

A reply to Cling’s “The epistemic regress problem”

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ABSTRACT: Andrew Cling presents a new version of the epistemic regress problem, and argues that intuitionist foundationalism, social contextualism, holistic coherentism, and infinitism fail to solve it. Cling’s discussion is quite instructive, and deserving of careful consideration. But, I argue, Cling’s discussion is not in all respects decisive. I argue that Cling’s dilemma argument against *holistic coherentism* fails.

KEYWORDS: Circular regresses of reasons · Cling · Coherence · Epistemic regress problem · Holistic coherentism

1 Introduction

Andrew Cling (2008) presents a new version of the epistemic regress problem, and argues that intuitionist foundationalism, social contextualism, holistic coherentism, and infinitism fail to solve it.¹ Cling’s discussion is quite instructive, and deserving of careful consideration. But, I argue, Cling’s discussion is not in all respects decisive. I argue that Cling’s dilemma argument against *holistic coherentism* fails. In section 2, I explain Cling’s dilemma argument. In section 3, I argue that Cling’s dilemma argument is unsuccessful. Last, in section 4, I conclude.

2 Cling’s dilemma argument explained

I follow Cling in the following preliminaries (pp. 402-403). *Implication is necessary for support*: A proposition P_1 supports—i.e., is a reason, or is evidence, for—a proposition P_0 for a subject S only if P_1 implies P_0 , by standing in a (relevant) logical or quasi-logical relation, e.g. logical entailment, to P_0 .² But, implication is *not sufficient* for support.

¹ All references to Cling are to Cling (2008).

² When is it that P_1 implies P_0 , by standing in a (relevant) logical or quasi-logical relation to P_0 ? Cling mentions three possible answers: when P_1 entails or inductively implies P_0 ;

Consider the propositions *I have \$10 million* and *I have at least \$5 million*. The former logically entails the latter, and so implies the latter. But, alas, the former does not support the latter for me; the former does not provide me with a reason, or evidence, to believe the latter. Things would be different if I had a reason to believe *I have \$10 million*. However, I have no such reason. A sequence of propositions $\sigma = \langle P_0, P_1, \dots, P_n (\dots) \rangle$ is *I-ordered* (implication ordered) just in case (i) σ has propositions in at least its first two places and (ii) every member of σ is implied by its successor, if it has one.³ A sequence of propositions $\sigma = \langle P_0, P_1, \dots, P_n (\dots) \rangle$ is *S-ordered* (support ordered) for a subject *S* (at a time *t*) just in case (i) σ is I-ordered and (ii) every member of σ is supported, for *S* (at *t*), by its successor, if it has one.⁴ An *endless regress of reasons* is an S-ordered sequence of propositions every member of which has a successor. An endless regress of reasons is *circular* (or noninfinite) just in case it has infinitely many *filled places* but not infinitely many *components*, and is *infinite* just in case it has infinitely many components, not just infinitely many filled places.⁵ The sequence $\sigma_S = \langle I \text{ have three sisters, The number of my sisters} = \sqrt{9}, I \text{ have three sisters, } \dots \rangle$ has infinitely many filled places but not infinitely many components. The sequence $\sigma_T = \langle I \text{ am at least 7 feet tall, I am at least 8 feet tall, I am at least 9 feet tall, } \dots \rangle$ has infinitely many filled places and infinitely many components.⁶

when the probability of P_0 given P_1 is sufficiently high; when P_1 stands in an irreducibly epistemic relationship to P_0 such that P_1 would justify P_0 (p. 402). (When Cling gives the second possible answer, he writes: "the probability of P_1 given P_0 is sufficiently high" (p. 402). I take it that, since the question is of when it is that P_1 implies P_0 , not of when it is that P_0 implies P_1 , what Cling means to say is: the probability of P_0 given P_1 is sufficiently high.)

³ For any P_i in σ such that P_i has a successor, the successor of P_i is P_{i+1} .

⁴ This construal of the notion of an S-ordered sequence differs from Cling's initial construal (p. 402) in making no use of the notion of *relevant accessibility*. I take it, though, that, as Cling understands the notion of relevant accessibility, if every member of σ is supported, for *S* (at *t*), by its successor, if it has one, then the members of σ are relevantly accessible to *S* (at *t*).

⁵ When Cling initially defines the notion of an *infinite* endless regress of reasons (p. 403), he does not refer to the other kind of endless regress of reasons as "circular." But Cling adopts this terminology elsewhere in the paper.

⁶ The claim is not that σ_S is a circular *endless regress of reasons*, or that σ_T is an infinite *endless regress of reasons*. Perhaps neither σ_S nor σ_T is S-ordered. The claim is simply that σ_S has infinitely many filled places but not infinitely many components, and σ_T has infinitely many filled places and infinitely many components.

