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Klein and the Regress Argument

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For years, Peter Klein has taken Aristotle's regress argument for foundationalism as a point of departure for developing a view he calls "infinetism". In this paper, I will be offering a critique of Klein's view. I will argue for three main conclusions. First, Klein's response to the regress argument for foundationalism is neither infinitism nor foundationalism but a distinct position I call the "unjustified foundations" view. Second, Klein's "unjustified foundations" view is subject to some serious problems that make it inferior to foundationalism. Third, Klein's objections to foundationalism fail to knock it from its place of superiority over the "unjustified foundations" view.

Before defending these three conclusions in sections 3–5, I will begin with an account of the regress argument for foundationalism in section 1 and with a brief presentation of Klein's views in section 2.

1. The Regress Argument

The regress argument for foundationalism goes back at least to Aristotle (*Posterior Analytics* I, 3). Aristotle's argument focused on knowledge or understanding but other versions of the argument have focused on rationality or justification or warrant. My discussion will concentrate on justification. From Aristotle onward, the emphasis in the regress argument has tended to be on actual beliefs and the epistemic goodness they can have by means of actual inference or in the absence thereof. For this reason, it is natural for any discussion of the regress argument to focus on doxastic justification rather than propositional justification.

Doxastic justification is a property of actual beliefs, where these are understood as mental states. Most epistemologists agree that for a belief to be justified in this sense, it isn't enough that the person holding the belief *has* adequate evidence for it. In addition, the belief must be *based on* that evidence. Propositional justification is different. It is a property of a proposition and a proposition has it *relative to a person*. Roughly speaking, a proposition *p* is propositionally justified for a person *S* so long as

the overall evidence S has supports p; if one part of S's evidence supports p but that part combined with the rest of her evidence fails to support p, then p is *not* propositionally justified for S. If p is propositionally justified for S, and S believes p on the basis of the appropriate evidence, then S's belief that p will be doxastically justified.¹ But, importantly, if p is propositionally justified for S and yet S's belief that p is not based on the appropriate evidence—i.e., the evidence that supports it—but is instead based on something that doesn't support it or on nothing at all, then S's belief that p is *not* doxastically justified, despite the fact that p is propositionally justified for S. Moreover, p can be propositionally justified for S even if S doesn't believe that p. What matters for propositional justification is whether the person in question *has* evidence for the relevant proposition, not whether that proposition is believed or properly based. But for doxastic justification, believing and proper basing matter. For the remainder of this paper, when I use the term 'justification' without modification, I will be speaking of doxastic justification rather than propositional justification.²

In order to capture the core of the regress argument and related philosophical puzzles, it will be helpful to have before our minds the following six views:

- PB: a belief can be justified even if it is not inferred from (based on) a belief (i.e., there can be properly basic beliefs).³
- JJ: a belief can be justified only if it is inferred from (based on) a *justified* belief (i.e., all justification requires prior justification).
- UF: a belief can be justified even if the belief(s) from which it is inferred (on which it is based) is/are not justified (i.e., a belief can be justified via an inference chain terminating in an unjustified belief—what might be called an “unjustified foundation”).
- IR: a belief can be justified via an infinitely long non-repeating inference chain (i.e., justification can arise via infinite reasoning).
- CR: a belief can be justified via a circular inference chain (i.e., justification can arise via circular reasoning).
- RS: there can be no justified belief (i.e., radical skepticism is true).⁴

Now consider two uncontroversial theses, about how these six views are related:

¹ Or so it is standardly assumed. For objections to this assumption, see Turri (2010).

² My own view differs slightly from this standard view in that I don't think propositional justification is required for doxastic justification and I don't think there is a basing requirement on doxastic justification, though I do think there is a formed-in-the-right-way requirement on doxastic justification that is quite similar to the basing requirement. For some discussion, see Bergmann 2006: 61–2 (including note 20).

³ A belief is *basic* just in case it is not inferred from (based on) a belief. It is *properly* basic if it is basic and justified.

⁴ Although Aristotle is speaking of knowledge or understanding rather than justification, he makes reference to views similar to each of these six views in *Posterior Analytics* I, 3 (Barnes 1984).

T1: If

~PB: a belief can be justified only if it is inferred from (based on) a belief
then either

JJ: a belief can be justified only if it is inferred from (based on) a *justified* belief
or

UF: a belief can be justified even if the belief(s) from which it is inferred (on
which it is based) is/are not justified.

T2: If JJ, then either

IR: a belief can be justified via an infinitely long non-repeating inference chain
or

CR: a belief can be justified via a circular inference chain
or

RS: there can be no justified belief.

The following argument can be constructed on the basis of these two uncontroversial theses:

T1: If ~PB, then either JJ or UF.

T2: If JJ, then either IR or CR or RS.

T3: Therefore, if ~PB, then either UF or IR or CR or RS.

T3 captures the core uncontroversial thesis behind the regress argument for foundationalism.

