**Klein’s Case for Infinitism**

Ram Neta

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Infinitism is both a theory of epistemic justification and a solution to the regress problem. To specify the content of infinitism more precisely than this requires some stage-setting. I devote section I of this paper to that stage-setting, and to stating the content of infinitism more precisely. Section II gives a sympathetic rendering of Klein’s argument for infinitism. Section III rebuts what I take to be the most compelling objections to that argument, and shows how we need to interpret Klein in order to issue those rebuttals. In the concluding section, I will briefly sketch what seems to me to be a more promising strategy for rebutting Klein’s argument.

**Section I: What is Infinitism?**

Are there propositions that you can be justified in believing even without having a reason to believe them? It may seem that there are. For instance, you are currently justified in believing the proposition that 1>0, and it may seem that you need not have a reason for believing that proposition in order to be justified in believing it. Or, to take another example, you are currently justified in believing the proposition that you are conscious, and yet, once again, it may seem that you need not have a reason for believing that proposition in order to be justified in believing it. Let us use the term “basic” to denote just the propositions in this category: those such that your justification for believing them does not require you to have a reason for believing them. Our initial question, then, may be put as follows: are there any basic propositions?

Of course, even if it is true that some of the propositions that you are currently justified in believing are basic for you, it’s also true that many of the propositions that you are currently justified in believing are not basic for you. For instance, I am currently justified in believing that the high temperature today will be 61 degrees Fahrenheit, but my justification for believing this depends upon my having a reason to believe it (viz., that this is what the weather forecast said this morning). So whether or not there are basic propositions, there surely are non-basic propositions.

Suppose, then, that you are justified in believing a non-basic proposition p. Then you have a reason for believing that p – call this reason r1. Suppose also that you can be justified in believing p by virtue of having r1 only if r1 is a proposition that you are justified in believing. Then, either r1 is basic for you or it is not. If it is not basic for you, then you have a reason to believe r1 – call this reason r2. Again, suppose that you can be justified in believing r1 by virtue of having r2 only if r2 is a proposition that you are justified in believing. Then, either r2 is basic for you or it is not. If it is not basic for you, then you have a reason to believe r2 – call this reason r3. Again, suppose that you can be justified in believing r2 by virtue of having r3 only if r3 is a proposition that you are justified in believing. Then, either r3 is basic for you or it is not. If it is true in general that justifying reasons for belief must be propositions that the believer is justified in believing, then this regress ends only once we arrive at a proposition that is basic for you. But must this regress end?

Most philosophers assume that it must, and are thereby committed to the claim that either there are propositions that are basic for you (foundationalism), or else that justifying reasons for a proposition need not be other propositions that the believer is justified in believing (externalism). The coherentist denies both of these disjuncts, and claims that the regress never ends, but only goes round in a circle.

But infinitism denies all of these claims. According to infinitism, the regress does not end, nor does it go around in a circle. On the contrary, the regress goes on forever, and no proposition reached in the regress is ever reached again at another stage of the regress. This is what I will call the infinitist’s “solution to the regress problem”.

Klein sometimes describes the regress problem as the question “which type of series of reasons and the account of warrant associated with it, if any, can increase the credibility of a non-evident proposition?”[[1]](#footnote-1) where a “non-evident proposition” is one concerning which there could be credible disagreement. This particular way of describing the regress problem is both historically unfamiliar, and also seemingly quite different from the problem raised by the regress that I’ve just described above. But we will see in section III, when we try to defend Klein’s argument for infinitism, why it is that Klein describes the regress problem in this way.

As I said above, infinitism is not merely a solution to the regress problem. It is also a theory of epistemic justification. Not every theory of epistemic justification also serves as a solution to the regress problem. Consider, for instance, the process reliabilist theory of justification. According to such a theory, a belief’s being justified consists in its being formed by means of a reliable process. What does this theory imply about whether or not the regress of justifiers must end, or whether it can go in a circle? Nothing. The process reliabilist theory of justification is consistent with the view that the regress must end, and it is also consistent with the view that the regress does not end. (It is open to a process reliabilist to claim, for instance, that a belief-forming process can reliably form the belief that p only if p is the terminus of a regress of reasons that stretches infinitely far back, each of which is itself reliably formed.) Process reliabilism is consistent with the view that the regress goes in a circle, and it is also consistent with the view that the regress does not go in a circle. In short, a process reliabilist theory of justification has no implications whatsoever for the problem. Neither does a reliable indicator theory of justification. Neither does a virtue theory. In short, a theory of justification need not be a solution to the regress problem. And the converse is also true: a solution to the regress problem need not be a theory of justification. But infinitism, unlike the other aforementioned theories of justification, is simultaneously a theory of justification and a solution to the regress problem.

The infinitist gives a theory of propositional justification, and also of doxastic justification. The most succinct statement of each theory is given by John Turri, as follows:

“**Infinitist propositional justification** (IPJ): The proposition Q is propositionally justified for you just in case there is available to you at least one infinite non-repeating series of propositions (or reasons) such that R1 is a good (and undefeated) reason to believe Q, R2 is a good (and undefeated) reason to believe R1, R3 is a good (and undefeated) reason to believe R2, … Rm+1 is a good (and undefeated) reason to believe Rm, for any arbitrarily high m.

