

EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY, THE CRITERION, AND RATIONAL  
ENTITLEMENT

By

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Abstract: In this paper I examine the threat of epistemic circularity to our being justified in claim to reliability knowledge of our basic belief sources. I begin with Alston's presentation of epistemic circularity and its relation to the ancient problem of the diallelus. I relate the diallelus with that of the criterion. By means of track-record argument, I consider William Alston's treatment of the problem to orient its threat to our forming justified belief, such that majority of this paper serves to get a clear picture on what it takes to consider ourselves justified in our assumptions of reliability by means of perceptual justification. I then consider common-sense approaches to skepticism from that of G.E. Moore and Thomas Reid so as to provide reasons to accept dogmatism. It is on the basis of Crispin Wright's conception of rational entitlement I provide reasons to accept hinge propositions to reliability claims. I focus on securing rational entitlement to these hinge-propositions so as to avoid circularity and skepticism. I put forth a reply with common-sense leanings that is largely indebted to a contextualist interpretation of Wittgenstein.

## ***Epistemic circularity, the criterion, and rational entitlement***

David Gutierrez

We form beliefs through our faculties of reason, sense-perception, memory, induction, etc. We accept knowledge to the reliability of these sources as a product of our present knowledge of the world and where these faculties situate us in it. Yet this knowledge, this reliability knowledge, is a derivative of these sources. Skepticism demands pretheoretical knowledge securing the reliability of our knowledge sources prior to our knowing one or another source is reliable. William Alston argues any attempt to provide a clear picture of this structure suffers epistemic, and arguably vicious, circularity. It seems unacceptable to obtain knowledge via circularity. We find ourselves staking claim against the skeptic to secure even our most basic sources of belief. Such is the task of providing argument that accounts for reliability knowledge that does not beg the question as it avoids circularity, nor obtains this reliability knowledge too easily. This tasks the remaining hopeful to construct a raft of certainty out of a whirlpool of skepticism. As a remaining hopeful, I offer a view that argues heavily from a contextualist reading of Wittgenstein.

### *1. Epistemic Circularity, Alston, and Fumerton*

The problem of epistemic circularity is but a modern instantiation of the ancient problem of the *diallelus*, or circle, harkening back to Pyrrhonian skeptics. The first mode of skepticism, that of disagreement, emerges in Book II of the *Outlines* as Sextus Empiricus recounts debate with the Stoics regarding standards of truth,

”..in order for the dispute that has arisen about standards to be decided, we must possess an agreed upon standard through which we can judge it; and in order for us to possess an agreed upon standard, the dispute about standards must have already been decided. Thus the argument falls into the reciprocal mode and the discovery of standard is blocked- for we do not allow them to assume a standard by hypothesis, and if they want to judge the standard by a standard, we throw them into an infinite regress.” (20)

We interpret ‘standard’ in this passage as the criteria of truth through which we judge propositions. Disagreements surrounding all matters of inquiry vexed the ancients, for they considered the only means through which we resolve these disagreements and attain knowledge is to require criteria that distinguishes true belief from false. Yet, the skeptics found similar disagreements surrounding the correct standard of truth. That is, as we seek to resolve disagreement regarding the correct standard of truth, we must antecedently know which beliefs true and which false- the very purpose of putting forth a standard in the first place. Yet, we also cannot put forth standard by means of hypothesis, argues Sextus, for risk of arbitrariness. We reason ourselves into a circle before getting our knowledge theory off the ground. Such is the problem of the criterion. Circularity and the criterion prove intricately linked, with most accepting the criterion as a set of related problems and the circle but one of them. It is here we note the point of contention rests on the broader question as to whether reason can be used as a means to settle matters of inquiry. In this we draw distinction between the skeptics and the dogmatists. The skeptics argue that because we have no conclusive reasons in favor of instances nor standards, we are to

suspend judgement as to whether reason can settle matters of inquiry and so cannot attain knowledge. To Sextus, the dogmatists are those philosophers who insist reason *can* settle matters and that we *can*, and *do*, possess knowledge. I anticipate most practice some form of dogmatism. The generalized version of the criterion of McCain and Rowley (2014) is one I consider most demonstrative of the problem for the purposes of contemporary debate:

i) which propositions are true?

ii) what is the criteria of truth?

