

Arguments Against Peter Klein's Infinitism

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Infinitism, as held by Peter Klein, is a radical and deeply interesting idea. However, I believe it ultimately fails. I want to offer two reasons why it fails. One reason I think Klein's infinitism fails is because the theory of belief that it is dependent on fails. I also think it will fail as a theory of the structure of epistemic justification because it is a theory of justification that never bottoms out in non-normative features. And also to a lesser degree, it fails because it cannot be defended against an objection against one of the principles it is meant to exclusively honor. To develop my arguments against infinitism first I will explain the important Regress Argument for foundationalism and show how infinitism is a direct and major objection to it. Next, I will present Klein's explanation and argument in favor of infinitism. Klein's argument for infinitism essentially depends on two principles, which I will identify and show how they are meant to work in favor for infinitism. One of these principles, the Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness, is claimed by Klein to have three possible objections against it. One such objection is an objection from "meta-justifications". I will explain what meta-justifications are, clarify Klein's arguments against them, and then present two objections against his reply. One of my objections against his reply will come from a Finite Mind perspective and the other will be based on the fact that a property is not a reason, in that it is not *available* to us. Then, I will object to Klein's infinitism, as a whole, by using Richard Feldman's "consideration" notion of belief to directly critique Klein's "conditional" notion of belief (a notion that his infinitism essentially depends on). By showing that these notions of belief are incompatible, that infinitism cannot be held consistently with the "consideration" notion, and that the "conditional" notion has absurd implications, I will conclude that infinitism is not a viable theory of the structure of justification. Then, I will argue that infinitism also isn't a viable theory based on the argument of Ernest Sosa that infinitism is a theory of justification that doesn't bottom out in any

non-normative features. Hopefully, these two arguments against infinitism coupled with a critical analysis of Klein's argument *for* infinitism will result in the conclusion that we shouldn't look to infinitism as the best plausible theory about the structure of epistemic justification.

First I want to explain infinitism and Klein's arguments for it. I will begin the explanation of Klein's infinitism by showing its relationship to a very important argument in epistemology. This argument is the Regress Argument. I will begin with the Regress Argument because it is one of the most important arguments in all of contemporary epistemology and also more importantly because Klein's infinitism can be seen as a major and direct objection to the Regress Argument. The Regress Argument is an argument for the position called foundationalism. Foundationalism is the view that if we have any justified beliefs then we must have basic beliefs. By justified beliefs, epistemologists mean something like beliefs that are rational to accept. By basic beliefs, epistemologists mean something rather specific and technical. Basic beliefs are justified beliefs that are not justified by other beliefs. That is, basic beliefs are beliefs that *do not* get their justification by *beliefs*, but rather something else (like experiences, for example). The Regress Argument for foundationalism proceeds thusly:

1. Suppose there are some justified beliefs
2. If there aren't any basic beliefs, then each justified belief is justified by either i) other unjustified beliefs, ii) itself, or iii) other justified beliefs
3. A belief cannot be justified by unjustified beliefs
4. A belief can't be justified by itself
5. Therefore, if there aren't any basic beliefs, then each justified belief is justified by other justified beliefs
6. But, a belief can't be justified by a never-ending chain of justified beliefs.

7. Therefore, if there are some justified beliefs, then there are some basic beliefs.

As one can see, this Regress Argument for foundationalism is an argument from elimination to the conclusion that if we have some justified beliefs then there exists some basic beliefs. Klein's infinitism will directly object to one of the above premises. Infinitism is the view that the "structure of justificatory reasons is infinite and non-repeating" (Klein, 297). In contrast to the foundationalist, who holds that the structure of justification is like a building with basic beliefs forming the foundations, the infinitist holds that the structure of justification is a chain that goes on forever. Infinitism is an assertion that premise 6 in the Regress Argument is false. Klein would say that a belief *can* be justified by a "never-ending chain of justified beliefs". So, if infinitism is correct then we have good reason to reject the Regress Argument. Now, let's turn to an examination of Klein's own arguments in favor of infinitism.