Cling argues that the epistemic regress problem assumes just three theses:

- (1) *Reasons are Supported*: Only supported propositions provide support.
- (2) *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*: Propositions supported only by endless S-ordered sequences are unsupported.
- (3) *Some Proposition is Supported*: At least one proposition is supported by a proposition.⁷

(1)-(3), Cling argues, are jointly inconsistent:

(1)-(3) are jointly inconsistent. *Reasons are Supported* implies that any proposition P_0 is supported by a proposition P_1 only if P_0 and P_1 are the first two members of an endless—infinite or circular—regress of reasons. Given *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* it follows that no proposition is supported. This contradicts *Some Proposition is Supported*. (p. 405).

Yet, if Cling is right, each of (1)-(3) is independently plausible (pp. 405-408). Thus the problem—the epistemic regress problem.⁸

It might seem that (2) is obviously false. For, it might seem that (2) implies: If P_0 is supported by an endless S-ordered sequence of propositions, hence, *is supported*, and P_0 , though, is not supported in some other manner, then P_0 *is not supported*. But this is not how Cling means (2) to be understood. Cling means (2) to be understood as saying: If support requires an endless regress of reasons, then there is no support—no proposition is supported. Cling's formal expression of (2) is:

$$(\forall x)[(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow ERSxy) \rightarrow \sim(\exists z)Sxz].$$

The variables "x," "y," and "z" range over propositions. "Sxy" means that x is supported by y . "ERSxy" means that x and y are the first two members, in that order, of an endless (circular or infinite) regress of reasons. So, formally speaking, (2) says: For any x , if for

⁷ The names and wording of these theses are Cling's (pp. 404-405). I clarify (2) below.

⁸ Cling does not claim that there is no solution to the epistemic regress problem. Cling's claim is more modest (though still quite strong): Each of intuitionist foundationalism, social contextualism, holistic coherentism, and infinitism fails to solve the epistemic regress problem. Cf. Cling (2009).

any y , x 's being supported by y requires that x and y be the first two members, in that order, of an endless regress of reasons, then there is no z such that x is supported by z .⁹

Cling characterizes Laurence Bonjour's coherentism (1976, 1985) as a form of holistic coherentism, on which "a believed proposition is justified for a person S just in case the propositions S believes are coherent" (p. 417). Cling argues that holistic coherentism (so understood) faces a fatal dilemma:

Are justified beliefs supported (*Justification Requires Support*)? . . . If justification requires coherence and coherence requires that the believed propositions in a coherent set be supported by supported propositions, then justification requires an endless regress. If, on the other hand, a set of beliefs can be coherent without every member of the set being supported by a supported proposition, then either support is not required for justification—*Justification Requires Support* is false—or unsupported propositions can provide support—*Reasons are Supported* is false. So either holistic coherentism does not solve the regress problem or it is a version of foundationalism, contextualism, or some other theory incompatible with *Reasons are Supported*. (p. 417)

Let's grant the second horn of this dilemma argument.¹⁰ I want to consider the question: Does Cling establish the first horn?

Implicit in the first horn is *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*. The charge, more fully put, is this: If, on holistic coherentism, justification requires coherence and coherence, in turn, requires that each of the propositions believed be supported by a supported proposition, then justification requires an endless regress—that is, justification requires support and support, in turn, requires an endless regress—and so holistic coherentism runs afoul of *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, and, thus, holistic coherentism fails to solve the epistemic regress problem. So, to establish the first horn, Cling needs to establish *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*.

Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* has two main sub-arguments. The first is meant to show that *No Proposition is Supported only by*

⁹ Cling's formal expressions of (1) and (3) are, respectively, " $(\forall x)(\forall y)(Sxy \rightarrow (\exists z)Syz)$ " and " $(\exists x)(\exists y)Sxy$." Cf. Cling (2009).

¹⁰ I find it plausible that holistic coherentists *as such* are committed to *Justification Requires Support* and *Reasons are Supported*. Regardless, my interest is in answers to the epistemic regress problem on which *Justification Requires Support* and *Reasons are Supported* are correct.