We cannot provide answer to (i) without first providing answer to (ii), though conversely cannot answer (ii) without giving answer to (i). Concretely, I cannot know a given proposition is true without having some antecedent criterion of truth, yet I cannot put forth a criterion of truth unless I already know which propositions are true. I cannot provide knowledge cases without criteria nor can I provide criteria without knowledge cases. So, we cannot separate the sheep from the goats, good apples from bad, without subjecting ourselves to circularity. We find circularity manifest in the process of providing reasons to accept an argument's conclusion in reasoning from premise to conclusion, for one of the premises assumes the very truth of the conclusion. This conclusion, for example, eg. that my belief-forming faculties are reliable, prove formidable to secure by means of argument. Suppose I form the belief that I am typing in my study, in the usual fashion, basing this belief on sense perception. It seems, provided the sense data, that my belief is correct. The issue, however, is how I am to know my belief is correct if I have not secured the reliability of sense perception? We might resort to appeals to reason, but find merely a displacement of the problem to a higher-order. For how am I to know I am reasoning properly in my appeals to reason without knowing my reasoning faculties are reliable? And so we are on the wheel, without clear indications as to how to get off. It is here the problem reveals itself one of epistemic order, or rather, a question of how best to proceed in our investigation into knowledge and its starting point. Epistemic circularity poses a challenge to reliabilist theories, and those epistemologies who seek to obtain knowledge via perceptual justification, for it seems we cannot secure entitlement to reliability knowledge through perceptual justification without begging the question. Richard Fumerton expresses this very criticism:

“You cannot *use* perception to justify the reliability of perception! You cannot *use* memory to justify the reliability of memory! You cannot *use* induction to justify the reliability of induction! Such attempts to respond to the skeptic's concerns involve blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity.”(1995, 177)

Epistemic circularity orients its threat in its observation that we generally work under the supposition that our belief forming faculties *are* reliable indications of the world and how it actually is. Introspection on this supposition leaves us to wonder how, and in what ways, we can consider ourselves justified in so supposing. We move to further characterize epistemically circular arguments and recent attempts to stop the wheel.

## 2. *Epistemic Failure and track record arguments*

The weakness of circular arguments rests in their epistemic defeat, the observation that they fail to be dialectically effective modes of argument. We cannot convince one to accept the conclusion of an argument sourced through circular reasoning as they will reject its very premises- and perhaps rightfully so. Shared intuition of circular arguments considers that something simply *feels* wrong about them. The skeptic positions their volley on this intuition, that something is wrong with amassing knowledge K, sourced through SP<sub>1</sub>, that itself relies on the

<sup>1</sup> For brevity I use SP to refer to sense-perception.

reliability of its source. Replies securing reliability knowledge that meet the skeptic's challenge are those capturing exactly what goes wrong so as to mitigate this concern and determine whether the alleged circularity is virtuous or vicious. The common strategy to securing knowledge of reliability takes the form of track record argument, where one amasses a series of beliefs and partitions their history, or track-record, of success. We consider the following track record argument:

- (1) In this instance, my sense perception indicates I am typing and it is true.
  - (2) In this instance, my sense perception is accurate.
  - (3) My sense perception has been accurate for every instance.
- Thereby induction,
- (4) My sense perception is always accurate.
  - (5) *P*- My sense perception is reliable.

In this case I proclaim to know that my sense perception is reliable. The pessimism of this approach seems to emerge in the process of securing external support in favor of reliability of sense perception. It seems I cannot accept (P1) as true without antecedently knowing the truth of (P1). Criticism of (P1) pushes as well that I cannot provide non-circular approach to knowing the falsity of the defeater eg. my faculties defective and in some way deceiving me. Many accept we can never know this, choosing instead to embrace fallibilism.<sup>2</sup> I say that I know that *P* provided those relevant contexts that allow me justifiably *accept* my belief that *P* is true. I, presumably among others, consider it of intrinsic importance to get a clear picture as to what it takes to justify *P*, or in what ways we consider ourselves justified in accepting *P*. By this intrinsic importance I mean that I consider it valuable to effectively demonstrate that we know much of what we proclaim to know. Such value is all better realized if we can somehow *show* that we know by means of argument. Here Alston distinguishes showing in the *dialectical* sense with that of the *epistemic*. Dialectically showing is our practice of providing argument others consider sound so as to rationally convince them of its conclusion. Showing in the epistemic sense is simply that of providing argument with justified premises, where justification is interpreted as not precluded by circularity. Having distinguished epistemic from dialectical showing, we find we can't convince someone by way of epistemically circular argument. That is, it seems I need to *know* my sense perception is reliable prior to knowing anything revealed through sense perception is true. I motion that common-sense views, like that of Thomas Reid, accept one's inability to show that we *know* that *P*, while we can know *that* we can't show that we know. I maintain, as do others, that there are many things we know but cannot show that we know. I consider this a virtue more than it is a weakness of common-sense views. We note the skeptical strategy at hand in the objection is notably Cartesian in character, for its strength rests on the *closure principle*. Such principle maintains knowledge as closed under entailment, for if a subject *S* is to know some proposition *P* eg. I am typing in my study, the subject can properly deduce a second proposition through entailment. That is, 'My typing in my study entails that I have hands'. Or, if subject *S* knows *p*, and *p* entails *q*, then *S* knows *q*. We formulate the Cartesian-style argument as it applies to perceptual justification:

I do not know if sense perception is defective. (-SP)  
If I do not know that (-SP), then I do not know *P*.

