

Is Klein an infinitist about doxastic justification?

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Abstract This paper is a response to Peter Klein’s “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Progress of Reasoning” (also in this issue of this journal). After briefly discussing what Klein says about the requirement, for doxastic justification, that a belief be formed in the right way, I’ll make the following three points: Klein’s solution to the regress problem isn’t an infinitist solution, Klein’s position on doxastic justification faces a troubling dilemma, and Klein’s objection to foundationalism fails.

Keywords infinitism · foundationalism

Peter Klein deserves the gratitude and respect of the philosophical community for making us work so hard to defend our dismissal of infinitism—a view that many thought was obviously false. He still hasn’t managed to shake my conviction that infinitism is a mistake though he has certainly demonstrated that it isn’t an easy matter to refute a canny defender of it. In this paper, I will argue not only that his latest attempt to defend infinitism fails to defend the conclusion he arrives at but also that the conclusion he arrives at isn’t infinitism.

I confess that I’ve never been much interested in propositional justification. Insofar as I’ve been interested in epistemic justification, it’s doxastic justification that I care about. There’s wide agreement between externalists and internalists and between skeptics and nonskeptics that knowledge requires doxastically justified belief. There’s less agreement about whether propositional justification is required or at least about whether it’s worth mentioning in an analysis of knowledge. Moreover, as Klein himself points out (in the Section “Infinitism is the only alternative that can solve the regress problem” of his 2006), the regress problem is concerned not with propositional justification but with doxastic justification. Of course, this doesn’t show that one shouldn’t be interested in propositional justification. I mention these considerations only to explain why I care about doxastic justification and why I’ll be ignoring propositional justification in these comments.

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In what follows, I'll focus first on what Klein says about the requirement, for doxastic justification, that a belief be formed in the right way. Then I'll make the following three points: (a) Klein's solution to the regress problem isn't an infinitist solution; (b) Klein's position on doxastic justification faces a troubling dilemma; and (c) Klein's objection to foundationalism fails.

Doxastic justification and the basing requirement

Klein says in the Section "Propositional and doxastic justification" of his 2006 that a person's belief is doxastically justified only if it is held in an epistemically responsible manner—that is, only if the belief is formed in the right way or held for the right reasons. I have two complaints related to this point. The first has to do with what Klein *avoids* saying: he seems to resist saying that the belief must be properly *based* and he clearly resists saying that it must be *caused* in the right way. But I don't see any good reason for him to resist either claim. Klein admits that a belief's doxastic justification has to do with the manner in which it is held or formed. And he says that it must be held for the right reasons. I take it then that he is requiring, for a belief B's doxastic justification, that B be held *because* of some adequate reason the person has for it. But this is just to agree that it must be *properly based* on some adequate reason the person has for it. Is there a causal element to this basing? This isn't the place for a full-fledged discussion of that point. But, for the record, I'll just note that I have yet to see an example of a belief that is plausibly thought to be justified in virtue of being based on something, X, even though X isn't a causal contributor to the belief.¹

My second complaint in connection with Klein's the Section "Propositional and doxastic justification" discussion of the basing requirement on doxastic justification is that he later seems to contradict that discussion. In the Section "Propositional and doxastic justification", he makes it clear that a belief is doxastically justified only if it is formed or held in the right way for the right reasons. Yet later, in the Section "Further clarification and defense of infinitism", he speaks of what:

... lies at the heart of the infinitist's requirement for doxastic justification, namely that we be able to produce reasons for our beliefs. The issue is not what causes our beliefs; but rather whether we can cite a reason for our beliefs.²

The point here seems to be that doxastic justification requires not that our beliefs be caused in the right way but that we be *able to* cite a reason for our beliefs. In what sense must we be able to do this? Klein concludes that infinitists can reasonably say that having easy (physical) access to an ordinary encyclopedia containing adequate evidence for p, is sufficient for being able to cite a reason for believing p. But this is a

¹ A priori beliefs in necessary mathematical truths don't provide obvious examples of the sort I say I can't find. It is sometimes pointed out that mathematical beliefs are about the abstract realm of numbers and that things in that realm are causally inert, so that a priori mathematical beliefs can't be causally based on them. But according to what I take to be the usual understanding of belief grounds (the things on which beliefs are based), they are other mental states of the subject. So an a priori mathematical belief is based on, for example, a mental state such as the seeming obviousness of its content, not on any abstract item in the realm of numbers. And this seeming obviousness is itself a mental state that *can* enter into causal relations.

² See the Section "Further clarification and defense of infinitism", question (iii) of Klein (2006).

far cry from what he initially said about doxastic justification. For clearly, the fact that that person has an encyclopedia in the next room containing adequate evidence for *p*, is consistent with that person forming or holding her belief that *p* in an epistemically irresponsible manner, in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons.³ Contrary to what Klein says, therefore, when it comes to doxastic justification, the issue is *not* whether there are easily available reasons we could cite; the issue is what our beliefs are in fact *based on*.

