foundationalism appears to advocate a process of reasoning that relies upon arbitrary propositions at the base. (What makes a proposition arbitrary will be discussed later.) Coherentism is nothing but a thinly disguised form of circular reasoning. Finally, infinitism advocates a process of justification that could never be completed.

Put another way: there are only three normative constraints that could apply to any instance of reasoning. For either the process of producing reasons properly stops at foundational beliefs or it doesn't. If it does, then foundationalism is correct. If it doesn't, then either reasoning is properly circular, or it is properly infinite and non-repeating.[11]

There are no other possibilities.[12] Thus, if none of these forms of reasoning can settle matters, no form can.

My view of the matter is that (1) the hinted-at arguments of the Pyrrhonians against *foundationalism* and *coherentism*, when properly fleshed out, *do* render plausible the claim that those forms of reasoning are inherently unacceptable models of good reasoning because they cannot provide the basis for *any* type of rational practice leading to the acceptance of beliefs. But (2) infinitism, when properly understood, appears acceptable and can lead to *provisional justification*.

So, I want now to take up foundationalism and coherentism and provide some reasons for thinking that they cannot provide a good model for reasoning, where *reasoning* is understood simply to be the process of producing reasons for our beliefs. Then, we will turn to infinitism. Finally, I want to apply the lessons learned in the general discussion of reasoning to the problem with which we started, namely the standard argument for Academic skepticism, in order to explain the fourth alternative response, mentioned above, to that form of skepticism.

Foundationalism

Foundationalism comes in many forms. But all forms hold that all propositions are either basic propositions or non-basic propositions and no proposition is both. *Basic propositions* have some autonomous bit of warrant that does not depend (at all) upon the warrant of any other proposition.[13] *Non-basic* propositions depend (directly or indirectly) upon basic propositions for all of their warrant.

I do not believe that this account of the structure of reasons can provide a model of reasoning that can be rationally practised. My discussion of this issue will be reminiscent of Laurence BonJour's (1978) rejection of foundationalism but unlike his argument, I am *not* claiming (here) that this account of the structure of reasons is false.[14] My claim is that a foundationalist cannot rationally practise his foundationalism because it inevitably leads to arbitrariness, that is asserting a proposition for no reason at all.

To see that foundationalism cannot provide a rational model of reasoning consider a discussion between two people: the Foundationalist, Fred, and the Pyrrhonian Skeptic, Sally. Fred begins by saying that he believes that p. He might say something quite strong like "I know that p" or "p is certainly true" or "I have conclusive reasons for p", or he might just say "p is true" or even just "p" with the appropriate gusto. The Pyrrhonian Skeptic, Sally, asks Fred-the-foundationalist why he believes that p is true. Fred gives his reason for believing that p, say q. Again, Sally asks Fred why he believes that q is true. Fred replies. This goes on a while. Finally, Fred (being a foundationalist) replies by citing what he takes to be a basic proposition, b.

Sally then asks Fred, "Why do you think b is true?" Fred, being a self-conscious foundationalist, replies that b is properly basic and has some warrant that does not depend upon any further reason for thinking b is true.[15] To use our terminology, Fred is claiming that b has some autonomous bit of warrant. Sally replies as follows, "But Fred, what I asked you was 'What makes you think b is true?' and you replied, in part, by claiming that b is a basic proposition. So you must think that because a proposition is basic there is some positive likelihood, however small, that it is true. Right? That is, you must think that propositions possessing the autonomous bit of warrant are more likely to be true than they would be were they not to possess that autonomous bit of warrant. Why do you think that possession of autonomous warrant is linked in any way with truth?"

We have come to the crucial point in the discussion. For Fred faces a dilemma. Either Fred will give a reason for thinking that the possession of autonomous warrant is at least somewhat truth-conducive or he won't.

Consider the first alternative. If Fred has a reason for thinking that propositions possessing the autonomous bit of warrant are, in virtue of that fact, likely to be true (even to some small extent), then the regress has not actually stopped, for Fred has a reason for thinking that b is true. Fred has given up his foundationalism in order to satisfy a perfectly reasonable question, namely "Do you think the possession of autonomous warrant is linked to truth?"