Klein holds that the primary reason for accepting infinitism is that it satisfactorily honors two principles that a theory of the structure of justification should honor while the two main alternatives, foundationalism and coherentism, do not honor these principles. So, I will proceed as Klein does; by identifying these necessary principles and showing how the alternatives supposedly cannot honor them while infinitism can. The first of these principles is the Principle of Avoiding Circularity. Klein explains the Principle of Avoiding Circularity as this:

"PAC: For all x, if a person, S, has a justification for x, then for all y, if y is in the evidential ancestry of x for S, then x is not in the evidential ancestry of y for S." (Klein, 298).

The PAC says that one cannot use circular reasoning or question-begging reasoning to justify beliefs. I cannot be in a situation where I have a belief x that justifies y, and y, in turn, justifies x. For a more tangible example, imagine a person who holds the belief that God exists. They hold this belief based on the reason that the Bible states that "God exists". They believe

that the Bible is infallible because it is the word of God, which is based on their implied and already existing belief that God exists. So, they believe A because of B, they believe B because of C, and they believe C because of A. Their reasoning is circular, and I hope anyone can see that this is obviously problematic. Any accurate structure of justification would exclude such circular reasoning, and that is why we should accept the PAC. In fact, the PAC is the reason why premise 4 is asserted as it is in the Regress Argument. Proponents of the Regress Argument and Klein both are critical of coherentism, in that, they view coherentists as implying circular reasoning as a valid way of justifying beliefs. So, this is why Klein rejects coherentism – it does not satisfactorily honor the PAC. However, infinitism does satisfy the PAC, because one does not use one reason in the evidential ancestry of itself, but rather the structure of justification is like a chain that does not loop. So, infinitism does honor the PAC, while coherentism does not.

The reason Klein rejects foundationalism is because he thinks it does not honor the Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness. Klein outlines this principle as this:

“PAA: For all x, if a person, S, has a justification for x, then there is some reason, r^1 , available to S for x; and there is some reason, r^2 , available to S for r^1 ; etc.” (Klein, 299)

Here Klein is implying that if we have justification for a belief, then we have a reason for accepting that belief. And if we have a reason for the original belief, then we must have another reason for accepting that reason and so on ad infinitum. To say that one reason is primary and not dependent on another, is in Klein’s view, arbitrary. More specifically Klein defines an arbitrary reason as “one for which there is no further reason” (Klein, 299). Klein rejects foundationalism, because he claims the stopping of a justificatory chain at a basic belief is, ultimately, arbitrary. However, to Klein, infinitism does honor the PAA. This is because, for his view, there is no arbitrary stopping point in the justificatory structure. For any reason, r^1 ,

infinetism will say there is an r^2 in support of r^1 . So, foundationalism fails to honor the PAA, while infinitism does.

However, Klein pauses in his case for infinitism here to mention three possible objections to the PAA. These three objections are a) an objection from reliabilism, b) meta-justifications, and c) harmless arbitrariness. While, his replies to the reliabilist and “harmless arbitrariness” objections are rather clear, his reply to the meta-justification objection is not so clear. I want to clarify his reply to the meta-justification objection and then put his reply under critical scrutiny.

He explains a meta-justification as a property, such that if a belief had the property P, then that belief would be justified. It is not a *belief* that justifies another belief under discussion here, but rather it is a property that supposedly justifies beliefs. Beliefs justified by meta-justification are acceptable “because they have some property, call it P, and beliefs having P are likely to be true” (Klein, 303). Certain properties he has in mind include properties related to the causal history of the belief in question. For example, a believer in causal history based meta-justifications would say that certain beliefs are justified because they involve “the proper use of our senses and memory” (Klein, 303). Other candidate meta-justification properties include properties related to the justified belief’s content. For example, a proponent of meta-justifications could say that certain beliefs are justified because the belief itself “is about a current mental state or it is about some necessary truth” (Klein, 303). But, then Klein wants to ask a hypothetical question to all the philosophers who hold that meta-justifications can exist: “Why is having P truth-conducive?” Klein says “if there is an answer, then the regress continues” (303). That is, for example, if someone can explain why beliefs that are about current mental states are likely to be true, then that person has given a further *reason* why she is justified in believing propositions like “I am in pain”, etc. Klein continues, that if there is no answer to

