

DON'T FEAR THE REGRESS: COGNITIVE VALUES AND EPISTEMIC INFINITISM

Scott Aikin

We are rational creatures, in that we are beings on whom demands of rationality are appropriate. But by our rationality it doesn't follow that we always live up to those demands. In those cases, we fail to be rational (and it is appropriate to use the term 'irrational'), but it is in a way that is different from how rocks, tadpoles, and gum fail to be rational. For them, we use the term 'arational.' They don't have the demands, but we do. The demands of rationality bear on us because we have minds that can move us to act, inspire us to create, and bring us to believe in ways that are responsible and directed. My interests here are the demands rationality places on our beliefs. Beliefs aim at the truth, and so one of the demands of being a rational creature with beliefs is that we manage them in a way that is pursuant of the truth. Reasons and reasoning play the primary role in that management – we ought to believe on the basis of good reasons. That is, if you believe something, you think that you're right about the world in some way or another. You believe because you think that something (call it 'p') is true. Now, p's truth is different from all ways it could be false, and your being right about p isn't just some arbitrary commitment, one that could just as well have been its negation. This non-arbitrary specificity of beliefs is constituted by the fact that they are held on the basis of reasons. Arguments are our model for how these reasons go – we offer some premises and show how they support a conclusion. Of course, arbitrary premises won't do, so you've got to have some reason for holding them as opposed to some others. Every premise, then, is a conclusion in need of an argument, and for

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arguments to be acceptable, we've got to do due diligence on the premises. This, however, leads to a disturbing pattern – for every premise we turn into a conclusion, we've got at least one other premise in need of another argument. Pretty soon, even the simplest arguments are going to get very, very complicated.

This problem is an old saw in philosophy, and it drives a number of classical works on knowledge. In contemporary parlance, the challenge posed is termed 'the regress problem.' Traditionally, there have been a number of places where the story yielding the problem gets interrupted. On the one hand, the argumentative model for reasoning can be called into question. Perhaps argumentation requires more awareness and linguistic ability than what is required in order to reason (e.g. babies don't give arguments, but they seem to know things). On the other hand, there have been special sorts of reasons posed, and the special properties of these reasons make them so that they don't have to be conclusions of arguments for them to serve their purpose – they may be *indubitable* (you don't have to argue for propositions nobody doubts), they may *cohere with other truths* (sometimes it's enough for a story to hang together), or the premises may be yielded by some *reliable source* (who's to argue with authority?). The thought here is that some beliefs may end the regress of reasons by their having some special property that makes them justified without having any further arguments that they are.

The problem with these solutions is that with all of them, you've *still* got to give arguments that one belief or other not only has those properties, but also that those properties confer justification. Surely we need an argument to stop with one sort of belief and not another. And so, we haven't ended the regress, have we? Call this the *meta-regress* problem – any time you propose a regress-ender, you do so on the basis of an argument, which needs due diligence. And that puts us back on the road to regress.

The regress problem is a consequence of a tension between our flatfooted intuitions about belief and

knowledge. The first is that 'knowing' and 'rational belief' are *success terms*. Knowledge lays claims on us, and we may meet those demands or not. Second, knowing and rational believing are *reflective successes*. We know and believe rationally by thinking hard, being careful, doing our homework, getting our facts straight. And these are the applications of a cognizer's awareness of her responsibilities. Third, that reflective successes can be made *explicit* and *determinative*. You can always show your work and explain why you arrived at one conclusion instead of another. Let me call the collection of these first three intuitions *epistemic proceduralism* – knowing and rational believing are consequences of proper belief-management. The problem is that this model conflicts with some other intuitions that we have about knowing. One is that human beings are good at knowing. Even dumb people still know lots of things, despite the fact that they cannot put an argument together to save their lives. On top of that, even smart folks, given the regress problem, won't know much, since no matter how smart you are, you can't complete an infinite series of arguments. It looks like the standards are just too high with proceduralism to let in a good deal of our knock-about knowledge – what gets us to work on time, what keeps us from stepping in front of buses or eating glass, what makes it so I can work my TiVo, and so on. Let us call this perspective *epistemic egalitarianism* – knowing, though an achievement, is something that is simple and widespread. The regress problem, then, is a case of the clash between proceduralism and egalitarianism. (The clash between the two perspectives is not just limited to the regress problem. All the same intuitions clash in discussions of skepticism, contextualism, the analysis of knowledge, religious epistemology, and so on.)