Notice that T3 can be used as an initial premise in more than one argument. Consider, for example, these two:

Regress Argument for Foundationalism

1. T3: If ~PB, then either UF or IR or CR or RS.
2. ~UF
3. ~IR
4. ~CR
5. ~RS
6. Therefore, PB.

Argument for Radical Skepticism

1. T3: If ~PB, then either UF or IR or CR or RS.
2. ~UF
3. ~IR
4. ~CR

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5. ~PB
6. Therefore, RS

These two arguments share their first four premises but differ greatly in their conclusions. The first is reminiscent of Aristotle's argument for foundationalism in the *Posterior Analytics* (I, 3). The second is similar to a skeptical argument found in Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.⁵

A helpful way to view both of these arguments is to consider this inconsistent set of claims:

The Inconsistent Set: {~PB, ~UF, ~IR, ~CR, ~RS}.

T3 says this set is inconsistent because T3 says that if the set member listed first is true, then at least one of the other members is false. Given that it's an inconsistent set, at least one of its members is false. The regress argument for foundationalism takes it that each of the last four members is more plausible than the first; it concludes that the first member is false (i.e., PB is true). The argument for radical skepticism takes it that each of the first four members is more plausible than the last; it concludes that the last member is false (i.e., RS is true). Other similar arguments could be formulated with T3 as a starting point. For example, one might think that the middle member is the least plausible and conclude, on the basis of accepting each of the other four as more plausible and true, that IR is true. In short, what we have here is a classic example of a philosophical puzzle: each member of an inconsistent set of claims has at least some initial plausibility to it, and so we are forced, it seems, to reject at least one seemingly plausible claim.

There are five standard ways to respond to this puzzle, each of which denies just one member of the Inconsistent Set:

Foundationalism: PB is true and UF, IR, CR, and RS are false.

The "Unjustified Foundations" View: UF is true and PB, IR, CR, and RS are false.

Infinitism: IR is true and PB, UF, CR, and RS are false.

Linear Coherentism: CR is true and PB, UF, IR, and RS are false.⁶

Radical Skepticism: RS is true and PB, UF, IR, and CR are false.

⁵ I have in mind Sextus's presentation of Agrippa's Five Modes in chapter XV of Book I (Annas and Barnes 2000). See Klein's reconstruction of Sextus's argument in Klein 2011a: 86. If we think of the "hypothesis" pattern of reasoning as including two distinct versions—one endorsing PB and the other endorsing UF, both of which Sextus rejects, along with IR and CR—then Klein's reconstruction of Sextus's argument is very similar indeed to the skeptical argument given above.

⁶ This sort of coherentism, which endorses circular reasoning, is to be distinguished from holistic coherentism which rejects circular reasoning. See Bonjour 1985: 89–93 on the distinction between linear and holistic coherentism. As Sosa (1980), Plantinga (1993: chap 4) and Klein (1999 and 2000) rightly point out, holistic coherentism is just a version of foundationalism.

These aren't the only five ways to deal with the Inconsistent Set.⁷ But they're the natural ones to focus on because, by denying only one member of the set, each departs *minimally* from the starting point of thinking that each member of the set is at least somewhat plausible. So which of these five ways of resolving this philosophical puzzle is best?⁸

In my view, and, I believe, the view of most philosophers throughout history who have thought about this puzzle, foundationalism is hands-down the best solution to the puzzle highlighted by T3.⁹ Even if foundationalism has some initial implausibility, that implausibility pales in comparison to the implausibility of the other four options. Moreover, as I will argue below, careful reflection on foundationalism and its worrisome features enables us to see that this minor initial implausibility disappears upon further examination.

2. Klein on Doxastic Justification and the Basing Requirement

Let's turn now to a brief presentation of Klein's views. He gives the following accounts of propositional justification and doxastic justification:

Klein's Account of Propositional Justification: a proposition, *p*, is justified for *S* iff there is an endless series of non-repeating propositions available to *S* such that beginning with *p*, each succeeding member is a reason for the immediately preceding one (2007a: 11).¹⁰

⁷ If RS is true, then each of PB, UF, IR, and CR is false. However, each of PB, UF, IR, and CR is compatible with each of the other three. Thus, in addition to the five ways of denying exactly one member of the Inconsistent Set, there are a number of ways to avoid the inconsistency by denying more than one member of the Inconsistent Set.

⁸ There is a very similar puzzle (discussed in my 2006: 185–6) that arises if we replace IR and RS with the following:

- IR*: some belief of ours is justified via an infinitely long non-repeating inference chain (i.e., justification in fact arises via our infinite reasoning).
- RS*: none of our beliefs are justified.

T1–T3 are just as uncontroversial if they include IR* and RS* in place of IR and RS. And the revised T3 gives rise to a similar inconsistent set {~PB, ~UF, ~IR*, ~CR, ~RS*}, which gives rise to a similar puzzle with a similar variety of possible solutions. The main difference is that RS is more implausible than RS* and that IR* is more implausible than IR. But, as I think Klein would acknowledge, each of IR, RS, IR*, and RS* is more implausible than PB.

⁹ See my 2006:186 for some discussion of why those philosophers who *seem* to be taking a position other than Foundationalism often aren't.