Therefore, I do not know *P*.

<sup>2</sup>Ward, R. Peirce's *Pragmatic Theory of Inquiry: Fallibilism and Indeterminacy*. I define the fallibilist as those who in principle maintain empirical knowledge can be accepted but not proven with certainty, where at best we possess defeasible justification.

The motivation behind Premise (1) holds that there is no way to determine by means of sense perception alone that my sense perception is defective(-SP) and, in some way, deceiving me. The skeptic appeals to conditions of our inability to defeat defeaters eg. conditions of my perceptual faculties defective and knowledge impossible. It's divisive as to whether the skeptic's appeals to such conditions are legitimate. It is here Reid and Moore turn the tables on the skeptic as to why we feel obliged to meet her demand. That is, they raise question as to why we require we need know the falsity of the defeater in order to know, or be justified in believing, that *P*. I will follow in this objection, for within the contexts of life we must at some point put concerns of global doubt to their overdue rest if we are to engage with the world at all. Even the great skeptic in Hume raised similar criticism of the Pyrrhonian in the latter section of his *Enquiry*<sup>4</sup> arguing, "nature is always too strong for principle"(83). Divisive as to whether we are so entitled, I contend with Hume that we inevitably *do* resort to custom and only engage the question of skepticism strictly in philosophical contexts. I argue, we can rest content with assumption in all other contexts in our objection to the requirement that we need know the falsity of the defeater. It is from here I will argue in defense of this assumption through a process of securing rational entitlement to hinge propositions.

### 3. Common Sense and Privileged Access

It's been argued some beliefs possess special privilege, for I seem to know them without having to know that I know them. This we understand the common-sense views of G.E. Moore and Thomas Reid. Although, similar views seemed to have emerged earlier through Baruch de Spinoza in his *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellects*. Concretely, if I were to have some experience in which I form belief *P* e.g. I am typing in my study, it seems I am more certain of having some such experience than I am some skeptical hypothesis. The evidentialist may say that if I were have evidence of having experience *P*, where I form the belief that *P* on the basis of evidence *E*, then I could be *justified* in accepting that *P* is the case provided no alternative. The evidence suggests that I am typing in my study or perhaps reading a philosophical paper, then provided my evidence, I accept these conditions obtain. I remind us Reid assured that if we are to encounter some philosophical theory arguing in favor of skepticism, then so much worse the theory. In this I contend with Reid, as did Chisholm, for it proves difficult to deny that we in fact *do* know much about the world as revealed through our faculties. But, we need to provide reasons beyond their appeal in order to embrace common-sense views. We simply cannot accept common-sense strictly on grounds that dogmatism is more appealing than skepticism. I move to what I consider to be more conclusive reasons to embrace dogmatism.

#### 3.1a Wittgenstein and hinge-propositions

In his 'On Certainty', Wittgenstein argues in favor of propositions of which we simply do not and cannot cast doubt. These *hinge propositions* are those propositions which secure the door that is our philo-scientific investigations. I remind we arrive at circularity in asking ourselves, as did Reid, as how best to proceed rationally when trusting our sources of belief. For Wittgenstein, if we are to conduct serious philosophy, or hope for any subject of inquiry at all, we must accept there exists some propositions immune to doubt, properly basic, requiring no justification

<sup>3</sup> Pryor. "Skeptic and the Dogmatist"

<sup>4</sup> Hume. *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Pt II, Sec. 12, 83. Hume reflects on the Pyrrhonian, "And though a Pyrrhonian may throw himself or others into a momentary bewilderment and confusion by his deep arguments, the first and most trivial event in life will put all his doubts and worries to flight, and will leave him- in every aspect of his actions and beliefs- in just the same position as any other kind of philosopher, and indeed the same as someone who had never concerned himself with philosophical researches at all."

<sup>5</sup> Spinoza, Baruch de. *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, p. 13. Spinoza's anti-Cartesian solution to the circle: "...in order to know, there is no need to know that we know, much less to know that we know that we know."

beyond presumption, that are themselves unknowable to us. These propositions possess special qualities of justification and knowledge for they are the very propositions securing the possibility of justification and knowledge. To put my cards on the table, I contend with Wittgenstein in this strategy. Motivations cite that we've all entered vehicles or public transportation with the very well cognizance that after a certain point we are to get off, usually upon arriving at our destination. Yet it is in this getting off, metaphorically speaking, that establishes the point at which practicality supersedes questions of doubt. It is through this we engage, and come to know, the external world of hands, hinges, and philosophical papers. We find this appeal to practicality in the passage:

"That is to say, the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn [...] But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put." (OC 341–343).