Epistemic infinitism is a thorough-going proceduralist view. The model runs that those who know are those who have been maximally intellectually responsible. In essence, the thought behind the view is that if you know, you can answer questions about what you know until there just

aren't any more questions. But, as it turns out, there are in principle no final questions. So knowers need to be able to keep coming with the answers.

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

The point here is that *knowledge-attribution* is cheap. We allow people who do not know to claim they do all the time, and we do so because we may waste time correcting them, it may be rude, or it just doesn't matter. Knowledge-attribution happens in contexts where there are many other values on the table in addition to saying truly or not whether someone knows. But all you have to do to burst the bubble is to ask the question, often in the appropriate tone of voice, 'Yes, but do you *really know*?'

The second illusion is the significance of the fact that infinite reason giving isn't widespread. The illusion, of course, is not that some cases of actual non-terminating reason-giving are being overlooked; instead, the illusion is that when people stop giving reasons, they have satisfied the

demands of knowledge. A regular thought regarding arguments is that they are speech acts addressed to an *audience* for the sake of either resolving a *disagreement* or settling an *issue*. Once arguments accomplish these goals, there is no more social use for them – once we are in agreement, we don't argue any more. The fact that there are no infinitely long chains of arguments is a *social fact* – we have a tendency to agree, and when arguments go on too long, we give up on arguments and settle matters with our fists. But the epistemic question returns once the issue is resolved – though we may *persuade* each other that *p*, does that mean that we now *know* that *p*? A chasm yawns between the two thoughts, and it seems to demand we acknowledge that we are often lucky we've never met a really smart person skeptical about the things we think we know – else we suddenly would find that we don't know.

Knowledge requires that you be able to give reasons you know are good reasons. It seems a simple truism. Who would say someone knows that *p*, if asked why he believes it, he shrugged his shoulders and uttered the anarticulate 'hmmm... idunno'? So what follows?

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

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

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

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

hand. $2 + 2 = 4$. If object x has properties P and Q , then x has property P . Don't torture innocent people for fun. Pain is bad. I am being appeared to red-bulgy-fruity. But with each of these, it seems that if someone weren't convinced, or curious about how you knew these things, you could (and *should*) still offer an argument. I know this is my hand, because I am being appeared to my-handly and I'm having a kinaesthetic impression of holding my hand in front of my face. From these, I've arrived at the belief that this is my hand. $2 + 2 = 4$, because if you take two of any thing and two of anything else, you'll have four things... just try it! Each argument here is a function of our concepts... but do we have *the right* concepts? For example, couldn't I add two things and two other things and have *five* things – four objects put together and the collection of them? (Isn't a collection a thing – baseball collections, coin collections, aren't they things? Why isn't the collection also counted when we do addition?) There, I think, are answers to these questions, but you see that it requires that we continue the reason-giving even on the level of the concepts used. And the same with experiences – having the right experiences is crucial for the empirical justification for many of our beliefs about the world. But we, if we take those experiences to give us information about the world, we should be able to give an argument that they are veridical and how they are relevant to the beliefs they support. If you know, you should be able to answer questions with reasons instead of shoulder-shrugging or the back of a hand. Now, we may say those who use those other means to answer questions 'know,' but this is out of our desires to be nice to them or save our skins. And those aren't reasons to say someone *really knows*.

Scott Aikin is Visiting Scholar in Philosophy, Vanderbilt University and Lecturer in Philosophy, Western Kentucky University.