his hypothetical question, then stopping the justificatory chain at a meta-justification is simply arbitrary. And so, according to Klein, the proponent of meta-justifications is caught in a dilemma of accepting the regress (and therefore infinitism) or of accepting that meta-justifications are completely arbitrary. And since, to Klein, the proponents of meta-justifications are faced with such a repugnant dilemma, then the existence of meta-justifications shouldn't be seen as a genuinely plausible objection to infinitism.

I'd like to critically discuss Klein's moves here. There are at least two possible objections to what he has argued above against meta-justifications. These objections may well be mutually exclusive, but maybe by charitably explaining both, I may convince the reader Klein has made some faults. One objection is that reasons are things which are available to a subject in a certain way. That is, if someone doesn't consider the reason, *r*, for her justified belief, *b*, then *r* doesn't actually serve as their reason for *b*. That doesn't mean that the support or explanation that *can* justify her belief is non-existent, it just means it's not in her evidential ancestry. And so, because it is not in her evidential ancestry (or entertained by her) then it is not really a reason for her justified belief. The human mind is finite, and therefore only a certain number of beliefs can be entertained. This means, someone can have a justified belief but not have an available reason for that belief. Klein could say that because the reason exists (it is just unexplored) stopping her evidential ancestry here to preclude the existence of such a reason is arbitrary. However, it is not arbitrary. It is done because of the limits of the human mind. Klein could furtherly reply to this, and say "You just answered with a reason why it is not arbitrary. Therefore, there is an infinite regress of reasons." However, this is not the case. That is my reason for why such beliefs are not arbitrary, but down the line my reasons *do*, in fact, end, because I do not have an infinite list of reasons available to me in my finite human mind. To summarize this objection, a reason is

only a reason if it is available to me, and therefore my reasons do end *somewhere* because I possess a finite mind. And one, possibly, often-used non-arbitrary end place of my reasons is with such meta-justifications.

Another potential objection to his reply against the meta-justification objection to infinitism is to say that meta-justifications are properties and therefore, characteristically, not reasons. If I have a belief, “I am in pain”, it is justified because it has the property of being about mental states and such beliefs are truth-conducive. Now, my explanation of why “I am in pain” should, following common sense, sound like a reason. However, this is because of a misunderstanding of what it means to be a reason. A reason is something that must be available to a person. Klein says himself when discussing the PAA that “the reason for a belief must be *available*” (299). Properties aren’t available to us, in the relevant sense that beliefs can be. Properties can be available, but I’m not justified in believing “I am in pain”, because *I* have the property of “being about mental states”. My belief that “I am in pain” is justified, *because* the belief in question has that property. Now, Klein would obviously ask “But, why are such properties truth-conducive?” There is, perhaps, an answer to this question but answering it does not prove that an infinite regress of reasons continues. One chain already ended with the property just described. Asking why such properties are truth-conducive begins a new line of inquiry or to use Klein’s terminology a new line of “evidential ancestry”. We may have a reason for believing why such properties are truth conducive, but that answer would not be in support of the belief that “I am in pain”. The support for “I am in pain” came from that belief having the property (not reason) of being about mental states. Hopefully, these two objections show how Klein’s critique of meta-justifications isn’t satisfactory.

Lastly, I want to criticize Klein's infinitism on the whole. I will do this in two ways. First, I will explain how Klein's theory depends on a repugnant notion of belief, before introducing Sosa's critique of infinitism. Hopefully, these two criticisms of Klein will show his theory to be deficient.

First, I will examine how Klein's infinitism depends on a repugnant notion of belief, and therefore show that infinitism needs, at the least, a dramatic improvement. Klein's infinitism essentially depends on accepting a "conditional" notion of belief, which comes into direct conflict with Feldman's "consideration" notion of belief. By showing that infinitism requires the "conditional" notion, and then showing that the "consideration" notion is much more reasonable, I hope to persuade the reader that infinitism cannot be correct as it is. First, let me explain the relevant notions of belief.