Endless Regresses holds for the case of *circular* endless regresses (p. 407). The second, in turn, is meant to show that *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* holds for the case of *infinite* endless regresses (p. 407). We can set aside the second main sub-argument. If holistic coherentism requires, for support, an endless regress, it requires a *circular*, not an infinite, endless regress.¹¹

The first main sub-argument of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* can be seen as having three main parts. In the first, Cling argues, by example, that a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions is not S-ordered *per se* and so some further condition must be met (p. 407). Then, in the second main part of the argument (which is given in the final two sentences of the passage below), Cling argues that the further condition in question must include an *independent* reason to believe some member of the sequence:

Consider, then, a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions $\sigma_C = \langle P_0, P_1, \dots, P_0 \rangle$. Each member of σ_C is conditionally supported: P_n is supported *if* P_{n+1} is, but σ_C is not S-ordered *per se*. The members of σ_C must satisfy some additional condition. This condition must include an independent reason to believe a member of σ_C . For without a reason P_1' —a reason not already a member of σ_C —to believe some member of σ_C , the sequence will be arbitrary from the believer's own point of view. (p. 407, emphasis Cling's)

Last, in the third main part of the argument, Cling moves to the overall conclusion that *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* holds for the case of circular endless regresses:

If the sequence of propositions that conditionally supports P_1' is itself circular, the problem arises again. So no proposition is supported only by circular sequences of propositions. Therefore *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* holds for the case of circular sequences of reasons. (p. 407)

¹¹ The situation with respect to holistic *coherentism* and the *first* main sub-argument is very much analogous to the situation with respect to holistic *infinetism* and the *second* main sub-argument. Perhaps, then, what I argue (below) on behalf holistic coherentism (against the first main sub-argument) can be argued, *mutatis mutandis*, on behalf of holistic infinitism (against the second main sub-argument). Peter Klein's "warrant-emergent" infinitism (2005) is a form of holistic infinitism about *warrant*. Klein's theory could be transformed into a holistic infinitist theory of *justification*, or a holistic infinitist theory of *support*.

I aim to show that the first main sub-argument of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* fails. If I succeed, it follows that Cling fails to establish the first horn of his dilemma argument against holistic coherentism.

3 Cling's dilemma argument critiqued

Let's consider a form of holistic coherentism on which *Some Proposition is Supported* is correct, and the following thesis holds:

- (4) *P* is supported for *S* if and only if (i) there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that (a) *P* is a member of σ_C and (b) *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions, and (ii) *S*'s belief system is coherent.

Let's call this theory, viz., the conjunction of *Some Proposition is Supported* and (4), "(HC)." If (HC) is correct, the epistemic regress problem is to be answered by affirming *Reasons are Supported* and *Some Proposition is Supported*, and denying *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*.¹²

Several comments are in order. First, (HC), unlike the holistic coherentist theory at issue in the first horn of Cling's dilemma argument, is a theory of *support*, not a theory of *justification*. I focus on (HC) because the epistemic regress problem, as construed by Cling, concerns (first and foremost) *support*. Cling's charge against (HC) would be: (HC) denies, and, so, runs afoul of, *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, and, thus, (HC) fails to solve the epistemic regress problem. Second, (4) should be understood so that if, say, *S* believes P_0 , P_1 , and P_2 , and no other propositions, and if, in

¹² (4) is a component of (HC), and (4) entails *Reasons are Supported*. (If (4) is correct, then when *P* is supported, *P* is supported by its successor in σ_C , and *P*'s successor in σ_C , in turn, is supported by its successor in σ_C , and so on. Thus, (4) entails *Reasons are Supported*.) *Some Proposition is Supported* is a component of (HC). (Note: (4) does not entail *Some Proposition is Supported*. (4) can be true even if (i) and (ii) are never satisfied.) (HC), thus, is correct only if *Reasons are Supported* and *Some Proposition is Supported* are correct. Since, as Cling holds, *Reasons are Supported* and *Some Proposition is Supported* together entail that *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* is false, it follows that if (HC) is correct, then *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* is false.

fact, P_0 is implied by $\{P_1, P_2\}$,¹³ P_1 is implied by $\{P_0, P_2\}$, and P_2 is implied by $\{P_0, P_1\}$, then, with respect to each of P_0, P_1 , and P_2 , (i) in (4) is satisfied. It might be that Cling's machinery for constructing I-ordered sequences of propositions will need to be modified.¹⁴ But Cling should allow for this. A situation of the sort just described, where S believes P_0, P_1 , and P_2 , and no other propositions, and where P_0 is implied by $\{P_1, P_2\}$, P_1 is implied by $\{P_0, P_2\}$, and P_2 is implied by $\{P_0, P_1\}$, is (an oversimplified example of) just the sort of situation holistic coherentists have in mind in speaking of "mutual" or "reciprocal" support. If Cling denied that in such a situation (i) in (4) is satisfied, Cling would be in no position to charge, as he does in the first horn of his dilemma argument, that holistic coherentism runs afoul of *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*.¹⁵ Third, (4) is too stringent, in requiring that P be *believed* by S . This deficiency can be remedied by modifying (a) in (4) to say " P is a member of σ_C or P is implied by a member of σ_C ."¹⁶ I focus on (4) unmodified solely for simplicity. Fourth, it is no simple matter to specify with precision just what it takes for a belief system to be

¹³ Cling construes support as a two-place relation (p. 403), and notes that: "In case the evidence that is available for a proposition consists of more than one proposition, we may represent it as the conjunction of the relevant propositions *or as the set of those propositions*" (p. 403, n. 3, emphasis mine). If a proposition can be supported by a set of propositions, then, likewise, a proposition can be implied by a set of propositions.