¹⁰ What is it for a proposition to be available to *S*? For at least some kinds of knowledge, Klein seems to adopt the following rather liberal account of availability: "a proposition, *p*, is available to *S* just in case there is an epistemically credible way of *S*'s coming to believe that *p* given *S*'s current epistemic practices" (2007a: 13). As an example, Klein says that the proposition *the Almanac is a reliable source and it lists Helena as the state capital* (of Montana) is available to you, in the relevant sense, if you would check the Almanac, were you required to in the context (2007a: 13). This suggests that a reason given in a book is available to you if the book is in the next room and you'd go and check it if required.

Klein's Account of Doxastic Justification: a belief [that p] is doxastically justified for S iff [its content is propositionally justified and] S has engaged in tracing the reasons in virtue of which the proposition p is justified far forward enough to satisfy the contextually determined requirements (2007a: 11).¹¹

For our purposes, it is the account of doxastic justification that is of interest, because that is the sort of justification connected with the regress argument.¹² Notice that the proposal is contextualist, not in the attributor-context way that the views of Cohen and DeRose are contextualist, but in the subject-context way that David Annis's view is.¹³ The idea is that the person holding the belief needs to trace the reasons for the belief as far as is demanded by that person's context. The features of the subject's context that determine what is demanded in this regard will be things like what the inquirers in the context demand of the subject in terms of giving reasons for the belief or for the reasons given for the belief. If, at a certain time, they and the subject are satisfied with the reasons given, then no more reason-giving is required at that time in that context (Klein 2007a: 10).

Given that we are thinking about T3 and the regress problem as formulated above, a key question for Klein's view is what sort of inference (if any) is required for doxastic justification. We can see that his answer is "it depends on context." But if there are some contexts in which X is not required for justification, then, *strictly speaking*, X is not necessary for justification (since that justification can be had without X). So, in terms of inference from or basing on a belief, what is the *minimum* that is required for a belief's doxastic justification in a particular context? The answer given in the quotations at the beginning of this section seems to be that some amount of "tracing reasons... forward" is required, different amounts being required in different contexts. Elsewhere, instead of speaking of tracing reasons forward, Klein speaks of "locating and citing reasons" (2011a: 93), of "providing" reasons, and of the time taken to "discover and offer reasons" (2011b: 252). How is this tracing, locating, citing, providing, discovering, and offering of reasons for beliefs—where these reasons are themselves beliefs¹⁴—related to the practice of a belief being *inferred from* or *based on* a belief?

At first glance, it seems that locating and citing a reason for a belief is not the same thing as basing that belief on that reason. Consider the following example, which

¹¹ What appears in square brackets is implicit in the rest of the quotation but Klein also says explicitly that "if a belief is objectively doxastically justified, its content is propositionally justified" (2007b: 29).

¹² Klein agrees: "The regress argument and any possible responses are concerned with whether the belief is doxastically justified" (2011b: 251).

¹³ See Annis 1978, Cohen 1999, and DeRose 1992.

¹⁴ In his 2007a: 11, Klein talks about "the beliefs which are cited as reasons," about S believing "the proposition, say r, that is S's reason for p," and about "beliefs with the reasons as their content." All of this indicates that he's thinking of the reasons cited as being themselves beliefs. Moreover, in his discussions of doxastic justification, when he talks about contexts requiring further reasons to be given for the reasons already given, it's natural to understand him as thinking of each of these reasons that are given as beliefs for which further reasons might be requested.

illustrates this difference. Suppose Mr Sexist has to choose between two candidates for a job (a man and a woman) and that he believes the man should be hired. This belief of his is based solely on his further beliefs that (i) that job candidate is a male with more than the minimal competence required for the position and (ii) women should not be working outside the home, in the way this job requires. When asked by others working at the company why the man should be hired, Mr Sexist realizes that they won't be impressed by his actual reasons but that they are impressed by how high the national ranking of a candidate's alma mater is, something that Mr Sexist doesn't rely on at all in holding his belief on the matter. So, in response to queries from others at his company about why the man should be hired, Mr Sexist locates and cites as a reason the fact that the male candidate's alma mater is a more highly ranked college than the female candidate's alma mater. Given that this reason is offered only to persuade others and that his belief is not in any way based on this reason, this seems like a clear case where locating and citing a reason for a belief is not the same thing as basing a belief on that reason. Similar examples would show that providing or offering a reason for a belief is not the same thing as basing that belief on that reason.