“**Infinitist doxastic justification** (IDJ): Your belief that Q is doxastically justified just in case Q is propositionally justified for you, and you have provided enough reasons along at least one of the infinite non-repeating series of reasons, in virtue of which Q is propositionally justified for you, to satisfy the contextually determined standards.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

IPJ and IDJ are both very unorthodox claims. What could Klein have to say on their behalf? Roughly, the grounds on which Klein recommends both forms of infinitism are that only they can explain how it is possible for someone to have a non-question-begging and non-dogmatic answer to *any* question of the form “why think that p?”, when such a question is directed towards a person who regards the particular value of p at issue to constitute a reason for something else she believes. According to Klein, the coherentist can offer only question-begging answers to such questions, and the foundationalist can offer only dogmatic answers to some such questions (i.e., those that concern what she herself counts as foundationally justified propositions). But how can Klein justify these bold claims? We turn to that question in the next section.

**Section II: What is Klein’s Case for Infinitism?**

Klein’s clearest statement of his argument for infinitism occurs in Klein 1999, and is an argument for IPJ specifically. Klein can argue from IPJ to IDJ as follows:

(i) IPJ

(ii) Your belief that Q is doxastically justified just in case Q is propositionally justified for you, and your belief that Q is properly based on what propositionally justifies Q for you.

(iii) Your belief that Q is properly based on what propositionally justifies Q for you just in case you have provided enough reasons along at least one of the infinite non-repeating series of reasons, in virtue of which Q is propositionally justified for you, to satisfy the contextually determined standards.  
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(iv) IDJ

This argument is valid, and premise (ii) is uncontroversially true. While premise (iii) is highly controversial, it is plausible that if (i) is true, and if we have any doxastically justified beliefs at all, then (iii) is true. That’s because doxastic justification comes not simply from holding a propositionally justified belief, but from holding such a belief *on the basis of what propositionally justifies it*. However precisely this “basing” requirement is to be understood, it is quite plausible that, if (i) is true, then the condition laid down in (iii) is necessary to satisfy that requirement. And so the fundamental controversy surrounding the argument above for IDJ concerns step (i), viz., IPJ. In the rest of this paper, I focus exclusively on Klein’s argument for IPJ.

In order to understand his argument for IPJ, I must first introduce and define a term that Klein’s argument employs. This is the term “evidential ancestry”. Here’s what Klein says by way of explaining his use of the term: “By ‘evidential ancestry’ I am referring to the links in the chains of reasons, sometimes branching, that support beliefs. For instance, if r is a reason for p, and q is a reason for r, then r is in the evidential ancestry of p, and q is in the evidential ancestry of both p and r.”[[3]](#footnote-3) For a reason to “support” a belief, in the sense that Klein has in mind in this passage, the reason must be both objectively and subjectively available to the believer. Klein does not commit himself to any specific account of what is involved in either objective or subjective availability, but roughly, a reason r is objectively available for a proposition p only if r increases the credibility of p, and r is subjectively available for a proposition p only if the believer has the appropriate sort of subjective relation to r.

We can use the term “evidential ancestry” to distinguish foundationalist theories of propositional justification (FPJ), coherentist theories of propositional justification (CPJ), and IPJ as follows: FPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time is finite and contains no element more than once. (FPJ can treat foundationally justified propositions as having an evidential ancestry that contains no elements at all, and so has a finite cardinality of zero.) CPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time contains some elements more than once. And IPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time is infinite and contains no element more than once.

Klein’s argument for IPJ is an argument by elimination. It proceeds from two premises, which Klein states as follows:

“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.

PAA: For all x, if a person, S, has a justification for x, then there is some reason, r1, available to S for x; and there is some reason, r2, available to S for r1; etc.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

If PAC is true, then no evidential ancestry can contain the same element more than once, and so CPJ is false. If PAA is true, then no evidential ancestry can be finite, and so FPJ is false. (As Turri 2009 shows, FPJ does not imply that *every* evidential ancestry is finite, but it does imply that *some* are, and so PAA entails that FPJ is false.) If – as Klein assumes – IPJ is the only logically possible alternative to FPJ and CPJ, then it follows that infinitism is true. If I had space here, I would call into question Klein’s assumption that IPJ is the only logically possible alternative to FPJ and CPJ. But that is an assumption that might plausibly seem unassailable to Klein since none of Klein’s critics to date have assailed it. Indeed, Klein’s critics have all seemed willing to grant this assumption, and also to grant PAC. What Klein’s critics have done is, in one or another way, to attack Klein’s case for IPJ by attacking PAA. What I want to do in this section of the paper is to spell out Klein’s argument for PAA as sympathetically as I can. Then, in the next section, I will show that Klein can rebut all of the best objections to PAA. If Klein’s argument for IPJ is flawed, then the flaw may lie elsewhere than in PAA.

So now let’s turn to the issue: what does Klein have to say on behalf of PAA? What he says on behalf of PAA is, for the most part, not contained in the 1999 paper in which he originally defends IPJ, but rather in a 2005 paper that initiates a fruitful exchange with Ginet.[[5]](#footnote-5) There, Klein defends PAA by arguing that, if it were false, then a particular kind of obviously illicit epistemic practice would be licensed:

“imagine a dialogue between Fred, the Foundationalist, and Doris, the Doubter. …Fred asserts some proposition, say p. Doris says something …that prompts Fred to believe that he had better have reason(s) for p in order to supply some missing credibility. So, Fred gives his reason, r1, for p. (r1 could be a conjunction.) Now, Doris asks why r1 is true. Fred gives another reason, r2. This goes on for a while until Fred (being a practicing foundationalist) arrives at what he takes to be a basic proposition, say b.