Now, consider the second alternative and suppose that Fred does not have a reason for thinking that b's possession of the autonomous bit of warrant makes it at all likely that b, or any other basic

proposition, is true. Then Fred ought (rationally) to give up assenting to all basic and non-basic propositions.[16] After all, Fred has no reason for thinking that the basic ones are (somewhat likely to be) true by virtue of whatever he thinks makes them basic and, being a foundationalist, he believes that without the warrant provided by the basic propositions, the non-basic ones are not warranted. He has been forced to admit that accepting basic propositions and everything that depends upon them is arbitrary – meaning by *arbitrary* that there are no better reasons for thinking that they are true than for thinking that they are false.[17]

Consider an example: suppose that it is argued, along contextualist lines, that some propositions just don't need to be justified – what makes a proposition *properly* basic is some fact about the context – perhaps that it is accepted by some specified group of people.[18]

First, I don't think that is a plausible characterization of the property that could possibly make a proposition basic.[19] I grant that on many occasions the foundationalist will not be challenged to provide a reason for the offered basic proposition – perhaps because everyone in the relevant context believes it and accepts it as a reason for further beliefs. But it is crucial to note that the unchallenged stopping points could include a wide variety of propositions. Suppose the issue at hand is whether there is an American football game on TV today. The response, "Today is New Year's Day" might stop the conversation. Similarly, "The newspaper said so" or "My mother told me" could all be conversation-stoppers. But are they basic in the sense required by the foundationalist? I doubt it. They do not have any autonomous warrant. For if I didn't believe that I was correctly reading the calendar, or that I am correctly remembering the newspaper story, or that I understood what my mother said, the conversation-stopping propositions would possess *no warrant at all.*

Second, and more to the point, even if contextualism correctly identified what makes a proposition basic, the crucial point here is that the contextualist response does not serve to stop the regress. For the foundationalistic contextualist will still be asked this: does the fact that a proposition is a conversation-stopper give anyone any reason for thinking that it is true? And Fred's dilemma returns.

Now consider a more traditional brand of foundationalism and suppose that Fred offers a first-person introspective report as the basic proposition, for example "I seem to remember that there is a football game on TV today". When asked why he thinks that it is true that he seems to remember that there is a game, Fred could say that he has no reasons for thinking it is true – he just does think it is true. Arbitrariness looms. What is much more likely is that Fred will come up with a story about how he acquires knowledge of his memories – a story told to get Sally to see why introspection delivers propositions that are (at least) likely to be true. It could be a relatively straightforward story about our privileged access to certain kinds of our states, for example certain kinds of mental states, as contrasted with our ability to gain knowledge of other of our states. Privileged access, it could be claimed, is just that sort of access such that the content of what is delivered is very likely to be true. Or the story that Fred could tell could be a relatively complex one – perhaps even one that Fred thinks contains a priori propositions – about the meaning of some "methodologically basic" words and the conditions for their application which guarantee that they are "true in the main".[20] The content of the story is not crucial here. What is crucial is that Fred is giving his reasons for thinking that propositions of a certain sort are likely to be true. Thus, in order to avoid arbitrariness, Fred has offered reasons for thinking that introspection reports or propositions about methodologically basic items are likely to be true. In other words, the regress continues.

It is crucial to recall that I am *not* claiming that foundationalism is false. Perhaps some propositions do have autonomous warrant which is truth-conducive and all other propositions depend for some of their warrant upon those basic propositions (although I doubt it). What I am claiming is that there is a deep irrationality in being a practising self-conscious foundationalist. If Fred remains true to his foundationalism, he will not provide a reason for thinking that the basic proposition, *b*, is true unless that reason ultimately depends upon other basic propositions. But basic propositions are supposed to have some warrant that does not depend upon another proposition being warranted. So, the question to Fred can be put this way: on the assumption that

you cannot appeal to any other proposition, do you still think *b* is true? Fred not only won't have any such reason for thinking *b* is true, given that constraint, he *cannot* have one (if he remains true to his foundationalism). Arbitrariness is inevitable. Of course, foundationalists typically realize this and, in order to avoid arbitrariness, tell some story that, if true, would provide a reason for thinking basic propositions are at least somewhat likely to be true. But then the regress of reasons has continued. Foundationalism, then, cannot provide a good model for reasoning since, when practised, it endorses arbitrariness.

Coherentism

Let us now turn to coherentism. This section can be much shorter because we can apply some of the lessons learned in the discussion of foundationalism.