In light of this example, it's extremely plausible to think that what matters for doxastic justification for S's belief B is not S's locating and citing reasons for B, even good ones, if they aren't the reasons on which B is based. Instead, what matters for doxastic justification for S's belief B is that S actually bases B on good reasons (whether these reasons are cited for any inquirers or not). Providing "fake" reasons—ones you don't use or rely on in holding your belief—doesn't seem relevant to justification. So, does Klein endorse the implausible view that what matters for doxastic justification is just locating and citing reasons? Does he prefer it to the view that what matters is that the belief is actually based on good reasons? I think not. Although Klein is too often not sufficiently clear on the matter, I'm inclined to think that when he speaks of locating, citing, and providing a reason for a belief he means to be speaking instead of basing a belief on a reason (or at least that when he says things suggesting that locating, citing, and providing a reason would be enough for doxastic justification, he doesn't mean that basing isn't required). Here's why I think that. In his 2011b, he emphasizes that what is required for a belief's doxastic justification is not just that one has reasons available but also that the belief is held *for those reasons*.¹⁵ And in his 2007b, he explicitly says that for a belief to be doxastically justified, some reasons must be available and the belief must be "based

¹⁵ In his 2011b: 251 he says: "it is crucial to note that what is required for knowledge is that S's believing that p be justified . . . For even if p is true, believed, and propositionally justified for S, S could fail to know that p because either S believed p *for the wrong reasons* or *no reasons whatsoever* (as in a guess). The regress argument and any possible responses are concerned with whether the belief that p is doxastically justified sufficiently for the belief to rise to the level of knowledge." [emphasis added]

upon those beliefs that have the available reasons as their contents.”¹⁶ This suggests that Klein holds the plausible view that doxastic justification doesn’t require merely locating and citing a reason but rather *basing* the belief on that reason, where that reason is another belief. I will proceed on the assumption that this is what Klein thinks.¹⁷ If it isn’t, then his view is problematic insofar as he seems committed to thinking that a belief can be doxastically justified by “fake” reasons a believer locates and cites without in any way relying on them.

3. Klein is Still *Not* an Infnitist about Doxastic Justification

In my 2007, I argued that Klein does not endorse Infnitism about doxastic justification; instead he endorses The “Unjustified Foundations” View. These two views were defined in section 1 as follows:

The “Unjustified Foundations” View: UF is true and PB, IR, CR, and RS are false.
Infnitism: IR is true and PB, UF, CR, and RS are false.¹⁸

Klein wants to resist this way of describing his views. And yet, in the paper in which he voices his resistance to this description of his position, he acknowledges that he thinks beliefs “can be (at least partially) doxastically justified even if the beliefs from which they are inferred are unjustified” (Klein 2007b: 27). The problem is that this acknowledgement entails that he endorses UF, which was defined in section 1 as follows:

UF: a belief can be justified even if the belief(s) from which it is inferred (on which it is based) is/are not justified (i.e., a belief can be justified via an

¹⁶ In his 2007b: 26–7 he says: “although propositional justification requires that there be an infinite path of non-repeating reasons, in order for a belief to be (at least partially) doxastically justified, it is not required that S possess that infinite set of reasons or that a belief be based upon beliefs that have the infinite set of reasons as their propositional contents. However, it is required that some of those reasons be available and that the belief be based upon those beliefs that have the available reasons as their contents.” [emphasis added]

¹⁷ In his 1999: 315, Klein says that a belief’s being (doxastically) justified by a reason requires that the belief “is playing the appropriate causal role in sustaining” the reason. But in his 2011a: 93–4, he says that locating and citing reasons is what matters for doxastic justification even if we ignore the causal ancestry (including the current sustaining causal ancestry and not just the original causal ancestry). From the perspective of those who think the basing relation is (at least in part) a causal relation, this makes it sound like Klein now thinks that what matters for doxastic justification is locating and citing reasons, not basing the belief on those reasons. However, in his 2007b: 26, Klein says that he wants to leave it open whether the basing relation is (in part) a causal relation. His view there is that proper basing is required for doxastic justification, whether or not the basing relation includes a causal component. From this I take it that when (in his 2011a) he emphasizes the importance of locating and citing reasons and downplays the importance of causal ancestry, he is not thereby denying the importance for doxastic justification of proper basing.

¹⁸ We could be more cautious and say that he endorses The “Unjustified Foundations” View* and rejects Infnitism*, which are just like The “Unjustified Foundations” View and Infnitism except that IR and RS are replaced with IR* and RS* (see note 8).

inference chain terminating in an unjustified belief—i.e., an unjustified foundation).

And in his 2007a (which is the paper he is defending while resisting my description of his view), Klein says that “assuming it takes some time to provide reasons . . . *no belief* could ever be completely doxastically justified” (2007a: 10). Why not? Obviously, it’s because we can’t actually provide an infinitely long chain of inferential reasoning. But to insist on this is just to deny IR, which was defined in section 1 as follows:

IR: a belief can be justified via an infinitely long non-repeating inference chain (i.e., justification can arise via infinite reasoning).¹⁹

In light of this, why does Klein resist the charge that he endorses The “Unjustified Foundations” View and rejects Informatism?

For starters, Klein seems to run together The “Unjustified Foundations” View, which says that beliefs can be justified via inference from unjustified beliefs, and foundationalism, which says that beliefs can be justified even if they aren’t inferred from other beliefs. He insists, in response to my charge that he endorses The “Unjustified Foundations” View, that his view is not a “type of foundationalist” view (2007b: 27)—in particular, it’s not the “unjustified (arbitrary) foundationalist” type (2007b: 28). But my charge was that he endorsed The “Unjustified Foundations” View, not that he endorsed foundationalism of some type. Klein goes on to identify some features of his view that he thinks prevent it from being a version of The “Unjustified Foundations” View or foundationalism. Of most importance, he thinks, is the fact that, on his view, although a belief can be justified via inference from unjustified beliefs (ones that are reasons), there are contexts in which further reasons would be required for those initial reasons in order to prevent the doxastic justification of the original belief from being lost.²⁰ But that is irrelevant to my point, which is just that when faced with the Inconsistent Set associated with the regress

¹⁹ Or, again, we could be more cautious and say that at least Klein is denying IR* (see note 8).