“Doris will, of course, ask Fred for his reason for b. But Fred, being a self-conscious, circumspect foundationalist will tell Doris that b doesn’t need a reason in order to possess the autonomous bit of warrant. He will say that her question ‘Why do you believe that x?’ though appropriate up to this point is no longer appropriate when ‘b’ is substituted for ‘x’ because b is basic. There is no reason that supplies the *autonomous* warrant that b has.

“Grant that foundationalism is true; b has some autonomous bit of warrant that arises because b has some foundational property, F, such that any proposition having F is autonomously warranted, and every non-basic proposition that depends upon b for its warrant would lose some of its warrant were b not autonomously warranted.

“Doris should say to Fred, ‘I grant that b has autonomous warrant. But what I want to know is whether autonomously warranted propositions are, in virtue of that fact, somewhat likely to be true.’ Here worry becomes a ‘meta’ worry. But she went meta, so to speak, because Fred went meta first.

“Given that with regard to any proposition, once we consider whether it is true, we must hold it, deny it, or withhold it (i.e. neither hold nor deny it), Fred is now faced with a trilemma:

1. He can hold that autonomously warranted propositions are somewhat likely to be true in virtue of the fact that they are autonomously warranted.
2. He can deny that autonomously warranted propositions are somewhat likely to be true in virtue of the fact that they are autonomously warranted.
3. He can withhold whether autonomously warranted propositions are somewhat likely to be true in virtue of the fact that they are autonomously warranted.

“If he takes alternative 2, then using b as a reason for the first non-basic proposition in the series is arbitrary. Holding b is not arbitrary. Doris has granted that b is autonomously warranted and she could grant that it is not arbitrary to hold a proposition that has autonomous warrant. But if Fred believes that such propositions were not even somewhat likely to be true in virtue of being autonomously warranted, how could he think that b could provide a good reason for thinking that the penultimate proposition was likely to be true? Fred thinks that the warrant for all of his beliefs rests on basic propositions. If he thought that b’s possession of F was not the least bit truth conducive, then why is he using b and all the other basic propositions on which the warrant for his non-basic beliefs rests?

“The same applies to alternative 3. Doris has asked whether the fact that b is autonomously warranted makes it at all likely that b is true. Fred responds that he doesn’t have an opinion one way or the other. Fred thinks b is true but her neither has a reason for thinking it is true nor does he thinks that basic propositions are somewhat likely to be true because they are autonomously warranted. So, from Fred’s point of view and Doris’s, Fred ought not to use b as the basis for further beliefs. The mere fact that he thinks b is true is not sufficient for him to use b as a reason, unless he thinks that b is true somehow makes it likely that b is true.

“If he takes alternative 1, then using b as his reason for the penultimate proposition is not arbitrary, *but* *that is because the regress has continued*. Fred has a very good reason for believing b, namely b has F and propositions with F are likely to be true. Fred, now, could be asked to produce his reasons for thinking that b has F and that basic propositions are somewhat likely to be true in virtue of possessing feature F.

“*Therefore*: foundationalism cannot solve the regress problem, even if it were true. A practicing foundationalist cannot increase the rational credibility of a questioned proposition through reasoning.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

It’s not obvious how to interpret the argument given in the passage just quoted. Klein concludes by saying that foundationalism cannot solve the regress problem; his grounds for this conclusion seem to concern what a foundationalist (Fred) would be committed to thinking if he were to consider the issue of whether autonomously warranted propositions are likely to be true. But just how is the latter issue related to the issue of whether foundationalism can solve the regress problem? Could it be that, by considering the issue of whether autonomously warranted propositions are likely to be true, we alter our justificatory situation in such a way that propositions that were heretofore foundationally warranted are no longer foundationally warranted? Michael Williams has developed a response to the regress problem according to which such changes in justificatory status are to be expected.[[7]](#footnote-7) An argument for infinitism should not simply assume that Williams’s epistemological views are false.

I propose then, that we interpret Klein’s appeal to what Fred *would be* committed to thinking if he were to consider a particular issue to be an implicit invitation to reflect on what Fred is *already* committed to thinking about a particular issue, whether or not he ever thinks about that issue.

But if we interpret Klein in that way, then we face another difficulty. The issue that Fred is invited to consider is the issue of whether “autonomously warranted propositions” are likely to be true. Of course, since Fred is a “practicing” foundationlist, he will already have the concept of an “autonomously warranted proposition” – but in this respect he is unlike the rest of us, and so it is not clear just what we can inferences we are entitled to make from his justificatory situation to our own. Since very few people have the concept of an “autonomously warranted proposition”, it is not clear that we have any rational commitments to holding any views about the very general issue of whether such propositions are likely to be true. But this is a problem that we can avoid as follows: what matters for Klein’s argument is not what Fred (qua representative thinker) is committed to thinking about the likelihood of truth of all the propositions in some general category (e.g., the “autonomously warranted” ones). Rather, what matters is what Fred (qua representative thinker) is committed to thinking about the likelihood of truth of the particular proposition that he takes to be foundational, and to which he appeals in the course of defending one of his beliefs. It is the issue of that likelihood that matters for Klein’s argument. Of course, it might be that the likelihood of a property being instantiated by a single case is always relative to, or dependent upon, some reference class to which the single case belongs. But the reference class need not be the particular one that Klein picks out: it could be lots of others.