Klein's solution to the regress problem

Let's turn now to an important problem related to doxastic justification: the epistemic regress problem. Consider the following reductio version of the regress argument for the foundationalist thesis that our beliefs can be noninferentially (doxastically) justified:

1. A belief of ours can be justified only if it is inferentially justified. [assume for reductio]
2. A belief of ours can be inferentially justified only if the belief from which it is inferred is a justified belief.
3. Therefore, either our beliefs can be justified via circular reasoning or they can be justified via infinite chains of reasoning or it isn't possible for our beliefs to be justified. [from 1 and 2]
4. Our beliefs can't be justified via circular reasoning.
5. Our beliefs can't be justified via infinite chains of reasoning.
6. It is possible for our beliefs to be justified.
7. Therefore, 3 is false. [from 4, 5, and 6]
8. 3 is both true and false. [from 3 and 7]
9. Therefore, 1 is false (i.e., our beliefs *can* noninferentially justified). [by reductio, from 1 to 8]

The fact that this argument is valid and has only four premises makes it clear that its foundationalist conclusion can be rejected in the following four ways:

- (i) *The Unjustified Foundations View*: our beliefs can be inferentially justified even if the beliefs from which they are inferred are unjustified (so premise 2 is false).
- (ii) *Linear coherentism*: our beliefs can be justified via circular reasoning (so premise 4 is false).⁴
- (iii) *Infinitism*: our beliefs can be justified via an infinite chain of reasoning (so premise 5 is false).
- (iv) *Radical Skepticism*: it's impossible for our beliefs to be justified (so premise 6 is false)

³ Klein also requires that the subject is such that she would check the encyclopedia for this evidence were doing so required in the context. But the satisfaction of that further condition (i.e., being such that she would do such checking) is—even when combined with the satisfaction of the easy access requirement—also consistent with the person forming or holding her belief that *p* in an epistemically irresponsible manner, in the wrong way and for the wrong reasons.

⁴ This differs from the holistic coherentist position which accepts the foundationalist thesis. According to holistic coherentists, a belief can be (doxastically) justified in virtue of being a member of a coherent set of beliefs, even if it isn't *inferred from* or *based on* any of those other beliefs. See Plantinga's (1993, ch. 4) for further discussion of how coherentists who reject circular reasoning are a species of foundationalists.

Given that Klein recognizes that the regress problem has to do with doxastic justification and that his stated purpose (in the opening sentence of his 2006) is to explain how infinitism solves this problem, one would expect him to endorse option (iii), which denies premise 5. But what we in fact find is that his solution to the regress problem is to endorse option (i), which rejects premise 2.⁵

According to Klein, the infinitist thinks that S's belief that *p* is doxastically justified if and only if "S has engaged in tracing the reasons in virtue of which the proposition *p* is justified far enough forward to satisfy the contextually determined requirements".⁶ As I understand Klein's view here, he is saying there is or could be some context *C* in which a person *S* holds a belief, *B*₁, and she bases *B*₁ on (holds it because of, infers it from) her further belief, *B*₂. Her belief *B*₂ is based on her belief *B*₃ and so on down to *B*₁₀, her belief on which she bases her belief *B*₉. In context *C*, by tracing her reasons for *B*₁ this far, *S* has done enough to satisfy the contextually determined requirements for *B*₁'s doxastic justification.⁷

In order to reject the foundationalist solution to the regress problem, Klein must endorse the following view:

K1: For a belief *B* to be doxastically justified, it must be based on some other belief.

From this we may conclude that since *B*₁₀ in the scenario described above isn't based on some other belief, belief *B*₁₀ isn't justified. Now suppose Klein combined K1 with:

K2: A belief can be doxastically justified by being based on some other belief only if that other belief is itself doxastically justified.

From this it would follow that *B*₉ in the above scenario isn't justified, since *B*₉ is inferred from *B*₁₀, which isn't justified. But then *B*₈ wouldn't be justified either, and so on right down to *B*₁. Since that clearly conflicts with Klein's description of the scenario, he must reject K2. And to reject K2 is to deny premise 2 from the regress argument given earlier. It's to endorse the unjustified foundations view. Hence, Klein's solution to the regress problem is not an infinitist solution.

A dilemma for Klein

Klein must either accept or reject K2. Suppose he rejects it, as he seems to in his 2006. Then he endorses the unjustified foundations view. One problem with embracing this horn of the dilemma is that, as I just noted above, it doesn't provide the infinitist solution to the regress problem that Klein promised to explain. But he could just take that promise back and acknowledge that his solution to the regress problem appeals to the unjustified foundations view. However, this isn't the most

⁵ In fact, his position is a contextualist version of the unjustified foundations view. This contextualism isn't the recently discussed variety defended by Lewis (1996) and DeRose (1992). Rather, it's more like the old-fashioned sort of contextualism defended by Annis (1978).