At its base, coherentism holds that there are no propositions with autonomous warrant. But it is important to note that coherentism comes in two forms. What I choose to call the "warrant-transfer form" responds to the regress problem by suggesting that the propositions are arranged in a circle and that warrant is transferred within the circle – just as basketball players standing in a circle pass the ball from one player to another.[21] I could, for example, reason that it rained last night by calling forth my belief that there is water on the grass and I could reason that there is water (as opposed to some other liquid, say glycerin, that looks like water) on the grass by calling forth my belief that it rained last night.

At the beginning of the chapter, I claimed that all circular reasoning in which the contested conclusion was employed as a premise and for which no warrant existed beyond what was available to be transferred via the argument was fallacious. That is the model of reasoning embedded in the warrant-transfer form of coherentism. It seems to me that Aristotle explained why it is fallacious. As he put it: this is a "simple way of proving anything" (1994: bk I, ch. 3, 73a5). The propositions in the circle might be mutually probability enhancing, but the point is that we could just as well have circular reasoning to the conclusion that it did not rain last night because the liquid is not water and the liquid is not water because it did not rain last night. In this fashion anything could be justified – too simply! It is ultimately arbitrary which set of mutually probability enhancing propositions we believe because there is no basis for preferring one over the other.

The warrant-transfer coherentist could attempt to reply to this objection by claiming that there is some property in one of the two competing circles that is not present in the other and the presence of that property makes one and only one of the circles properly circular. For example, in one and only one of the circles are there propositions that we actually believe, or perhaps believe spontaneously (BonJour 1985). More generally, the coherentist could claim that all and only circles with some property, *P*, have some initial plausibility. But then it is clear that the warrant-transfer coherentist has adopted a form of foundationalism because she is now claiming that all and only the propositions in circles with *P* have the autonomous bit of warrant. And, all that we have said about the dilemma facing the foundationalist transfers immediately. Is the possession of *P* truth-conducive or not? If it is ... well, you can see how that would go.

So much for the warrant-transfer version of coherentism. The second form of coherentism, what we can call the "warrant-emergent form", does not imagine the circle as consisting of propositions that transfer their warrant from one proposition to another. Rather warrant for each proposition in the circle depends upon the fact that they are mutually probability enhancing. Coherence itself is the property by virtue of which each member of the set of propositions has warrant. Warrant emerges all at once, so to speak, from the web-like structure of the propositions. The coherentist can then argue that the fact that the propositions cohere provides each of them with some prima facie credibility.

This might initially seem to be a more plausible view since it avoids the circularity charge. But, aside from the fact that there are, again, just too many competing circles that are coherent, there is one, by now very familiar, problem with this alternative. It is crucial to note that the coherentist is now explicitly assigning some initial positive warrant to all of the individual propositions in a set of coherent propositions that does not depend upon the warrant of any other proposition in the set. In other words, he is assigning to them what

we have called the autonomous bit of warrant. Thus, this coherentist has, once again, endorsed a form of foundationalism and, once again, the dilemma facing the foundationalist returns.

Let me sum up where we are at this point. There seems no way for the foundationalist or the coherentist to avoid arbitrariness *and* at the same time stop the regress. It is now time to consider what happens if the regress is unavoidable.

Infinitism

Infinitism is the view that the answer to the regress problem is that the regress never properly ends. There 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.

There is an obvious objection to this form of reasoning as a method for settling what we should believe. Here's a close paraphrase of the objection as put by Jonathan Dancy:

> Suppose that all justification is inferential. We justify belief A by appeal to belief B, and belief B by appeal to C. The result is that A is justified only if B and C are. Justification by inference is conditional justification only; A's justification is conditional upon the justification of B and C. But if all justification is conditional in this sense, then nothing is actually non-conditionally justified. (1985, p. 55)[22]

My response is that Dancy is absolutely right: infinitism does not sanction non-conditional justification. But that is quite different from the objections we discovered to foundationalism and coherentism. There we found that those models of reasoning were unacceptable because they endorsed arbitrariness or circularity. We have just seen that infinitism is not able to provide an account of a type of reasoning that would *settle* matters because each belief in the set of offered reasons is only provisionally justified. But that does *not* lead to the conclusion that infinitism is unable to be practised rationally.