In light of these considerations, I believe that Klein’s reasoning in the passage quoted above can be most charitably rendered as follows:

Premise 1: If PAA is not true, then there are possible cases in which someone can rationally defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition.

Premise 2: Someone cannot rationally do both of the following two things: defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition, and also deny that that proposition is likely to be true.

Premise 3: Someone cannot rationally do both of the following two things: defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition, and also neither believe nor deny that that proposition is likely to be true.

Premise 4: If someone rationally defends a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition, then she is committed to believing that that foundationally justified proposition is likely to be true. (from 2 and 3, by the general principle that, if ∂ and π are mutually exclusive and logically exhaustive options, and no one can rationally ø and π, then, if someone rationally ø’s, she is thereby committed to ∂’ing.)

Premise 5: If someone is committed to believing that a foundationally justified belief (B) is likely to be true, then she has an available reason to hold belief B.

Premise 6: If someone has an available reason to hold a belief, then that belief is not foundationally justified for her.

Premise 7: If someone rationally defends a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition, then that proposition is not foundationally justified for her. (from 4, 5, 6)

Premise 8: There are no possible cases in which someone rationally defends a belief of hers by appeal to what she correctly takes to be a foundationally justified proposition. (from 7)

Premise 9: If there are no possible cases in which someone rationally defends a belief of hers by appeal to what she correctly takes to be a foundationally justified proposition, then there are no possible cases in which someone can rationally defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition. (This premise is not made explicit anywhere in Klein’s passage, but Klein must hold something like this premise in order for his argument to be valid.)

Conclusion: PAA is true. (from 1, 8, 9)[[8]](#footnote-8)

Although this argument is valid, there appear to be grounds for doubt concerning some of its premises. One might question premise 1: couldn’t PAA be false, and there be some foundationally justified propositions, even if nobody took any propositions to be foundationally justified? At first blush, this seems clearly possible: foundationalism could be true even if everyone consistently denied it, and so even if no one ever took any proposition to be foundationally justified. One might question premise 3: couldn’t someone defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she took to be a foundationally justified proposition, even if she held no view on the issue of whether that proposition is likely to be true? Once again, this seems to be clearly possible: the issue of likely truth might never have occurred to the agent in question, and this wouldn’t seem to impugn her ability rationally to defend one of her beliefs by appeal to what she took to be a foundationally justified proposition. One might question premise 5: couldn’t one be committed to believing that foundationally justified propositions are likely to be true, and yet still have no available reason for believing any particular proposition that she took to be foundational? Her belief that foundationally justified propositions are likely to be true might seem not to provide her with such a reason if, say, that belief is itself based on the foundationally justified proposition in question. And finally, one might question premise 9: couldn’t there be circumstances under which one could rationally defend one’s beliefs by appeal to what one took to be foundationally justified propositions, even if one could not rationally defend them by appeal to what one correctly took to be foundationally justified propositions? If any of these four premises are false, then the argument above is not sound, even if it is valid.

In the next section, I will address the doubts just raised concerning each of these four premises, and reformulate Klein’s argument in a way that renders it invulnerable to those doubts. But before I do that, I want to say something about why it is that Klein describes the regress problem as the rather unfamiliar sounding question “which type of series of reasons and the account of warrant associated with it, if any, can increase the credibility of a non-evident proposition?” This unorthodox description of the regress problem may suggest that Klein means for infinitism to solve a problem that is very different from the historically familiar regress problem described in section I above. But this suggestion would be misleading: Klein clearly does think of infinitism as, among other things, a solution to the historically familiar regress problem. But then why does he offer such an eccentric description of the regress problem? In the next section, we will see that the answer to this question helps us to understand how Klein can rebut the four objections issued above against his argument.

**Section III: Defending Klein’s Argument from Objections**

As I said, there are apparent grounds for doubting premises 1, 3, 5, and 9 of Klein’s argument for infinitism. In this section, I would like to assess those grounds for doubt, and elaborate Klein’s argument in a way that renders it invulnerable to them. But in order to do this, I must first address a question that arose above, when we noted the difference between the orthodox presentation of the regress problem above, and Klein’s highly idiosyncratic presentation of the regress problem. The question is: why does Klein present the regress problem in such an idiosyncratic way? Once we know the answer to this question, we will be in a position to see how Klein can defend premise 1. Then we can go to see how he can defend premises 3, 5, and 9.

So how does Klein present the regress problem? He begins with a quote from Sextus Empiricus:

“The *locus classicus* of the regress problem is to be found in Sextus Empiricus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:

‘The later Skeptics hand down Five Modes leading to suspension, namely these: the first based on discrepancy, the second on the regress *ad infinitum*, the third on relativity, the fourth on hypothesis, the fifth on circular reasoning. That based on discrepancy leads us to find that with regard to the object presented there has arisen both amongst ordinary people and amongst the philosophers an interminable conflict because of which we are unable either to choose a thing or reject it, and so fall back on suspension. 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. The Mode based upon relativity… is that whereby the object has such or such an appearance in relation to the subject judging and to the concomitant percepts, but as to its real nature we suspend judgment. 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 judgment about both.’

“Although the three alternative strategies for solving the regress will be the focus of this essay, a brief discussion of the other two modes will be useful in understanding what initiates the regress.