²⁰ Klein distinguishes between subjective doxastic justification, which doesn’t require propositional justification, and objective doxastic justification, which does require propositional justification (2007b: 29). And he argues that while subjective doxastic justification can be lost, objective doxastic justification cannot be lost. But—and this is intended as a friendly amendment to his view, not a worrisome objection—objective doxastic justification *can* be lost. Suppose a belief is propositionally justified according to Klein (because the person has available an infinite series of non-repeating reasons) and that it is also objectively doxastically justified because (i) it is based on a belief (whose content is a reason, R1, in the series) that is not objectively doxastically justified but (ii) the context doesn’t require the person to carry on the reasoning by providing a reason, R2, for that reason, R1, on which the original belief is based. Now suppose that the context changes and the person later *is* required to carry on the reasoning. Moreover, suppose that, although the person has reasons available (in the book in the next room, for example), the person does not access those reasons or *base* the belief with the content R1 on any other belief—i.e., suppose that although the reasons are available, they are not accessed or employed or relied upon. In that case, the original belief will no longer be objectively doxastically justified according to Klein, now that the new context requires further basing and the person doesn’t adhere to that requirement. Hence, objective doxastic justification can be lost.

problem—i.e., { \sim PB, \sim UF, \sim IR, \sim CR, \sim RS}—Klein solves the puzzle by denying the second member, not the third (i.e., he endorses UF, not IR). If Klein wishes to endorse UF and call his way of doing that “infitism,” that’s up to him (although it is misleading). My main claim is just that Klein solves the puzzle associated with the Inconsistent Set by endorsing UF rather than IR and that the natural way to describe that solution is to say he endorses The “Unjustified Foundations” View rather than Infitism about doxastic justification, which is the kind of justification that is the focus of the regress argument.

It’s worth noting that, in addition to endorsing UF, Klein also endorses PB, which was defined in section 1 as follows:

PB: a belief can be justified even if it is not inferred from (based on) a belief (i.e., there can be properly basic beliefs).

Or at least he thinks there is a kind of doxastic warrant (and, presumably, doxastic justification) of which PB is true and a kind of which UF is true. He writes that “there is some type of epistemic warrant that a belief acquires in virtue of its etiology” and “although there is one form of warrant that does not originate with reasoning, another form of warrant does” (2011b: 252).²¹ So if our focus is doxastic justification, Klein seems to opt for two different ways of solving the puzzle arising from the Inconsistent Set: for one type of doxastic justification or warrant, he endorses PB (the signature claim of foundationalism) and for another he endorses UF (the signature claim of The “Unjustified Foundations” View).²² But nowhere does he endorse IR with respect to any kind of doxastic justification. I conclude that Klein’s view on doxastic justification is not Infitism, at least not if we understand that view in the most natural way, namely, as dealing with the puzzle of the Inconsistent Set by endorsing IR.

4. Problems with Klein’s “Unjustified Foundations” View

Klein acknowledges that in order for his so-called “infitist” view to be correct, the Non-Originating Principle must be false:

Non-Originating Principle: Reasoning, alone, cannot produce epistemic warrant (2011b: 248, 252).

And he makes clear in a variety of places that he rejects this principle because a key claim of his “infitist” view is that justification (or warrant) can emerge from or be

²¹ He also says “so-called basic beliefs with truth-conducive causal pedigrees have one epistemic good-making feature” (2011a: 94).

²² See also his discussion (2007a: 5) of a detector type of knowledge that can be had without inference, in which case a version of PB applies to it.

produced by reasoning alone.²³ But what he rarely emphasizes is that to say that justification emerges from reasoning alone is to say that justification can arise by inference from reasons *even if those reasons are doxastically unjustified beliefs*. In other words, he rarely emphasizes that to say justification originates from reasoning alone commits him to the very implausible UF.

Why is UF so widely viewed as implausible in the extreme? Suppose you have two beliefs, B1 and B2, both of which are not justified at all, because neither of them is based on any reasons or evidence at all. And suppose also that B2 implies B1. Can B1 become justified to some degree solely in virtue of your later inferring it from the still unjustified belief B2, which implies it? It seems clear that the answer is “no.” Inference from reasons doesn’t yield any justification if those reasons have nothing going for them, epistemically speaking. Or so most people think, which is why they reject UF. Now, given that Klein endorses a position so widely viewed as implausible, it would be helpful if he said something in defense of this endorsement, something to make it seem more plausible or at least less implausible. Let’s consider four things he has to say (or could say) in defense of UF.