Richard Feldman says that "If you have never even considered a proposition, then you neither believe it nor disbelieve it" (24). That is, consideration is a requirement for belief. Klein, however, says such things as this: "humans have many beliefs that are not occurrent" (300) and one can have "the belief even before she forms the conscious thought" (300). His theory of belief should be called the conditional notion, because Klein says that you believe all things that you *would* answer with, if pressed in appropriate circumstances. So, your beliefs exist but their expression is conditional on whether or not you are pressed to express them. If Feldman holds that you must consider a proposition for it to be a belief, and Klein holds that you can have beliefs before you have the conscious thought (in other words, before you have considered it), then these two figures are in direct conflict with each other.

Could Klein abandon his conditional theory for the consideration theory of belief and still maintain infinitism. I don't think he could. This is because humans have finite minds. It

certainly takes time to consider propositions. Even if only a millisecond, it does take some time to consider any given proposition. But, humans have a finite amount of time in which they have to consider; that is to say - we have finite minds. To be an infinitist, we must hold that any of our justified beliefs are justified by an infinite chain of beliefs. But, this can't be the case once we accept the consideration theory. Because a belief requires consideration, consideration takes time, and infinitism requires our beliefs to be infinite. So, the consideration theory puts us in a situation where we can only have a finite number of beliefs, and infinitism requires an infinite amount. This clearly shows that you aren't able to hold infinitism and the consideration notion of belief consistently.

Before showing another problem with infinitism, I'd like to point out that the traditional theory about dispositional beliefs also contrasts with Klein's theory of dispositional beliefs in a similar way that Klein's more general notion of belief clashes with Feldman's. In arguing for his conditional notion of belief, Klein is arguing for a very robust theory of dispositional beliefs that says all of our dispositional beliefs are our beliefs which we would answer with when pressed in appropriate circumstances. This is much stronger than the traditional theory of dispositional beliefs. The more traditional theory is this: "A subject dispositionally believes *P* if a representation with the content *P* is stored in her memory or "belief box"" (Schwitzgebel). As one can see, according to the more traditional theory of dispositional beliefs, a dispositional belief is a belief stored in memory. But, this implies that it had to be occurrent at one point in order for it to now be stored in memory. So, for the more traditional theory, a dispositional belief cannot be merely something you would answer with if pressed. It's some belief stored in your memory that was once occurrent. Here, Klein faces a similar problem as he did with his more general notion of belief. The traditionalist about dispositional beliefs can agree with Klein

that we do have dispositional beliefs about what two plus two equals because most of us have thought about that mathematical problem before. However, the traditionalist differs with Klein about the three solutions to the philosophy puzzle discussed above. The traditionalist says we don't have a belief about such a problem because our favored answer to the problem has never occurred to us, so we can't have a dispositional belief about it. Klein would say we do, because his theory merely dictates that a dispositional belief is what we would answer with if pressed, and so his theory leads to the aforementioned absurdities.

Now that I've shown that these notions of belief are inconsistent and rival, if I can convince you that the consideration notion is correct, hopefully you will follow me in deducing that infinitism is in need of dramatic revision. I will show the falsity of the conditional theory by showing its absurd implications, and then show how the consideration notion can avoid such absurdities. If beliefs are simply what you *would* answer with if pressed by a question, then you can have beliefs about things which you have never been questioned. For example, imagine a puzzle in a philosophy topic far afield from anything you have ever studied. Let's say there are three possible answers to this puzzle. If the conditional notion of belief is right, you, *at this exact moment*, have a belief about which of the three answers is most correct regarding this puzzle. This seems very absurd – there is a question you have never heard of, and yet you have a specific belief about it already. Not only must the conditionalist-about-belief/infinitist hold that you have an answer to a question you've never heard, but that you also have an infinite chain of reasons for this belief. This should seem very absurd. Also, if Klein is correct about belief, you have beliefs right now that *will never* enter your mind. All these implications of the conditional theory are absurd. But, the consideration theory handles them quite nicely. Do you have a belief about the puzzle you have never heard of? "No," says the consideration theorist, because you

have never considered any of the possible answers. Do you believe something that will never enter your mind? “No,” says the consideration theorist, because ‘entering your mind’ is exactly what is required of a belief. So, the conditional theory of belief leads us to absurdity and the consideration theory avoids all these absurdities. I think therefore we should accept the consideration theory as the more reasonable. And because these two theories of belief are exclusive and also because Klein’s infinitism requires the conditional theory, we are ultimately forced to, provisionally, reject Klein’s infinitism.