“The Modes were recipes for avoiding dogmatism, i.e. the disposition to assent to non-evident propositions when it is not settled whether they are true. One could locate such a non-evident proposition either by noting that there was credible disagreement about it or by merely recognizing that there could be credible disagreement. For in order to avoid epistemic hubris, the recognition that our epistemic peers could sincerely disagree with us about the truth of some proposition forces us to regard it as requiring reasons in order to rise to the desired level of credibility.

“The *Regress Problem* can be put as follows: Which type of series of reasons and the account of warrant associated with it, if any, can increase the credibility of a non-evident proposition? Can a series with repeating propositions do so? Can one with a last member do so? Can one that is non-repeating and has no last member do so?” (Klein 2005a, 131 – 2)

It may seem puzzling that Klein describes the Sextus passage as the “*locus classicus* of the regress problem”, since it is not clear from that passage what “the regress problem” could be. Sextus is simply mentioning five ways in which the later skeptics attempted to induce suspension of judgment in their audience, but he does not, in that passage, describe anything that he takes to be a problem. It is Klein who identifies what he calls the “the regress problem”. But what is the relation between the problem that Klein identifies as such, and the five modes that Sextus mentions?

Klein points out that the five modes were intended as correctives to the tendency to assent to propositions the truth of which is not evident. Whenever it’s possible for epistemic peers to sincerely disagree as to the truth of a proposition, the truth of that proposition is not evident. But if the five modes lead us to suspend judgment concerning the truth of all such propositions, then must our judgment remain confined to those few propositions concerning which disagreement among epistemic peers is impossible (e.g., 1 + 1 = 2, I am conscious now)? The only way to answer this question in the negative is to find a way to guide our judgment concerning the truth of non-evident propositions. Klein takes the regress problem to be the problem of finding such ways, i.e., finding ways to guide our judgment concerning the truth of non-evident propositions. More precisely, since we cannot expect to find some small set of procedures to guide our judgment concerning the truth of any and all non-evident propositions, the problem is rather to specify the constraints on any such procedure: what would a procedure have to be like in order for it to guide our judgment concerning the truth of non-evident propositions? That is what Klein takes the regress problem to be.

But how is this very practical sounding “regress problem” related to the more familiar-sounding but highly theoretical regress problem described back in section I: the problem of understanding the structure of propositional justification? And why does Klein himself say nothing about how they are related? The more familiar-sounding problem is a theoretical problem concerning the structure of propositional justification. But what is propositional justification? We cannot explain it in terms of what a person *would* be justified in believing were she to believe it: such an account would have the absurd consequence that no one could ever be propositionally justified in believing that they don’t hold beliefs about their own beliefs. We also cannot explain propositional justification in terms of what justifies a person in holding a belief, for someone could have propositional justification for a belief that she does not hold. While it seems doubtful that we can give any non-circular account of propositional justification, the following at least is plausible: propositional justification is that *in light of which* a belief is justified.

Some internalists think that a belief can be justified in light of some factor or other only in virtue of the believer’s being somehow aware of that factor, and of its serving to justify the belief. But this form of internalism is highly controversial. There is, however, a weaker internalist thesis that, while still controversial, is more generally plausible: this is the thesis that a belief can be justified in light of some factor or other only in virtue of the believer’s *being capable, by means of reflection, of becoming aware* of that factor, and of its serving to justify the belief. Whatever justifications we possess cannot be beyond our reflective reach, even if they are not currently within our reflective grasp. I will henceforth call this the “reflective accessibility” constraint on propositional justification. As we will see, if Klein accepts this reasonable (albeit not uncontroversial) reflective accessibility constraint, then this would help to explain why he frames the regress problem in the way that he does, and also why he takes the argument for PAA offered above to be sound. For the remainder of this paper, I will therefore assume, for charity’s sake, that Klein accepts the reflective accessibility constraint on propositional justification.

Notice that the reflective accessibility constraint on propositional justification is compatible with a wide variety of views, including radically externalist views, concerning propositional justification: it is compatible with process reliabilism, indicator reliabilism, various versions of virtue theory, and even the recently propounded view that a belief is justified only if it is knowledgeably held. Each of these views is compatible with the claim that what gives a subject justification for holding a belief does so only by virtue of its being recognizable, upon reflection, as doing so. To say that justifiers need be recognizable as such is not to imply that they do not have some epistemically inaccessible properties as well.

We can take it, then, that if something constitutes propositional justification to believe that p, then it does so by virtue of the epistemic agent’s ability to recognize it (upon reflection) as constituting such justification. And so, for instance, a series of reasons can constitute a justification for S to believe that p only if that series of reasons is recognizable by S as constituting a justification to believe that p. But if S knows that her epistemic peers – those who share all of S’s reasons – could reasonably disagree with her about whether p is true, then S cannot also rationally regard her current reasons for believing that p to constitute a justification to believe that p: those reasons don’t suffice to rule out reasonable denial of p. (I assume, on Klein’s behalf, that, even if we can rationally regard reasons as somewhat permissive, we cannot rationally regard them as radically permissive. That is, we cannot rationally allow that a body of reasons sufficient to justify one in believing that p is also, on its own, sufficient to justify one in denying that p.) More generally, if S knows that p is not evident to her (if, say, all the evidence on the basis of which she believes p is evidence on which she could, by her own lights, equally reasonably believe something incompatible with p), then S cannot rationally take her current reasons for believing that p to constitute a justification for believing that p. In order for S to acquire something that she can recognize as a justification for believing that p, she must gain additional support for p, and this additional support must be in the form of something that S can, at least upon reflection, recognize as bolstering her justification for believing that p. And so, Klein’s own statement of the regress problem is simply the form that the familiar theoretical problem assumes when it concerns propositions that we know not to be evident and that we want to gain justification for believing. Klein’s regress problem is not an altogether different problem from the more familiar one stated in section I above, but rather a version of it that arises as a practical matter for agents who want to have justification for believing things that are not initially evident.