I’ll begin with his response to my charge that by endorsing UF, he is saying that a belief can be justified by inference from a “bad” reason (since the reason is an unjustified belief). Klein rightly points out that he *does* require that the reason, R, is propositionally justified, so the believer has further reasons available for the unjustified belief in R (2007b: 29). But the fact is that the reason, R, is still bad in the sense that it is not a justified belief.²⁴ Even if there are reasons in a book in the next room that are available to S for the belief in R, in the case I have in mind, S is not *basing* the belief in R on those available reasons and, therefore, S’s belief in R is not justified. In virtue of that it is a bad reason.

A second point Klein makes in defense of UF is that people reject it because:

they think that if a belief is justified by another belief the latter must be justified because they hold that justification is a property that is transmitted by inference to non-basic propositions (2007b: 27).²⁵

And Klein thinks it is a mistake to think that justification is transmitted in that way. But people can reject UF due to its implausibility without holding any view at all about whether justification is transmitted or transferred from one belief or proposition to another. What opponents of UF think is just that a belief can’t become justified by inference from an unjustified belief. They might also think that a belief *can* become justified by inference from a justified belief. But they needn’t have any

²³ See his 2005a: 137–8; 2005b: 152; 2007a: 8, 16; 2011a: 93–5; 2011b: 252–3.

²⁴ This is a sense of being a “bad reason” that Klein ignores when he considers different factors that could make a belief a bad reason (2011b: 254).

²⁵ This passage is talking about endorsing a principle called K2 but endorsing K2 is the same thing as denying UF.

views at all about whether that involves justification being *transferred* from one belief or proposition to another.

A third defense of UF is connected with Klein’s claim that a fundamental intuition behind the regress argument is that “any belief for which one can produce reasons is better or differently warranted than a belief for which one cannot produce reasons” (2011b: 250). If we put it in terms of justification, we can think of this alleged “fundamental intuition” as saying that:

FI: Producing a reason R for a belief B—even if that reason is an unjustified belief—is sufficient for B’s being justified, to at least some degree.

FI implies UF. So if FI were indeed a fundamental intuition behind the regress argument, then UF would at least be backed by a fundamental intuition. The problem is that, far from being a fundamental intuition behind the regress argument, FI is both implausible and quite different from any of the five claims in the Inconsistent Set that gives rise to the regress argument. It’s implausible because it conflicts directly with one of the most plausible of those five claims, namely, \sim UF. Of the five claims in the Inconsistent Set, FI is perhaps most similar to \sim PB, which says that a belief cannot be justified unless it is inferred from (based on) a reason, which is a belief. But \sim PB says that having a reason is *necessary* for justification; and that claim is compatible with requiring that the reason is itself a justified belief (so \sim PB doesn’t conflict with \sim UF). FI, on the other hand, is the claim that having a reason is *sufficient* for justification, and that *is* incompatible with requiring, in addition, that the reason is itself a justified belief (so FI does conflict with \sim UF). Thus, not only is FI implausible and not a fundamental intuition, it’s also implausible to think of FI as what is behind the regress argument. The fundamental intuition behind the regress argument is that each of the five claims included in the Inconsistent Set is somewhat plausible, despite the fact that we know that it can’t be that they’re all true. The fundamental intuition isn’t any particular one of those five claims and it most definitely isn’t FI.

Perhaps Klein’s main reason for endorsing UF is the fourth and final defense I will consider, namely, the thought that endorsing UF is more plausible than denying any of the other members of the Inconsistent Set—i.e., UF is more plausible than PB, CR, IR, and RS. Something like that thought is one of *my* main reasons for endorsing PB—i.e., I think PB is much more plausible than UF, CR, IR, and RS. It looks like Klein and I agree that CR, IR, and RS are very implausible and should not be endorsed with respect to doxastic justification.²⁶ We differ about which of PB and UF is most implausible.

In support of the view that PB is more plausible, I offer the following. First, PB doesn’t strike me as being the least bit implausible. Perhaps it’s initially a little bit

²⁶ Likewise with IR* and RS*. (See note 8.)

tempting to think that a belief is justified only if it is based on a reason and that a reason must be a belief. But once you see that that conjunction implies \sim PB and you have before your mind T3 and the entire Inconsistent Set $\{\sim$ PB, \sim UF, \sim CR, \sim IR, \sim RS $\}$, it's natural to have serious questions about \sim PB. Moreover, once you consider the view that a belief can be justified via basing on something other than a belief (e.g., an a priori mathematical seeming or an experience of pain), PB seems downright plausible.²⁷ Nothing similar happens with UF. There's nothing that makes it seem even a little bit plausible that inferring a belief B from an unjustified belief can make B justified.

So Klein and I agree about T3, \sim CR, \sim IR, and \sim RS. Each of is, therefore, forced to accept either PB or UF. Are we at an intuitive impasse, with me saying that I find UF very implausible and PB plausible whereas Klein says that he finds PB more implausible than UF? Not quite. For Klein has some objections to foundationalism, which might be enough to make PB seem less plausible than UF after all, despite what I've said above. I will turn to these in section 5.