Besides the objection above inspired by Feldman’s theory of dispositional beliefs, there is another subtler and maybe more damaging argument against infinitism. This argument comes from Ernest Sosa’s epistemology classic “The Raft and the Pyramid.” I’d like to discuss this argument now in order to show how Klein’s infinitism has more than one major problem.

Sosa claims that every normative property has its basis in non-normative properties. For example, a good car is good in virtue of having certain features – a running engine, possession of tires, etc. Likewise, a good belief (which is synonymous or translates to a ‘justified belief’ in this case) should be good in virtue of having certain features. But, the infinitist is forced to say that a justified belief is justified because of its relation to other justified beliefs. A foundationalist could agree that some justified beliefs can be justified because of their relation to other justified beliefs (that is, they would agree with this about inferential beliefs), but a foundationalist recognizes the need for this chain of justification to *bottom out* in some non-evaluative or non-normative property or feature. A car is a good car because it possesses some non-evaluative features, but for an infinitist a good belief is a good belief because it possesses a relation to another good belief. However, at some point there needs to be a non-evaluative feature of some belief so that its ‘goodness’ can actually be grounded. There has to be a relation

between justification and some non-normative property in order for justification to be a meaningful concept, otherwise we are just endlessly explaining justification in terms of itself (as the infinitist does). So, the infinitist says that a belief is justified because of its relation to something already justified, but they fail to explain what non-normative features give rise to epistemic justification in first place. The foundationalist, however, readily accepts that there are non-normative features that basic beliefs have that make them good or justified. What foundationalists often have in mind in regards to non-normative features that basic beliefs have are things like the fact that the belief is self-evident or the belief is about a sensuous experience, etc. This objection shows that infinitism has a problem with explaining the origins of justification.

Hopefully, I've shown that infinitism can be seriously challenged in multiple ways. Infinitism is a direct objection against one of epistemology's most important arguments – the Regress Argument for foundationalism. Klein's infinitism depends on two principles which it is supposed to honor, while foundationalism and coherentism are supposed to fail to honor them. One of these principles, the PAA, had at least three possible objections against it, including the meta-justification objection. Klein replied to this objection, by saying meta-justifications were either a continuation of the regress or an arbitrary stopping point in our chain of reasons. However, I argued that his reply was not satisfactory from two different objections. One objection was that our reasons must be in our current evidential ancestry or must be, at the least, considered by us. And because of our finite minds, it is not arbitrary to stop our lack of reasons at the level of our evidential ancestry. My other objection against his meta-justification reply came from the fact that with meta-justification are properties that justify beliefs, and properties *are not* reasons. They are not reasons, primarily because they are not *available* to us in the way

beliefs can be. I then critiqued infinitism more generally, by first critiquing the conditional notion of belief. Feldman has a consideration notion of belief which directly conflicts with the conditional notion. Infinitism is incompatible with the consideration notion and dependent on the conditional notion. So by showing the conditional notion leads to absurdities that the consideration notion can accommodate, I presented a serious flaw with Klein's infinitism. Also, I presented a subtler objection to infinitism that infinitism only explains epistemic justification in terms of relations to beliefs already having epistemic justification. This fails as an explanation of the origins of the normativity that justification has, because it fails to appeal to any non-normative features. While Klein's infinitism may be salvageable, it will need some revisions or clarifications to handle the two core objections presented here. In conclusion, if one wants to critique the Regress Argument, one will need to find a new standpoint other than Klein's infinitism, as it stands.

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