We established this conclusion by assuming that Klein accepts the reflective accessibility constraint on propositional justification. But, if propositional justifications are recognizable as such to the epistemic agent, then *each* of the person’s justifications must be recognizable to her as such. And if each of a person’s justifications is recognizable to her as such, then this suggests (though it does not imply) that, if the structure of an agent’s propositional justifications is finite, then that structure may perhaps be recognizable by her upon reflection. Just as my ability to see each Lego in a tower of Legos typically suffices for me to be able to see the whole tower as such, and my ability to hear each note in a sonata typically suffices for me to be able to hear the whole sonata as such, so too my ability to recognize each justification in a finite structure of justifications might suffice for me to be able to discern that structure as such. In other words, perhaps my reflective access to my justifications gives me reflective access to the structure formed by those justifications, at least assuming that structure is finite. While this claim, which I’ll heretofore call “structure accessibility” is far from obvious, it is not entirely implausible either. And, as we will see, attributing this assumption, along with the assumption of reflective accessibility, to Klein helps us to understand how he can rebut all of the objections raised above to his argument for PAA.

Recall that the objection to premise 1 was this: couldn’t PAA be false, and there be some foundationally justified propositions, even if nobody took any propositions to be foundationally justified? To see how Klein should respond to this objection, let’s first consider more carefully what is involved in someone taking a proposition p to be foundationally justified. Presumably, this need not involve something as conceptually sophisticated as *believing that* p is foundationally justified – that is a belief that very few people have the conceptual sophistication to hold, since very few people have the concept of *foundational propositional justification*. Taking p to be foundationally justified must be more conceptually primitive than that, if premise 1 is to be at all plausible. Could it involve as little as simply this: confidently believing that p, and also *not* regarding anything distinct from p as one’s reason for believing that p? No. While confidently believing that p might plausibly be regarded as a way of (implicitly) taking p to be justified, we cannot identify one’s failing to regard anything distinct from p as one’s reason for believing that p with taking one’s justification for p to be foundational: one might fail to regard anything distinct from p as one’s reason for believing that p simply because it doesn’t occur to one to think about one’s reason for believing that p. It would be more plausible to think of one’s modally robust disposition – even upon reflection – not to regard anything distinct from p as one’s reason for believing that p as a way of taking one’s justification for p to be foundational. It is not easy to see how a creature lacking the concept of foundational justification could take a particular belief of theirs to be foundationally justified by virtue of anything less than having such a modally robust disposition with respect to one of their own confidently held beliefs.

But notice that, if PAA is not true, then the structure of a person’s reasons for any particular proposition is finite. And if that structure is finite, then, according to structure accessibility, that structure is reflectively accessible as such to that person. Furthermore, if PAA is not true, then there is at least one proposition such that S is justified in believing that proposition but S has no reason to believe it: the proposition is foundationally justified. Finally, if structural accessibility is true, and if some proposition is foundationally justified for me, then I should be able to recognize, upon reflection, that that proposition is foundationally justified for me.

Thus, I suggest that Klein can defend premise 1 of his argument above as follows:

1. If PAA is not true, then there is some proposition p that is foundationally justified for someone S.
2. If PAA is not true, then S’s structure of reasons is finite.
3. If structural accessibility is true and S’s structure of reasons is finite, then S can recognize her structure of reasons upon reflection.
4. If S can recognize her structure of reasons upon reflection, and there is some proposition p that is foundationally justified for S, then S can recognize upon reflection that p is foundationally justified for S.
5. If PAA is not true, and if structural accessibility is true, then there is some proposition p that S can recognize upon reflection to be foundationally justified for S. (from a, b, c, and d)
6. If S can recognize upon reflection that p is foundationally justified for S, then S can rationally defend some beliefs of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition.
7. Structural accessibility is true. (Assumption, attributed to Klein for sake of charity.)

Premise 1: If PAA is not true, then there are possible cases in which someone can rationally defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she takes to be a foundationally justified proposition.

Notice that Premise 1 of the argument above follows from a – g, and the only controversial move in that argument is g (viz., structural accessibility). If we attribute to Klein an acceptance of structural accessibility – rendered at least somewhat plausible in light of the reflective accessibility constraint on justification – then Klein is in a position to establish premise 1 on the basis of what he is committed to regarding as a sound argument. This would suffice to rebut the envisaged objection to premise 1.

Now recall that the objection to premise 3 was this: couldn’t someone rationally both defend a belief of hers by appeal to what she took to be a foundationally justified proposition, and also have no view on the issue of whether foundationally justified propositions are likely to be true? Once again, this seems to be clearly possible: the issue of likely truth might never have occurred to the agent in question. But the question is not whether a particular psychological state is possible; the question is rather whether a particular psychological state can be rational. Can it be rational *simultaneously* to defend a belief by appeal to what you take to be a foundationally justified reason, and also to refrain from regarding foundationally justified reasons as probably true? No; here’s the argument:

(a’) If you can rationally defend a belief of yours by appeal to some reason r, then you can rationally take r to be your reason for holding that belief. (This follows from the accessibility constraint on justification.)