So the question becomes this: can the practising infinitist be provisionally justified in believing one proposition over its competitors and provisionally justified in believing it rather than withholding belief?

First, it is important to note that the infinitist can rationally practise what she thinks is the correct solution to the Pyrrhonian trilemma even though the process of justifying a proposition is never completed. When needed, the infinitist can always seek a further reason. Contrast this with, say, the foundationalist who must produce a reason for which no further reason *can* be given – even when sincerely requested.[23]

Second, infinitism provides a good model for provisionalism. Here's how it goes. The infinitist finds a reason, q, for her belief, p. She would not think that it is settled whether p is true because she knows that she will never complete the process of providing the infinite set of reasons for p (if there is such a set). However, if she does locate *a* reason for p and she doesn't have an equally good or better reason against it, it would be more reasonable to believe p than to deny p or withhold p *because she does have a reason for believing it.* Indeed, on many occasions perhaps we can't help but believe p – at least to some extent – if we have better reasons for it than against it. But we can assess the epistemic situation and, as infinitists, come to recognize that we ought not to think it is settled that p, even though it is more reasonable to believe p than to deny p or to withhold p.

A Clarification and Partial Defence of Infinitism

Nevertheless, it is one thing to claim that infinitism can provide an acceptable account of rational belief and another to claim that infinitism is true. This is not the place for a full-blown defence of infinitism.[24] But I would like to consider one reason that has been offered for rejecting it because doing so will help to clarify infinitism.

The worry is simply this: how could I have an infinite number of beliefs? I have a finite mind. Here is how John Williams puts this worry:

> The [proposed] regress of justification of S's belief that p would certainly require that he holds an infinite number of beliefs. This is psychologically, if not logically, impossible. If a man can

> believe an infinite number of things, then there seems to be no reason why he cannot know an infinite number of things. Both possibilities contradict the common intuition that the human mind is finite. Only God could entertain an infinite number of beliefs. But surely God is not the only justified believer. (1978, pp. 311–12)

I think this worry (or perhaps set of worries) can be resolved by clarifying what infinitism claims. It is crucial to remember that infinitism is not a form of dogmatism. It acknowledges that we do not ever have fully justified beliefs – perhaps that epistemic state is available only to a being that could *consciously* and *simultaneously* entertain an infinite number of beliefs. But the issue here is not whether we can be fully justified, it is whether we can have provisionally justified beliefs.

Nevertheless, there is a deep worry here that does not depend essentially upon how many or how few conscious states, that is non-overlapping temporal states, humans can occupy during a finite time period. The worry is this: there is no reason to believe that there is an infinite number of propositions available to us that could serve as reasons for our beliefs.

The response to that worry is twofold. *First*, like foundationalism and coherentism, infinitism comes in two varieties – an optimistic and pessimistic form. What both varieties of infinitism have in common is the belief that the normative conditions for full or complete justification include the existence of an infinite series of non-repeating reasons available to us for our beliefs. The optimistic form goes on to claim that in the required sense there are such reasons available. The pessimistic variety says that there are no such reasons available.[25]

Consider the parallel with foundationalism. A foundationalist holds that the normative conditions of complete justification require that all of our non-foundational beliefs rest on some basic beliefs with autonomous warrant. An optimistic foundationalist – a Cartesian, for example – could claim that there are such foundational beliefs. A pessimistic foundationalist – a Humean, for example – could claim that (at least for many of our important beliefs) there is no such set of basic beliefs.

Infinitism is like foundationalism and coherentism because all three are theories about the normative conditions required for full justification. And each could have an optimistic or pessimistic form. Thus, it would not be an objection to infinitism to claim that there is no such infinite set of available propositions. Pessimistic infinitism is an available option.

Perhaps, though, the worry here is that infinitism comes in only the pessimistic form. If that were true, it would not constitute an *epistemic* reason for rejecting infinitism. For that which we have reason to believe true is sometimes quite discouraging. If pessimistic infinitism were the only reasonable alternative, we might strongly wish it to be otherwise and so, perhaps, it would be better, in some sense, were infinitism false.

But, *second*, I think the worry that infinitism comes in only the pessimistic form misconstrues what, in general, is required for a belief to be available and what, in particular, infinitism requires for beliefs to be available. Generally, beliefs are dispositions to sincerely assert something under the appropriate conditions. We can have those dispositions even if we have never consciously entertained the proposition. For example, I think that we all believe that pears don't normally grow on apple trees, that 61 + 346 = 407, and that Chicago is east of every city in California, but most of us have never before considered those propositions. Thus, we might very well have an infinite number of beliefs even though we will never consciously entertain an infinite number of propositions.