5. In Defense of Foundationalism

Foundationalists insist that people can have properly basic beliefs—i.e., beliefs that are justified noninferentially. Their claim is that the regress that is the focus of the regress argument stops with a justified belief that is not inferred from another belief. Klein objects to this view as follows:

[T]ake any proposed “basic” belief in the regress. Call it “E.” One can ask the following question: In virtue of what is E a proper ending point? If no answer is forthcoming, then it clearly appears arbitrary to believe E without a reason because up to that point reasons were needed. Why should the regress end at E rather than at some earlier step or at some possible later step? Suppose that the answer is that E is the appropriate ending belief in virtue of E's having some foundational property, F. Then, the next question becomes obvious: Does E's possessing F make it more likely that E is true than it would be if E did not possess F? . . . Once the question is asked about whether E's possessing F is truth conducive, there are four possible responses: It can be ignored, or “yes,” “no,” or “I don't know.” I take it that ignoring the question is to fail to grasp the normative imperative underlying the regress argument, and the “no” and the “I don't know” answers place S's acceptance of E in jeopardy. Once the question is asked and understood, the only answer that at least preserves all of E's warrant is “yes.” But, then, a reason for believing E has been given and the regress has continued. (2011b: 250)²⁸

²⁷ Even Klein must have *some* appreciation of and sympathy for the view that PB is plausible, given that he endorses PB with respect to some type of justification or warrant (see my discussion at the end of section 3).

²⁸ This same sort of discussion appears in a variety of places in Klein's work (e.g., 2005a: 133–4 and 2007a: 14–15).

The main strategy behind Klein's response is to get us to consider some persistent questioning about a belief that is allegedly a justified noninferential belief and to argue that, in the face of such questioning, this belief is either not justified (because the person is irrational in refusing to address the questions) or it is not noninferential (because, in addressing the questions, the person is offering further reasons for the belief, thereby allowing the regress to continue).²⁹

My response is twofold: first, addressing the questions needn't continue the regress; second, refusing to address the questions needn't be irrational.³⁰ Let's consider the first point first. Suppose that Jack goes to the doctor after a car accident. (Let's say that Jack himself isn't a philosopher and hasn't heard of foundationalism or ever thought of endorsing it or defending it.) The doctor, Sally, presses her hand along Jack's spine and neck to check for injuries, asking if it hurts when she does so. At one point, Jack feels a severe pain and says "ouch, that hurts!" Let's say that Jack at that time believes that he is in pain and that this belief is based on his awareness of his experience of pain and is not inferred from any other beliefs he has. Foundationalists will think that this belief of Jack's is noninferentially justified and is a perfect example for illustrating the truth of PB. Now suppose that Jack's doctor, Sally, asks Jack if he believes (1) that he has the belief that he is in pain and (2) that his belief that he's in pain is reliably formed. And suppose that Jack, while initially taken aback by the question, answers the question seriously and says that, while he hadn't considered (1) and (2) before, now that he considers (1) and (2), he does believe them. Does it follow that the conjunction of (1) and (2) is one of Jack's reasons for believing that he's in pain? Hardly. Even if it is pointed out to Jack that the conjunction of (1) and (2) supports the belief that he is in pain, it may be that Jack doesn't rely on that conjunction in any way as he continues to believe that he is in pain. Instead he relies solely on his awareness of his experience of pain. In fact, it may be that his awareness of that pain completely distracts him from thinking about the implications of (1) and (2) while leading him to strongly believe he is in pain. This is a case where a person addresses some questions about a basic belief without continuing the inferential regress.

Here's a similar example illustrating the same point. Suppose that Sally says to Jack, "It would seem that if a belief is properly believed noninferentially, then it needs to be different in some way from beliefs that are justified only on the basis of inference. Let's call the feature, whatever it is, that makes the noninferentially justified beliefs different 'F'. Do you think your belief that you're in pain has feature F?" Suppose that, after thinking about it, Jack agrees that it does and Sally says "Aha! There you go. That's a reason for you to believe you're in pain. You think that (a) beliefs with feature F are properly believed noninferentially and (b) your belief that

²⁹ Despite offering this kind of objection to foundationalism's endorsement of PB, Klein also endorses PB himself with respect to certain kinds of justification and warrant (see the end of section 3 above).

³⁰ For an earlier statement of this sort of response, see my 2004.

you're in pain has feature F. So your belief is inferentially justified after all." At this point, Jack can say "Well, I guess that's a reason for believing I'm in pain, but I'm not inferring *my* belief that I'm in pain from that reason; I'm basing it on my awareness of my experience of pain." The foundationalist will think that here too Jack's belief is noninferentially justified, based not at all on belief in (a) and (b), but instead on the pain experience. This is another case where the inferential regress stops even though the person addresses questions about the basic belief.