¹⁴ One way to do this would be to construe I-ordered sequences of propositions as sequences of *ordered pairs*, where the first member of a pair is a proposition, the second member of a pair is a proposition or a set of propositions, and the first member of a pair is implied by the second member of the pair. A circular I-ordered sequence would be a sequence with just finitely many pairs, and where each proposition involved in the sequence is the first member of some pair. Then, the sequence $\langle (P_0, \{P_1, P_2\}), (P_1, \{P_0, P_2\}), (P_2, \{P_0, P_1\}) \rangle$ would be a circular I-ordered sequence.

¹⁵ It would be true that holistic coherentism requires that supported propositions be supported, as in a case where (according to holistic coherentism) P_0 is supported by, hence is implied by, $\{P_1, P_2\}$, P_1 is supported by, hence is implied by, $\{P_0, P_2\}$, and P_2 is supported by, hence is implied by, $\{P_0, P_1\}$. But it would not follow that holistic coherentism requires circular I-ordered sequences of propositions, and so would not follow that holistic coherentism requires circular S-ordered sequences of propositions, that is, circular endless regresses.

¹⁶ (b), though, would remain the same.

coherent.¹⁷ I leave it open that not all circular I-ordered sequences of propositions are coherent (to the requisite degree or in the requisite sense), and, thus, that there can be cases in which (i) in (4) is satisfied but (ii) is not. Fifth, (4), as currently stated, is perfectly "egalitarian": (4) entails that *some* of the propositions *S* believes are supported only if *all* such propositions are supported. One way to make (4) less egalitarian would be to modify (b) in (4) so that *S* is permitted to believe propositions *in addition to* the propositions in σ_C , and so that what matters for support is the coherence *not* of *S*'s belief system *as a whole*, but just of a certain *subset* (or "module") of *S*'s belief system.¹⁸ Nothing in what I argue below, in reply to Cling, requires that (4) not be modified in this fashion. I focus on (4) unmodified solely for simplicity.

(HC) can be glossed as saying that support is a matter of coherence. This claim (that support is a matter of coherence), though, can be easy to misunderstand. The claim is not that *P*, when supported, is supported by the coherence of *S*'s belief system, or by the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent. Cling is right that coherence itself cannot provide support: "Coherence cannot . . . support any proposition in the relevant sense, for coherence per se is not the sort of thing that could be a reason" (p. 417). Nor is the claim that *P*, when supported, is supported by the proposition (believed by *S*) that *S*'s belief system is coherent. (HC) requires *not* that *S* believe that his belief system is coherent, but just that *S*'s belief system be coherent. (HC) thus avoids Cling's point that "requiring belief in the coherence of one's beliefs for justification or support would be both too strong—one must have the relevant concept of coherence—and too weak—to be a reason, this proposition needs support, and the regress returns" (p. 418). The claim, on (HC), is that *P*, when supported, is supported *by virtue of*, or *because of*, the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent. *S*'s reason for *P* is some other proposition he believes, say, *Q*. But what makes it the case that *Q* is a reason for *P*, that is, what makes it the case that *Q* supports *P*, and does not merely imply *P*, is the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent.¹⁹

I want to stress the point that (HC) requires not that *S* believe that his belief system is coherent, but just that *S*'s belief system be coherent. It might be that, if (HC) is correct, *S* needs to believe that his belief system is coherent in order for certain *epistemic*

¹⁷ For general discussion of the elements of coherence, see BonJour (1985, Ch. 5, sec. 5.3). For discussion of *probabilistic* conceptions of coherence, see Olsson (2005, Ch. 6, secs. 6.1 and 6.2).

¹⁸ See Lycan (1996) and Olsson (1997).