Equally, if not more, important is the fact that we have the capacity to develop new reasons for our beliefs when we are called upon to do so. For example, at a certain point in human history we did not believe that diseases were caused by microscopic organisms. Nevertheless, we had the capacity to form that belief. Of course, we needed new experiences, insight and perhaps a certain amount of luck in order to form it. But the new belief was formed. Thus, beliefs might be *available* to us in the requisite sense even though we do not have them.

Infinitism requires only that there be an infinite set of distinct propositions each member of which we have the capacity to legitimately call forth as reasons for our beliefs.[26] It does not require that we have already formed the beliefs with those propositions as their contents. Optimistic infinitism says that there is such a set.

Pessimistic infinitism says that at some point we will run out of such available reasons. It predicts that we will hit a permanent brick wall of ultimate arbitrary beliefs or we will have to employ a reason that has already appeared in the path of reasons. History suggests to me – but of course it does not fully justify for me – that when we need new reasons for our beliefs we can find them.

No belief is ever fully justified for any person. The process of justifying a proposition is never completed. That is a consequence of infinitism. But that is not because there is no infinite set of propositions available that could serve as good reasons for our beliefs. Rather, no belief is fully justified because at no point in time will we have completed the process of justifying our beliefs. All justification is provisional. And as mentioned at the very beginning of this paper, that's a good thing to recognize since it provides a basis for avoiding pessimism and dogmatism.

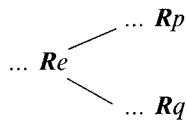
Academic Skepticism Reconsidered

Now, before concluding, I want to return to the puzzle with which we began, namely the argument for Academic skepticism, and test what we have learned about reasoning. Does the standard argument beg the question or depend upon an arbitrary assumption for which there are no better reasons for believing than there are for denying? Recall where we left off. We saw that the argument for Academic skepticism looked pretty good: the premises seemed true and the argument seemed valid. Nevertheless, the conclusion seemed false. We also saw that one argument against premise 1 ended with an arbitrary assumption, namely that the closure of justified beliefs depended upon the claim that all reasoning sanctioned by closure was like that depicted in Pattern 1. Thus, we discovered one important instance of the general Pyrrhonian claim that arguments that end, end either arbitrarily or commit the fallacy of begging the question.

But there is another lesson here related to our discovery of the various patterns of reasoning that instantiate closure. For a careful examination of them reveals the fourth alternative, mentioned earlier, for appraising the standard argument *for* Academic skepticism, namely that it, too, either begs the question or is based upon an arbitrary assumption. If that were true, the argument would give us no good reason for accepting that form of skepticism.

Recall the three patterns of reasoning exhibiting closure:

Pattern 1



Pattern 2 ... ***ReRp***... ***Rq***

Pattern 3 ... ***Re*** (where *e* includes *q*) ***Rp***

And recall the standard argument for Academic skepticism:

1 If a person, say S, is justified (to some positive degree, *d*) in believing that there is a table before her, then S is justified (to degree *d*) in believing that she is not in one of the skeptical scenarios in which there is no table but it appears just as though there were one.
2 S is never justified (to degree *d*) in believing that she is not in one of the skeptical scenarios in which there is no table but it appears just as though there were one.

Therefore, S is never justified (to degree *d*) in believing that there is a table before her.

Now, suppose that the Academic skeptic thinks that closure regarding justification holds between "there is a table before me" and "I am not in one of the skeptical scenarios in which there is no table but it appears just as though there were one" because the requisite evidential path exemplifies Pattern 1. That is, he holds that the *very same* evidence that is adequate for arriving at the proposition that there is a table is adequate for denying the skeptical hypothesis. Grant that premise 1 is true for that reason. But, now, when the Academic skeptic argues for premise 2 – as surely he must since it is not immediately evident – the subargument for premise 2 must be good enough to establish that there is no evidence adequate to justify the proposition that there is a table before him because the argument must be good enough to show that S cannot arrive at point *e* on the evidence path. For if S were able to do that, S would be able to arrive at the denial of the skeptical

hypothesis. Hence, the argument for premise 2 would be sufficient to show that the conclusion is true and the argument employing premises 1 and 2 begs the question since the argument for premise 2 alone establishes the conclusion. The standard argument does not work.