For Reid, first principles as these were revealed through common-sense. It's no less surprising we observe Wittgenstein follow suit with similar confidence in hinge propositions. It seems further investigation rests on one's commitment to debate as to when we have arrived at propositions which establish total and exhaustive analysis of a subject's cognitive and epistemic condition- a debate beyond the limits of this paper.<sup>6</sup>If this anti-skeptical strategy sees promise to halt the circle, albeit through assumption, we must offer defensible reasons for adopting the view. I now turn to what I consider to be these defensible reasons.

### 3.1b *Contextualist reasons for accepting hinge propositions*

A contextualist reading of Wittgenstein leaves one to question if we've reached a dialectical impasse with skeptic. It seems the extreme Pyrrhonian skeptic, one that would reject hinge propositions, would render what Crispin Wright considers to be total cognitive paralysis. It is this cognitive paralysis Wittgenstein considers in the case of the pupil who, out of radical doubt, begins to question whether there exist external objects and as far as the very meaning of words. To Wittgenstein, "...His doubts will lack any sense, and at most will lead him to a sort of epistemic paralysis: unable to learn the subject we are trying to teach him." (315) On Wittgenstein's view, we can't even begin to form the very notion of doubt without assumption. On Wright's interpretation, there appears to be practical rationality in supposing that one's belief forming faculties are reliable, for failure to do so would ensure this very cognitive paralysis. We interpret Wright's notion of practical rationality as one that again weighs the costs of practicality against that of skepticism. The costs of skepticism to our objects of inquiry are quite salient, yet the reasons to accept skepticism after considering whether it be practically rational to accept are less salient. From here the contextualist can argue that is only when we raise the standard of analysis that we question whether our belief sources *are* in fact reliable and demand account of alleged reliability. Yet, within the contexts of social discourse, we answer questions of reliability with little conflict or concern for skepticism. Whether those denoted all and always satisfy their assumed reliability is simply another question. In fact, our Cartesian predecessors knew very well that they do not always satisfy, though it is through the grace of St. Augustine we've learned to live with that. This position considers that attempts of obtaining reliability knowledge

<sup>6</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

<sup>7</sup> Ketchum, R.J. On the Impossibility of Epistemology. Here I liken inability to provide account of reliability knowledge as to that of Ketchum's argument for inability to provide similar account of justification.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, St. *Contra Academicians*, III, xi, 24. Here Augustine affirms one cannot doubt one's mental content, even if one possesses doubt as to whether this content bears any relation to the external world. On the Augustinian

dialectically by means of non-circular deduction, as shown in track-record argument, have proven hopeless. I remind our analysis is one strictly concerned as to whether we consider ourselves justified in forming our belief *P*. I argue that we cannot doubt ourselves as justified, nor can the skeptic raise the question of doubt, unless there is some basic object for which is to be doubted. In fact, Wittgenstein made this very point in a later passage:

“If you are not certain of any fact, you cannot be certain of the meaning of your words either [...] If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubt itself presupposes certainty.” (114-115)

I argue, we can accept hinge propositions regarding reliability claims on the basis of rational entitlement if we first weigh practical and contextualist reasons to accept them comparatively to skepticism. I also argue, as have others, that we can avoid circularity in obtaining reliability knowledge if we posit reliability as a basic, non-inferential, property of reason. We recall Wittgenstein concerned himself much with the propositions of which we proclaim to know, but concerned himself more with that of which we know but cannot express through propositions. I maintain that such is the case with respect to reliability claims. I maintain that we cannot divulge the concept of reliability any further by means of propositions. This leaves me to accept reliability as basic, non-inferential, with nothing to be said, for there is nothing further that *can* be said, on its behalf.

### *Conclusions*

In this article I survey the peripheral issues with respect to epistemic circularity. I examine threat of circularity to our being justified to claim of our basic sources of belief. I began with presentation of William Alston's treatment of the problem to illustrate its threat to both reliabilism and track-record arguments, those both of which seek to attain knowledge by means of perceptual justification. I focus discussion on securing rational entitlement to hinge-propositions to avoid skepticism and offer reasons to accept common-sense views. I provide reasons to accept hinge-propositions on the basis of practical rationality with leverage from Crispin Wright's case for rational entitlement. I provide a contextualist reply that argues heavily from considerations of reliability within the contexts of social discourse. I conclude with an interpretation of Wittgenstein that motions for no further dialectical treatments of reliability knowledge beyond its status as basic and non-inferential.

account, skepticism requires admission that certain things “seem” a certain way, yet it is this “seeming” of which the external world is so constituted, thereby rational to accept testimony via the senses.



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