¹⁹ Strictly speaking, on (HC), part of what makes it the case that *Q* supports *P* is the fact that there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that *P* and *Q* are members of σ_C , *Q* is *P*'s successor in σ_C , and *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions.

propositions, e.g., *P is supported for me*, to be supported for him. But that would be another matter. Where *P* is a *nonepistemic* proposition, then, if (HC) is correct, the requirement is just that *S*'s belief system be coherent (and there be a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that *P* is a member of σ_C , and *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions).²⁰

I have clarified (HC) and noted some respects in which (HC) can be refined. I will now argue that the first main sub-argument of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* fails.²¹

The central issue concerns the notion of an *independent* reason. Suppose there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that P_0 is a member of σ_C , and *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions. Suppose *S*'s belief system is coherent. Then, by the second main part of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, it follows that P_0 is supported for *S* only if *S* has an *independent* reason—a reason not in σ_C —to believe some member of σ_C . If *S* has no such reason, then, despite the fact that P_0 is a member of σ_C , and *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions, and despite the fact that *S*'s belief system is coherent, P_0 is *not* supported for *S*: P_0 is arbitrary from *S*'s point of view.²² By contrast, if (HC) is correct, then, since (i) and (ii) in (4) are satisfied, it follows that P_0 is supported for *S*, by P_1 (which, too, is supported for *S*, by P_2 , and so on), and, hence, P_0 is *not* arbitrary from *S*'s point of view—this despite the fact that *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C .²³ The question is: Does Cling *show* that an independent reason is needed?

Note: (HC) agrees with Cling that a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C is not S-ordered *per se* and so some further condition must be met. If (HC) is correct, the

²⁰ I am assuming, as seems plausible, that *S*'s belief system can be coherent even if *S* does not believe that his belief system is coherent.

²¹ Hereafter I will speak simply of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, and not refer explicitly to "the first main sub-argument" thereof.

²² Two comments are in order. First, as I understand Cling, a proposition *P* is supported for a subject *S* (that is, *S* has a reason to believe *P*) just in case *P* is not arbitrary from *S*'s point of view. Cling clarifies the notion of a proposition's being arbitrary from a subject's point of view on p. 406. Second, Cling sometimes speaks of a *sequence* of propositions as being arbitrary from a subject's point of view. I take it that when Cling speaks in this fashion, he means just that the *propositions* in the sequence are arbitrary from the subject's point of view.

²³ If (HC) is correct, *S* has no reasons *in addition to* the members of σ_C . Hence, if (HC) is correct, *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C .

further condition in question is: S believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions, and S 's belief system is coherent.

Cling, of course, would object that this condition is not enough, since it does not require that S have an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C . But, again, the question is whether Cling *shows* that an independent reason is needed.

Cling *argues*, by example, that a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C is not S-ordered *per se* and so some further condition must be met. Cling *holds* that the further condition in question must include an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C . Why follow Cling in this? Cling *states* that if S has no such reason, then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view. But why believe this? Cling does not say. He simply moves on to (what I am calling) the third main part of the argument, saying that "[i]f the sequence of propositions that conditionally supports P_1 ' [where P_1 ' is an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C] is itself circular, the problem arises again" (p. 407).²⁴ I suspect that Cling takes the point to be obvious—that if S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view. If, though, holistic coherentism, in at least some of its varieties, e.g., (HC),²⁵ is correct, it follows that: It is *false* that if S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view. I find it far from obvious that holistic coherentism is false.

²⁴ It might be wondered whether I have misread Cling. Consider the following passage (from the first full paragraph on p. 407): "To be S-ordered, σ_C must satisfy some additional condition. If *this condition* is not arbitrary from the believer's own point of view it must include having an independent reason P_1 ' to believe some member of σ_C , that is, it must include having a reason that does not itself depend on σ_C " (emphasis mine). It might seem that this passage involves a claim (an implicit claim) not included in my presentation of Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*—viz., the claim that the further condition in question must *itself* not be arbitrary from the subject's point of view. I have no idea, though, what it would mean to say that a *condition*, as opposed to a *proposition*, is not arbitrary from a subject's point of view. And Cling himself never specifies how to understand the notion of a *condition*'s not being arbitrary from a subject's point of view. So I read Cling as saying: If the further condition in question is to make it such that the members of σ_C are not arbitrary from the subject's point of view, then that condition must include an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C . This is just the claim: The further condition in question must (to make it such that the members of σ_C are not arbitrary from the subject's point of view) include an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C .

²⁵ Below I discuss two additional varieties of holistic coherentism.

Consider the case of Norman, which I adapt from Bonjour (1985, p. 41):

Norman believes *the President is in New York City*. This belief was produced by Norman's process of clairvoyance, under circumstances in which this process is highly reliable. Norman, though, has no belief as to whether he has a highly reliable process of clairvoyance. In fact, there is no proposition P (distinct from *the President is in New York City*) such that P implies *the President is in New York City*, and Norman believes P .

(HC) entails that *the President is in New York City* is arbitrary from Norman's point of view— S has *no* reason to believe *the President is in New York City*. This seems to be the right result; *the President is in New York City* is not implied by any other proposition Norman believes. Compare the case of Norman with the case of S :

There is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that P_0 is a member of σ_C , and S believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions. S 's belief system is numerous in beliefs, rich in content, and coherent.