The situation vis à vis this version of the argument for Academic skepticism is similar to this one for God's existence:

1 The Bible says "God exists".
2 Whatever the Bible says is true.

Therefore, God exists.

As stated, this argument doesn't beg the question. Similarly, as stated, the standard argument for Cartesian skepticism does not beg the question. But if the argument for premise 2 in the argument for God's existence were that the Bible was written by God and whatever God writes is true, then the argument would beg the question because the sub-premises employed in the argument for premise 2 imply the conclusion. My claim is that if the Cartesian skeptic thinks premise 1 in his argument is true because the appropriate evidential relationships are depicted by Pattern 1, he will be forced to beg the question when he gives his argument for premise 2.

I think this point becomes clearer when we look at Pattern 2. If the Cartesian skeptic thinks that closure holds in this case because one must arrive on the inference path at the proposition that there is a table before one arrives at the denial of the skeptical hypothesis, then in arguing for the second premise the skeptic must show that we cannot arrive at the proposition that there is a table, because if we did, we could get to the denial of the skeptical hypothesis (since that is what this instantiation of closure maintains). But if the sub-argument for premise 2 shows that we can't arrive at the proposition that there is a table, then that sub-argument already establishes the conclusion.

Finally, suppose the skeptic thinks that closure holds because the evidential relationship is depicted by Pattern 3. Here the skeptic is claiming that we must first eliminate the skeptical hypothesis in order to arrive at the proposition that there is a table before us.[27] That evidential prerequisite is not immediately evident and, hence, requires some reasons. Would we have to eliminate *every* possible alternative before we arrive at the one that is acceptable? Return to the zebra-in-the-zoo case. Would we have to eliminate the hypothesis that the zebra-like looking things are cleverly disguised aliens or *very* cleverly disguised members of the long lost tribe of Israel before arriving at the proposition that they are zebras? I doubt it. So, why should we have to eliminate the skeptical hypothesis before arriving at the proposition that there is a table before us? Is the skeptical hypothesis prima facie plausible? No. Is there some evidence that it is true? No. In fact, the requirement that we eliminate every contrary hypothesis to p before we are entitled to believe p has the consequence that we must have entailing evidence for p – and surely that is too strong a requirement for being justified in believing a contingent, empirical claim such as "there are zebras in the pen".[28] So, this argument for Academic skepticism rests upon an arbitrary assumption that we must eliminate the skeptical hypothesis before we are justified in believing any contingent, empirical proposition.

Thus, on careful inspection, this finite argument – like all such arguments, if the Pyrrhonian is correct – either ends in an arbitrary assumption or begs the question. Thus, the fourth alternative for rejecting the argument for Academic skepticism involves conceding that even if all of the premises are true and even if it is valid, the argument, at least so far, gives us no good reason for accepting the conclusion.

Conclusion

We have come a long way and covered a lot of ground. To sum up, I have argued for the following two main points:

1 Reasoning cannot settle matters, but it can provide provisional justification. Further inquiry is always in order.
2 The standard argument for Academic skepticism with the conclusion that reasoning cannot produce any type of justified belief, including provisionally justified belief, has been shown to be an instance of the general constraints that Pyrrhonists believe apply to all finite arguments. They either rest on arbitrary assumptions or they beg the question.

One important caveat: I have argued that no belief is unconditionally justified. But even that conclusion has to be taken only provisionally – if I am right. My reasoning here has been finite in length. Maybe there aren't good reasons for some of the, as yet, unsupported suppositions in this chapter. And maybe I begged the question. Prudence requires that we view the two main points of the chapter as only provisionally justified.

Notes

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1 This is the view developed in Lehrer (1997) and (2000, esp. pp. 142–4).

2 I think that the difficult task in providing an account of what makes circular reasoning fallacious is to spell out clearly what is meant by the conclusion being "employed in" a premise.

3 The only way out of this predicament is to withhold belief about whether we have been successful in settling an issue by the employment of reasoning. But note that I am not claiming that if we believe that we know something, we will, in fact, ignore contrary evidence if (or when) it appears. At that point we could both lose our belief that we know and acknowledge the contrary evidence. Thus, there is no real "Kripke problem" – the alleged consequence of believing that we know, namely that we become permanently (and perhaps even rationally) convinced of the truth of what we believe we know. I have discussed this elsewhere; see Klein (1984).