(b’) You can rationally take r to be your reason for holding a belief only if you can rationally take r to be a good reason for holding a belief. (If you took r to not be a good reason for the belief, but to be your one and only reason for the belief, you could then no longer clearly count as holding the belief; how can you endorse the content of a belief that you hold for what you yourself take to be a bad reason?)

(c’) You can rationally take r to be a good reason for holding a belief only if you can rationally take r to be at least probably true.

(d’) If you can rationally defend a belief of yours by appeal to some reason r, then you can rationally take r to be at least probably true. (by a’ – c’)

But notice that, if this argument from (a’) – (d’) is sound, its soundness can be recognized simply by reflection on the argument and its premises. And reflection on the argument reveals that its soundness is independent of the value of r. Thus, by reflection on the argument above, we can reach the following general conclusion:

(e’) For any reason r, if you can rationally take r to be a good reason for holding a belief, then you can rationally take r to be probably true.

In other words, what you rationally regard as your reason for belief is such that you are rationally required to regard it as probably true. This conclusion holds independent of whether the reason at issue is foundationally justified or not: the foundationally justified reasons are not going to be different from other reasons in this respect. And so, in general:

(f’) What you rationally regard as your foundationally justified reasons for belief are also rationally regarded as probably true.

In short, what you rationally regard as a foundationally justified proposition is also something that you rationally should regard as probably true. Failing to regard it in this way would be failing to believe a conclusion that you could know to be true by reflection alone, given the accessibility constraint on justification. Such a failure would be a failure of rationality (even if not a gross or culpable form of irrationality). Thus, Klein can rebut the envisaged objection to premise 3.

Recall that the objection to premise 5 was as follows: couldn’t one rationally believe that a foundationally justified proposition is likely to be true, and yet still have no available reason for believing that proposition? Her belief that the proposition is likely to be true might seem not to provide her with such a reason if that belief is itself based on that very proposition; in that case, by PAC, her belief that the foundationally justified proposition is likely to be true could not be a reason for her to believe the foundationally justified proposition in question. But recall, from our discussion of the objection to premise 3, that her belief that the foundationally justified proposition is likely to be true is justified by dint of her reflection on an argument (a’) – (f’). And none of (a’) – (f’) can themselves be identical to the foundationally justified proposition in question. So the envisaged objection to premise 5 fails: you have a reason for believing that the foundationally justified propositions is likely to be true that is not itself directly justified on the basis of that foundationally justified proposition (even if its justificatory chain eventually terminates in some foundationally justified proposition – a possibility that the present argument is supposed to rule out eventually, not to assume away).

Finally, recall the objection to premise 9: couldn’t there be circumstances under which one could rationally defend one’s beliefs by appeal to what one took to be a foundationally justified proposition, even if one could not rationally defend them by appeal to what one correctly took to be a foundationally justified proposition? The structural accessibility constraint on finite justifications dictates a negative answer to this question. If that constraint holds, then, even if you don’t know, or have any views about, what justifications you have to believe various propositions, these facts about what justifications you have are at least in principle accessible to you upon reflection. If there are no possible cases in which you rationally defend a belief of yours by appeal to what you correctly take to be a foundationally justified proposition, then, by structural accessibility, this cannot be simply because there are no possible cases in which you correctly identify those propositions that are foundationally justified for you. It also cannot be because the correctness of your identification of a foundationally justified proposition as such somehow prevents you from rationally defending a belief of yours by appeal to that proposition: the correctness of your identification could not make it any less rational for you to defend a belief of yours by appeal to that proposition than it would be otherwise. So, if there are no possible cases in which you rationally defend a belief by appeal to what you correctly take to be a foundationally justified proposition, that can only be because there are no possible cases in which you rationally defend of belief of yours by appeal to what you take – correctly or not – to be a foundationally justified proposition. The envisaged challenge to premise 9 thus fails.

Given the unfamiliar way in which Klein frames the regress problem, it is charitable to interpret him as accepting the accessibility constraint on justification. And if he accepts the accessibility constraint, then he is also likely to accept the structural accessibility constraint on finite justification: while the latter does not follow from the former, it is made plausible by it. But if Klein accepts both the accessibility constraint on justification and the structural accessibility constraint on finite justification, then he can rebut all of the envisaged objections to his argument for PAA. It seems, therefore, that Klein’s argument for PAA is as solid as the accessibility constraint and the structural accessibility constraint on finite justifications. While neither of these last two constraints is obvious, neither is implausible. Klein’s case for PAA, while not airtight, is nonetheless much more plausible than has generally been assumed, especially to someone inclined to accept the accessibility constraint on justification.

Of course, much of the work that I’ve done has been done for the sake of charitable interpretation, and perhaps I have not succeeded in correctly interpreting Klein’s argument. But even if that is so, I have still set out an argument against PAA, and so for IPJ and IDJ, and this argument is itself worth taking seriously, even if it is not an argument that Klein himself wanted to espouse.

**Conclusion: A Better Reply to Klein?**

I have defended (what I take to be the best version of) Klein’s argument for PAA, and if PAA is true, then FPJ is false. Since PAC is so widely accepted, Klein does not argue for it, and if PAC is true, then CPJ is false. But if we grant Klein that FPJ and CPJ are both false, must we then accept IPJ as the only possible alternative? Klein thinks so, and nobody, so far as I know, has challenged him on this point. But I think that this is where his argument for infinitism might be most fruitfully challenged. Recall our earlier statement of the options:

FPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time is finite and contains no element more than once. CPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time contains some elements more than once. And IPJ is the view that the evidential ancestry of any proposition that is justified for a person at a time is infinite and contains no element more than once.