(HC) entails that, though S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , P_0 is supported for S , and so is not arbitrary from S 's point of view. This result strikes me as being at least somewhat plausible. P_0 is implied by some other proposition S believes,²⁶ which in turn is implied by some other proposition S believes, and so on *without exception*. Further, S 's belief system is numerous in beliefs, rich in content, and coherent.

(HC) does not (explicitly) require that a belief system be numerous in beliefs and rich in content. But (HC) allows for this, and could be modified so as to require it. Also, Cling's position on the need for an independent reason is meant to hold for *any* circular I-ordered sequence of propositions *regardless of size and richness of content*.

Bear in mind that (HC) is just one form of holistic coherentism. (HC) places no *content*, or *subject-matter*, requirements on a belief system. (HC), thus, does not require that S have beliefs about the ways in which she is reliably connected to the world. Other forms of holistic coherentism, by contrast, do place content requirements on a belief system, and do require that S have beliefs about the ways in which she is reliably

²⁶ Or *set* of propositions S believes.

connected to the world.²⁷ One such view, "(HC*)," is the conjunction of *Some Proposition is Supported* and the following thesis:

- (5) *P* is supported for *S* if and only if (i) there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that (a) *P* is a member of σ_C , (b) σ_C includes propositions about the ways in which *S* is reliably connected to the world, and (c) *S* believes each of the propositions in σ_C and no other propositions, and (ii) *S*'s belief system is coherent.

Consider the case of *S* discussed two paragraphs above. Let P_0 be the proposition *a cat is before me*. Suppose σ_C includes propositions about the ways in which *S* is reliably connected to the world, including, in particular, the propositions *it appears to me visually as if a cat is before me* and *usually when it appears to me visually as if such and such is the case, this is because (causally) such and such is the case*. (HC*) entails that *a cat is before me* is supported for *S*, hence is not arbitrary from *S*'s point of view—*S* has, at the least, *some* reason to believe *a cat is before me*. This implication strikes me as being at least somewhat plausible.

If we are to side with Cling, and against (HC) and (HC*), on the need for an independent reason, we should have an *argument* for doing so.²⁸ Since Cling fails to provide such an argument, Cling fails to establish *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*.²⁹

²⁷ It is not uncommon for coherentists to invoke content requirements. See, e.g., Blanshard (1939, Ch. 26, sec. 19), BonJour (1985, Chs. 6-7), Brink (1989, Ch. 5, secs. 5-7), and Lehrer (2000, Chs. 6-7).

²⁸ Of course, there are well known objections to views such as (HC) and (HC*), e.g., the "Alternative Systems Objection." For discussion and references, see Kvanvig (2007). Cling makes no explicit appeal to any such objection. So I presume the basis for Cling's position on the need for an independent reason lies elsewhere. Below I discuss a view, "(HC**)," which, arguably, fares quite well against the various standard objections to views such as (HC) and (HC*).

²⁹ It might seem that Cling should be read as arguing:

A circular I-ordered sequence of propositions is not S-ordered *per se*. If a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions is not S-ordered *per se*, then if *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from *S*'s point of view. Therefore, if *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from *S*'s point of view.

Perhaps, though, an argument (for the need for an independent reason) is close at hand. Consider the argument:

Argument from No Beliefs

Imagine S is in a situation of *no beliefs*, that is, a situation in which S has no beliefs. Suppose S is considering whether to believe the members of σ_C . Suppose S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C . Then, since a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions is not S-ordered *per se*, it follows that the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view. Hence, if, in a situation of no beliefs, S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view.

Let's grant that *Argument from No Beliefs* is sound. Is this enough for Cling's purposes? No. The conclusion of *Argument from No Beliefs* is the claim that:

- (6) If, in a situation of *no beliefs*, S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view.

(6) is about *only* situations of *no beliefs*; (6) says nothing about situations of *some beliefs* (that is, situations in which S has some beliefs). Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, though, needs a claim about *all* situations, a claim, thus, much stronger than (6). Specifically, Cling's argument needs the claim:

- (7) If, in *any* situation, S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view.³⁰

On this reading, Cling gives an argument for his position on the need for an independent reason. But the argument is inadequate. Since (HC) and (HC*) entail the falsity of the second premise, and since (HC) and (HC*) are at least somewhat plausible, it follows that Cling needs to provide an argument for the second premise. Cling, though, does not provide an argument for the second premise.