4 I chose to put the argument in terms of degrees of justified belief rather than knowledge for two reasons: 1) the argument for Academic skepticism about knowledge usually depends upon assuming that knowledge is at least adequately justified true belief and it is the supposed lack of fulfilment of the justification condition that leads to the denial of knowledge, and 2) it is the power of reasoning to justify beliefs that is the primary concern of this chapter and, consequently, even if knowledge did not entail adequately justified beliefs, if there were a good argument showing that our beliefs were never justified to any positive degree, my claim that reasoning can make a belief provisionally justified would have been undercut.

5 Hume claimed that the only way to deal with skepticism was simply not to think about it. That might work for some, but not for me – and it didn't work for Hume either!

6 Strictly speaking, it could be that beliefs which are justified are closed under entailment because justified beliefs are a subset of beliefs and the subset could be closed while beliefs are not. But the same objections to the closure of beliefs, *simpliciter*, seems to apply to justified beliefs as well.

7 Robert Audi gives some other examples in which it appears that one can have sufficient evidence for the entailing proposition but not for the entailed one (1988, esp. pp. 77ff.). I discuss these examples in some detail in Klein (1995, pp. 213–36). Briefly, I think these counter-examples fail for the same reasons that Dretske's proposed counter-examples fail.

8 I have argued for that in Klein (1984), in Klein (1995) and in Klein (2000a).

9 The modes of relativity and discrepancy recapitulate passages in Sextus's chapter "Concerning the Ten Modes" in Sextus (1933). Sextus attributes this formulation of the modes to Aenesidemus.

10 The term "infinitism" is not original to me. To the best of my knowledge, the first use of a related term is in Moser (1984), in which he speaks of "epistemic infinitism". Also, Post (1987, p. 91) refers to a position similar to the one I am defending as the "infinitist's claim".

11 The reason for the "non-repeating" condition is that were the propositions to repeat, the result would be a form of coherentism – infinitely long circles.

12 Strictly speaking, there is a fourth possibility, namely that there are foundational propositions and that there are an infinite number of propositions between the foundational one and the one for which reasons are initially being sought. Interestingly, such a hybrid view might be indistinguishable in practice from infinitism and, hence, not subject to the "foundationalist's dilemma" to be discussed later. Thus, I think for our purposes we can treat this as a form of infinitism or an acceptable form of foundationalism because it is the ability of the three patterns of reasoning (foundationalism, coherentism and infinitism) to provide a basis for rational practice that is the criterion which will determine whether any of the patterns is acceptable. As far as I know this possibility has never been explored; it might be worthwhile to do so.

13 I put it that way in order to make clear that foundationalism can embrace some aspects of coherentism. Propositions with only minimal justification can mount up, so to speak, by gaining extra credibility. Thus, the definition of foundationalism includes both weak and strong foundationalism as characterized in BonJour (1978, pp. 1–13).

14 In other places I have argued that foundationalism is false; see Klein (1999).

15 That is, there is no reason that can be given that does not ultimately depend upon other basic propositions. There could be reasons for believing the basic ones for they could cohere with other propositions and coherence could add some degree of warrant. But Fred would see that Sally would then just ask about the set of basic propositions. In other words, she would ask, "What makes you think that every member of the set of basic propositions is true?"

16 There is one move Fred might make here. Steven Luper suggests that it is rational to accept foundational beliefs even though they cannot be supported by reasons. Here is a close paraphrase of his argument. The epistemic goal is to acquire a complete and accurate picture of the world. Granted, at base our reasons are arbitrary but "an injunction against believing anything... would obviously make it impossible for us to achieve the goal of arriving at a complete and accurate understanding of what is the case... Indeed, given that our ultimate beliefs are arbitrary, it is rational to adopt management principles that allow us to retain these foundational yet arbitrary views, since the alternative is to simply give up on the attempt to achieve the epistemic goal" (Luper-Foy 1990, p. 45). Briefly, the claim is that since the goal of an epistemic agent is to acquire a complete and accurate picture of the world, accepting a basic, though arbitrary, reason is rational since if one did not accept it, there would be no possibility of attaining the goal. It is "rational to do and believe things without reason" (p. 40) because if we did not, we could not attain our goal.