But, though we followed Klein in using the term “evidential ancestry” in stating these views, we also followed Klein in not explaining what the term denotes. Could it be that the term “evidential ancestry”, as Klein uses it, is ambiguous, and that on one reading FPJ is true and on the other reading CPJ is true, but that on neither reading are any of FPJ, CPJ, or IPJ all true? That is the proposal that I would like to defend.

Recall Lewis Carroll’s story of the Tortoise and Achilles; one moral of the story is that we must distinguish the premises of an inference from the rule governing the inference. For a conclusion to be established inferentially, not only must the premises be true, but the inference must also be valid. The truth of the premises is not sufficient to establish the conclusion, unless the inference is valid. The justification of the conclusion thus depends not simply on the reasons given in support of that conclusion (i.e., the premises cited); it depends also upon the validity of the inference from those reasons.

Just as there are these two distinct components in the inferential justification of a conclusion, I suggest that *all* propositional justification contains two such distinct components. There are the reasons in light of which a claim is justified – reasons that must themselves be, as Klein says, objectively and subjectively available if they are to justify. And then there is the relation – whether logical, probabilistic, or what have you – between those reasons, on the one hand, and the claim made on their basis, on the other: a relation that must be suitable for the claim to be justified in light of those reasons. If the term “evidential ancestry” denotes only the first set of factors, I suggest, FPJ is true: reasons eventually bottom out in justifiers that do not require, and cannot receive, justification. Such justifiers might include, say, its intuitively seeming to me as if addition is commutative (an intuitive seeming that I have by virtue of my possessing some mastery of the skill of adding), or its visually seeming to me that there are clouds in the sky now (a visual seeming that I have by virtue of my possessing a mature visual system). Even if the possibility of my having justification by virtue of these seemings requires me to have justification for believing that these seemings are themselves veridical, the latter justification is not part of the “evidential anecestry” of the propositions justified by these seemings. My justification for believing that my seemings are veridical is a necessary condition of those seemings serving to justify various propositions for me, but that does not imply that it is itself one of the reasons for believing those various propositions.

If, however, the term “evidential ancestry” denotes a broader category that includes the second set of factors mentioned above, then CPJ is true: what serves as a justificatory relation between a premise and a conclusion can also be made explicit as a proposition concerning the validity of that relation, and then that proposition can be used as a reason to believe the premise. For example, suppose I can prove that modus ponens is a valid rule of inference, and my proof of this conclusion does not itself proceed by means of modus ponens. Still, the proof must proceed by means of some rules or other. Then, if I prove the validity of those rules, that proof will itself have to proceed by means of some rules or other. While there need not be any rules that must necessarily be used in order to prove their own validity, any proof of the validity of any rule must use some rules or other. And there does not seem to be any problem with using one rule in a proof of the validity of another, and then using the latter in a proof of the validity of the former. Coherence here is a virtue, not a vice. And so, when “evidential ancestry” is interpreted in the broader way, there is no reason to accept PAC.

When Fred appeals to the foundational proposition f, and then Doris asks Fred whether autonomously warranted propositions are likely to be true, Fred should answer “yes, they are, but that is not my reason for believing f, for f is justified foundationally, not on the basis of any reason at all.” And when Doris asks Fred why he thinks that autonomously warranted propositions are likely to be true, Fred should not be worried about answering that question by appeal to considerations to which he appealed earlier, and in the defense of which he earlier cited f: such appeal would not constitute circular reasoning, since Fred is not reasoning both from f to those considerations, and also back again. Fred is reasoning from f to those considerations, but then he’s reasoning from the latter considerations to the propositions that autonomously warranted propositions (like f) are likely to be true. He needs to be justified in believing that last proposition in order to be justified in believing f, but that doesn’t imply that that last proposition – or any other proposition – is what makes him justified in believing f.

To sum up: Klein’s argument for PAA is much more plausible than it is typically understood to be. Nonetheless, his argument from PAA and PAC to IPJ is unsuccessful. There is a narrow interpretation of “evidential ancestry” on which PAC is true and PAA is false: on this narrow interpretation, evidential ancestry might well have a foundation. There is also a broader interpretation of “evidential ancestry” on which PAA is true and PAC is false: on this broader interpretation, evidential ancestry might well go in a circle. But on neither reading are both PAA and PAC true, and so on neither reading does Klein’s argument for IPJ succeed.[[9]](#footnote-9)

1. Klein 2005a, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Turri, 2009, 210 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Klein 1999, 298 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Klein 1999, 298 – 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That exchange consists in Klein 2005a, Ginet 2005a, Klein 2005b, and Ginet 2005b. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Klein 2005a, 133 – 4 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Williams 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that this particular argument for PAA (and thus against the possibility of foundational justification) is not addressed by the considerations that Turri 2009 uses to defend foundationalism. Turri argues that the foundationalist can do just as well as the infinitist can in explaining how it is possible to give a non-question-begging defense of any non-evident proposition that one believes. But Turri does not engage with Klein’s argument, laid out above, to the effect that it is impossible for *any* proposition to be foundationally justified. Of course if we can prove that it is impossible for any proposition to be foundationally justified, then it doesn’t matter whether foundationalism has the resources to solve this or that philosophical problem, since it is anyway demonstrably false. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. I am grateful to John Turri for his very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)