³⁰ Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* needs (7), a claim about all situations, because *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* is itself a claim about all situations. Note: If *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* covered only some situations, then even if *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* were correct, and even if *Reasons are Supported*, understood as a claim about all situations, were correct, it might still be that *Some Proposition is Supported* is correct. All that would follow (from the correctness of *No*

(6) leaves it open that (7) is false, by leaving it open that there are situations of *some beliefs* in which *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , and yet the members of σ_C are *not* arbitrary from *S*'s point of view. Consider (HC). (6) leaves it open that (HC) is correct. In fact, if (HC) is correct, (6) is correct.³¹ If, though, (HC) is correct, there *are* situations of some beliefs in which *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , and yet the members of σ_C are not arbitrary from *S*'s point of view—viz., situations in which *S* believes the members of σ_C , and no other propositions, and *S*'s belief system is coherent.

(HC) entails that a situation of no beliefs is a situation of *no support* (a situation in which no propositions are supported for *S*). It might seem that this implication is problematic. How, it might be asked, is a subject to non-arbitrarily build a belief system from scratch, that is, from a situation of no beliefs, if a situation of no beliefs is a situation of no support? Holistic coherentists, though, do not mean to be giving a *decision-procedure for non-arbitrarily building a belief system from scratch*. And for good reason: It is doubtful that a subject *could* use a decision-procedure to non-arbitrarily build a belief system from scratch.³² Holistic coherentists mean to be giving a *theory of support*,³³ a theory specifying the conditions under which a proposition is supported for a subject (at a time).

Argument from No Beliefs can be modified so that it covers *some* situations of some beliefs:

*Argument from No Beliefs**

Imagine *S* is in a situation of no beliefs, or at least of *no beliefs in the members of σ_C* . Suppose *S* is considering whether to believe the members of σ_C . Suppose *S* has no

Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses and Reasons are Supported) is that in the limited situations covered by *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, no proposition is supported. This would leave it open that in some of the situations not covered by *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, some proposition is supported.

³¹ If (HC) is correct, it follows that if *S* is in a situation of no beliefs, and *S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then, by (4), *no* propositions are supported for *S*, hence all propositions are arbitrary from *S*'s point of view, hence the members of σ_C are arbitrary from *S*'s point of view. Note: If (HC) is correct, it follows that if *S* is in a situation of no beliefs, *then S* has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C —*S* has no reasons whatsoever.

³² For relevant discussion, see Goldman (1980) and Pryor (2005).

³³ Or, more commonly, a theory of *justification*.

independent reason to believe some member of σ_C . Then, since a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions is not S-ordered *per se*, it follows that the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view. Hence, if, in a situation of no beliefs, or at least of no beliefs in the members of σ_C , S has no independent reason to believe some member of σ_C , then the members of σ_C are arbitrary from S 's point of view.

The conclusion of *Argument from No Beliefs** goes beyond (6), but still falls short of (7).³⁴ *Argument from No Beliefs**, thus, even if sound, is insufficient for Cling's purposes.

What needs to be shown, for Cling's argument for *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* to succeed, is that *even in a situation in which S believes the members of σ_C and no other propositions, and S's belief system is coherent, S needs to have an independent reason to believe some member of σ_C* . Put another way, what needs to be shown is that, contra (HC), (i) and (ii) in (4) are *not* (together) sufficient for support.³⁵ Cling fails to show this, and so too do *Argument from No Beliefs* and *Argument from No Beliefs**.

(HC), it must be admitted, is a rather radical theory of support. If (HC) is correct, the only mental states that matter, *epistemically*, for support are the subject's *beliefs*; the subject's *perceptual experiences* matter *not at all*. (HC) is thus a form of "doxastic" holistic coherentism.³⁶ I want to close by considering a less radical, and, arguably, more plausible, form of holistic coherentism—a form of "nodoxastic" holistic coherentism.

Let "(HC**)" be the conjunction of *Some Proposition is Supported* and the following thesis:

(8) P is supported for S if and only if (i) there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C such that (a) P is a member of σ_C and (b) S believes each of the

³⁴ The conclusion of *Argument from No Beliefs** leaves it open that (HC) is correct. In fact, if (HC) is correct, the conclusion of *Argument from No Beliefs** is correct. If, though, (HC) is correct, (7) is false. So, the conclusion of *Argument from No Beliefs** leaves it open that (7) is false.

³⁵ But even if it were shown that (i) and (ii) in (4) are not sufficient for support, and that (i) and (ii) in (5) are not sufficient for support, it would *not* follow that Cling is right about the need for an independent reason. It would still need to be shown (*inter alia*) that (i), (ii), and (iii) in (8), below, are not sufficient for support.