But I don't think Fred can employ this line of reasoning. For if Fred's basic beliefs are arbitrary, that is if there is no available reason for thinking that they are even somewhat likely to be true, then Fred, being a foundationalist, would have no reason for thinking that *any* of the *non-basic propositions* are true either. If, ultimately, it is rational to accept some "basic" proposition, *b*, for prudential considerations, then no epistemic warrant can be transferred to the non-basic ones from the basic ones. Thus, if the non-basic propositions have any epistemic warrant at all, it must arise completely from some source other than the basic beliefs. And that view isn't foundationalism. Coherence naturally suggests itself. But as we will see soon, that solution to the regress problem can't provide a model for rational practice.

17 I want to thank Steven Luper for his comments that forced me to be clearer about what counts as an arbitrarily adopted proposition. I take it that a proposition is arbitrarily accepted just in case there is no better reason for accepting it than denying it, but it is accepted anyway. Thus, in the argument considered earlier against closure (and hence against Academic skepticism) accepting the premise that closure entails Pattern 1 type evidential structures is arbitrary because there are better reasons for denying that than there are for accepting it (and hence there are no better reasons for accepting than denying it). Also, when the infinitist stops giving her reasons for beliefs (as she must), her last reason given need not be arbitrary because she might have better reasons for believing it than denying it – although she hasn't yet given them.

18 See, for example, Cohen (1987, 1988), Lewis (1979, 1996), Wittgenstein (1977) and DeRose (1995, 1992). There are also hints at such a view in Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, 1006a–1011b).

19 I have considered (and rejected) the contextualist response to Academic skepticism in Klein (2000a).

20 See Donald Davidson (1986) for this type of defence of the claim that certain methodologically basic propositions must be "true in the main". Davidson, of course, was defending what he took to be a brand of coherentism. But as we will soon see, some forms of coherentism are really nothing but foundationalism in disguise.

21 I do not think the expressions "warrant-transfer coherentism" or "warrant-emergent coherentism" are original to me. Nor is the distinction between the two types of coherentism. But I do not recall where I first ran across the use of those expressions or the discussion of these issues. Ernest Sosa does distinguish between various forms of coherentism. In addition, he argues that what I call the "warrant-emergent" form is actually a form of what he calls "formal foundationalism". Thus, the claim that some forms of coherentism are actually forms of foundationalism is not original to me; see Sosa (1980), reprinted in Sosa (1991, pp. 165–91). In addition, BonJour (1978) distinguishes between linear and non-linear coherentism. That distinction parallels the one here between warrant-transfer coherentism and warrant-emergent coherentism.

22 The original passage is as follows:

> Suppose that all justification is inferential. When we justify belief A by appeal to belief B and C, we have not yet shown A to be justified. We have only shown that it is justified if B and C are. Justification by inference is conditional justification only; A's justification is conditional upon the justification of B and C. But if all justification is conditional in this sense, then nothing can be shown to be actually non-conditionally justified.

I modified the passage to avoid what seems to me to be an unfortunate level confusion that conflates one's being justified with showing that one is justified. I also changed the passage to make clear that the alleged problem is with the infinite chain, per se, as opposed to the chain diverging because more than one proposition is offered as a reason for a belief.

23 Once again, I am indebted to Steven Luper for this point.

24 See Klein (1999) for a fuller defence.

25 Of course there is a third option – neutrality, that is being neither optimistic nor pessimistic. The reasons presented here for thinking that infinitism is not inherently pessimistic can be applied to the neutral view as well.

26 I point to various alternative accounts of what would make a proposition one which is *correctly* called forth in Klein (1999). There I call such propositions "objectively available" as reasons.

27 Keith Lehrer makes that claim on behalf of the skeptic in Lehrer (1971, pp. 292–4). Lehrer no longer accepts this argument (I think); see Lehrer (1974, pp. 238–40) and Lehrer (2000, pp. 132–7).

28 Here is the argument: both $(\sim p \ \& \ q)$ and $(\sim p \ \& \sim q)$ are contraries of p. If the denials of both are required to be in the evidence for p, then that evidence entails p because $\{\sim(\sim p \& q), \sim(\sim p \& \sim q)\}$ entails p.

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