⁶ See the beginning of the Section "Further clarification and defense of infinitism" of Klein (2006).

⁷ Obviously I'm assuming that "tracing out one's reasons" involves basing one's beliefs on the further beliefs offered as reasons. But this seems eminently plausible given that this tracing out of reasons is supposed to contribute to doxastic justification, something that Klein thinks of as depending on one's holding the belief in question for the right reasons.

serious problem with rejecting K2. The most serious problem is that it commits him to the view that a belief can be justified even if the reason one has for it (i.e., the belief it is based on or inferred from) is an unjustified belief! One of Klein's main complaints about foundationalism is that it makes justification inappropriately easy to obtain by saying that beliefs can be justified without reasons—i.e., without being based on other beliefs. Klein thinks that, in order to be doxastically justified, all beliefs need to be based on reasons in the form of other beliefs. Given the spirit of his complaints against foundationalism, one would expect him to require these reasons to be *good* reasons. But apparently even bad reasons will do, since the reason can be an unjustified belief.⁸ The suggestion that a belief can be doxastically justified via inference from an unjustified belief seems both highly implausible and contrary to the spirit of Klein's complaint that foundationalism makes justification too easy to come by.

If, on the other hand, Klein *accepts* K2 along with K1, then he is committed to requiring for doxastic justification an infinite number of actual beliefs, each of which is based on another in a nonrepeating series. But it seems completely clear that none of us has an infinite number of actual beliefs, each of which is based on another in such a series. (As a response to this concern, Klein's claim that we have an infinite number of reasons *available* to us is beside the point.) I assume that the reason Klein doesn't accept K2 in his 2006 (even though doing so would be more in accord with his claim to be an *infinetist* about doxastic justification) is that he agrees with me that this would make him obviously committed to global skepticism.

In defense of foundationalism

Klein makes it clear that he thinks one important consideration in support of infinitism is that its most plausible competitor, foundationalism, is mistaken. I want to turn next, therefore, to his objection to foundationalism about doxastic justification. Klein asks us to imagine a conversation between Sally the Skeptic and Fred the Foundationalist. Fred begins by asserting *p* and Sally asks his reason for thinking *p* is true. Fred gives his reason *r* and Sally asks what his reason is for thinking *r* is true. This continues on until Fred mentions his belief *b* which is a basic reason, one which is not based on another belief. A foundationalist will think Fred needn't give or even have another belief on which *b* is based, for Fred's belief *b* can be justified noninferentially, in virtue of having some property *F* on which noninferential justification supervenes.⁹ Here is Klein's response (from the Section "Infinitism is the only alternative that can solve the regress problem" of his 2006):

Sally (or Fred's inner voice) can grant that *b* has *F*. But she now asks Fred to consider this question: Are propositions with *F* likely to be true? Fred has only three responses available if he is to remain acting as a responsible epistemic agent seeking to retain only those beliefs worthy of being retained. He could, of course,

⁸ In correspondence, Klein has said that not only does *B*'s doxastic inferential justification *not* require the justification of the belief on which *B* is based, it also doesn't require that the person holding *B* have propositional justification for *B*'s content (which can be had, according to Klein, only if that person has available an infinite number of nonrepeating reasons for *B*'s content). Thus, he thinks *S*'s belief *B* can be doxastically justified despite the fact that (a) *S*'s belief *B* is based on an unjustified belief and (b) *S* lacks propositional justification for *B*'s content.

⁹ For my views on how Fred should continue this discussion, see Bergmann (2004).

get bored or see what's coming and flee – reminiscent of some of the characters in a Platonic dialogue. The context is such that if Fred is interested in holding doxastically justified beliefs, these are his possible responses:

1. Propositions with F are not likely to be true.
2. It's just as likely that propositions with F are true as it is that they are not true.
3. Propositions with F are likely to be true.

Notice that Klein is here making the following claim:

K3: If Fred sees what is coming and refrains from making any of those three responses, he is holding unexamined beliefs and is not an epistemically responsible agent.

K3 is a crucial component in Klein's response. If K3 is mistaken, then this objection to foundationalism doesn't go through. And K3 *is* mistaken. The foundationalist may be aware of Klein's claim that "unexamined beliefs aren't worth having". However, as Klein notes, the foundationalist can see what's coming. For either the allegedly required examination could be satisfied by basing *b* on an *un*justified belief or the allegedly required examination takes K2 for granted. But examination of one's beliefs that involves inference from an unjustified belief is clearly useless. And requiring examination that takes K2 for granted leads immediately to global skepticism, which makes such a requirement seem implausible. So Fred the foundationalist will reject Klein's examination requirement and refrain from asserting or believing any of 1–3. In doing so, he is *not* being an epistemically irresponsible agent. He's simply rejecting a highly implausible examination requirement. Thus K3 is false and Klein's objection to foundationalism doesn't go through.¹⁰

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