³⁶ Doxastic holistic coherentists deny that perceptual experiences can *serve as reasons for* beliefs, but do not deny that perceptual experiences can *cause* beliefs. For defense of the thesis that only beliefs can serve as reasons for beliefs, see, e.g., BonJour (1985, Ch. 4) and Davidson (2000). For helpful discussion and references, see Pryor (2005).

propositions in σ_C and no other propositions, (ii) there is a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_{C^*} such that (a) each member of σ_C is a member of σ_{C^*} , (b) each proposition serving as the propositional content of one of S 's perceptual experiences (that is, one of S 's perceptual experiences *at the time in question*) is a member of σ_{C^*} , and (c) each member of σ_{C^*} is a member of σ_C or (inclusive "or") serves as the propositional content of one of S 's perceptual experiences, and (iii) S 's system of beliefs and perceptual experiences is coherent.³⁷

How is (ii) to be satisfied? I can think of several ways. Perhaps the simplest is where S believes the members of a circular I-ordered sequence of propositions σ_C and no other propositions, and where for each perceptual experience e in S 's system (of beliefs and perceptual experiences), there is a perceptual belief b in S 's system such that e and b have the same propositional content (e.g., S has a visual experience with the propositional content *a blue object is, now, there*, and S has a visual belief, i.e., a belief produced by vision, with that same propositional content).³⁸ (HC**) agrees with (HC) that Cling is wrong on the need for an independent reason,³⁹ and agrees with (HC) that *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses* is false. But, (HC**) disagrees with (HC) that the only mental states that matter for support are the subject's *beliefs*. Also important, according to (HC**), are the subject's *perceptual experiences*; (ii) in (8) requires that each proposition serving as the propositional content of one of S 's perceptual experiences be a member of σ_{C^*} , and (iii) in (8) requires that S 's system of beliefs and perceptual

³⁷ I noted above (second paragraph of this section) that (HC) can be refined in certain respects. (HC**) can be refined in those same respects. Also, (HC**) can be modified so that, like (HC*), it is required that S have beliefs about the ways in which she is reliably connected to the world.

³⁸ How, in σ_{C^*} , are the separate contributions of S 's beliefs and perceptual experiences to be represented? One way to do this would be to designate the members of σ_{C^*} as "doxastic" or "perceptual-experiential" as appropriate. If p serves as the propositional content of a belief, this could be represented as " p_d ." If p serves as the propositional content of a perceptual experience, this could be represented as " p_{p-e} ." Then, if p served as the propositional content of both a belief and a perceptual experience, both p_d and p_{p-e} would have a place in σ_{C^*} .

³⁹ If (HC**) is correct, then (i), (ii), and (iii) in (8) are sufficient for support. It is thus *not* required that S have an independent reason (a reason not in σ_{C^*}) to believe some member of σ_{C^*} .

experiences be coherent. This, arguably, is a respect in which (HC**) is to be preferred to (HC).⁴⁰

Much more would need to be said to show that (HC**) solves the epistemic regress problem. Importantly, it would need to be argued that perceptual experiences have propositional content.⁴¹ Also, (HC**) would need to be refined in various respects. For one thing, (HC**) would need to be refined so that it can account for cases in which a subject has a reason to believe that certain of his perceptual experiences are illusory. Perhaps, too, (HC**) would need to be refined so that it can accommodate the idea that certain of a subject's *nonperceptual* experiences, e.g., *memorial* experiences, are relevant, epistemically, to what propositions are supported for her. My point is fairly modest: Cling would need to say much more to establish, against (HC**), *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, and thus would need to say much more to show that, because (HC**) runs counter to *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, (HC**) fails to solve the epistemic regress problem.

4 Conclusion

I conclude that, though Cling's discussion overall is very much instructive and deserving of careful study, Cling's dilemma argument against holistic coherentism is unsuccessful. The first horn of Cling's dilemma argument relies on *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*, i.e., the claim that if support requires an endless regress of reasons, then no proposition is supported. But Cling fails to establish *No Proposition is Supported only by Endless Regresses*.

⁴⁰ One of the main objections to views such as (HC) and (HC*) is the "Isolation Objection." This objection (at least in one of its versions) charges that holistic coherentism implies that a subject's perceptual experiences are irrelevant, epistemically, to what propositions are supported for her, and that, because of this, holistic coherentism is open to counterexample. (Strictly speaking, the objection is typically put in terms of *justification*.) See, e.g., Feldman (2003, pp. 68-70). (HC**) is not open to this objection. Nor are certain other forms of nondoxastic holistic coherentism. For further discussion of nondoxastic holistic coherentism, see Cohen (2002), Horgan and Potrc (2010), Kvanvig (1995), and Kvanvig and Riggs (1992).

⁴¹ For defense of the view that perceptual experiences have propositional content, see, e.g., Searle (1983, Ch. 2). For an introduction to the relevant literature, see Siegel (2010).

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