Let's turn now to the second point to be made in response to Klein's objection to foundationalism, namely, that refusing to address questions about a basic belief needn't be irrational and needn't indicate that the noninferential belief in question is unjustified. Suppose once again that Jack reports to his doctor, Sally, that he's in pain. Sally asks Jack what beliefs he relied on to infer that he is in pain and Jack replies that he didn't infer that he's in pain. Instead, he believes *noninferentially* that he's in pain. Sally asks if he thinks this is a rational way for him to proceed and he says "of course it is." She then points out that, often, our beliefs aren't rational unless we have inferred them from good reasons (in the form of other beliefs) and she asks Jack why it is that his belief that he is in pain is rational despite the fact that it isn't inferred from other beliefs. What feature does his belief have that makes it possible for it to be noninferentially justified? At this point, it would be sensible for Jack to reply: "I don't know. You're the philosopher-type. Why don't you figure it out?" If Jack dismisses her questions in that way and continues to believe he's in pain (on the basis of his awareness of his pain), it would seem that his pain belief is justified, despite the fact that Jack has decided not to get involved in doing philosophical analysis on the topic of what is distinctive about noninferentially justified beliefs. The regress has stopped and the questions have not been addressed (certainly not to Sally's satisfaction) and yet Jack is not being irrational. Instead, his pain belief remains justified without inference.

Here is another way the questioning could be shut down in a rational manner. Suppose that Sally pushes the conversation forward by asking Jack "Do you think your belief that you're in pain is reliably formed?" Jack has four options: he can believe it is reliably formed, he can believe it isn't, he can withhold judgment about whether it is or isn't, or he can do none of the above.³¹ According to Klein, if Jack genuinely believes it isn't reliably formed or if he withholds judgment about whether it is reliably formed, then he has an undercutting defeater for his belief that he's in

³¹ The latter option is possible because withholding judgment involves resistance, voluntary or involuntary, to believing p and to believing p is false. Most propositions are ones you have never considered, so you neither believe, disbelieve, nor withhold judgment about them. It is even possible to consider a proposition and yet neither believe, disbelieve, nor withhold it—if, for example, you are trying to understand it or to guess whether someone else wishes that it were true and are so distracted by those things that you don't get around to believing, disbelieving, or withholding it. See Bergmann 2005: 421–2 for further discussion.

pain, making it unjustified. I have no dispute with Klein about that.³² So Jack's remaining options are believing it is reliably formed or none of the above. Suppose that, in response to Sally's question, Jack believes that his pain belief is reliably formed. Then Jack has the makings of a reason very much like the reason he had a few paragraphs back consisting of (1) and (2).³³ Now imagine that Sally pushes even further. After Jack agrees that his belief that he's in pain is reliably formed, she asks him whether that belief (about his belief that he's in pain being reliably formed) is itself reliably formed. Jack, feeling a little bit frustrated by Sally's continued questioning, agrees that it is. Sally persists, asking him whether this latest belief (about the reliable formation of his belief that his pain belief is reliably formed) is itself reliably formed. At this point Jack says: "Hold on a minute. This is getting beyond silly. Your questions seem to be an indication of a philosophical temperament gone awry. The bottom line is that, first, I'm justified in believing I'm in pain; second, my belief that I'm in pain is based on my pain experience, not on my answers to any of these questions about reliable belief-formation that you've been asking; and third, your questions are getting quite complicated and I'm tired of trying to get them clearly in my mind, so I'm not playing this question-and-answer game anymore." By responding in this way to this last question of Sally's, Jack isn't thinking "yes" or "no" or "I don't know." Instead, Jack is taking the "none of the above" option. Klein wants to say that in doing that, Jack is being epistemically irresponsible. But the foundationalist will say there's nothing at all irresponsible about what Jack is doing. Jack is being perfectly reasonable and what he says is true: his belief that he's in pain remains both noninferential and justified, even if he answers a few of Sally's questions; and his belief also remains noninferential and justified even if, after a while, he decides to stop trying to answer Sally's questions in the way she wants.

I've been defending my twofold response to Klein's objection to foundationalism by arguing that addressing persistent questions about basic beliefs needn't continue the regress and that refusing to address such questions needn't be irrational or an indication that the basic beliefs in question are unjustified. But the examples I've been using all involved Jack who isn't a philosopher and who has never heard about foundationalism or ever thought about endorsing or defending it. Would it make a difference if we focused on Fred, a self-avowed foundationalist who wasn't having a conversation with his doctor during an examination but instead engaged in a philosophical discussion of skepticism and foundationalism with Sally? No, it wouldn't. If Fred were questioned by Sally, he could say things similar to what Jack said. He could say that he believes (1) and (2), or that he believes (a) and (b), and he could acknowledge that they count as reasons for believing that he's in pain. But he

³² See Bergmann 2005: 422–7.

³³ As I already noted when discussing the case where Jack believes (1) and (2), the fact that he believes them and that they count as a reason for his belief that he's in pain, doesn't mean that his belief that he's in pain is inferred from or based on them.

could then quite truthfully and sensibly insist that his belief that he's in pain is not based on those reasons and that it is justified nonetheless. Likewise, Fred could say that he's not interested right now in determining what feature it is that all properly basic beliefs have in common and that he's not interested in continuing to respond to Sally's questions by considering ever more complicated claims about the reliable formation of beliefs he has acquired in response to her previous questions. In deciding not to answer her questions in the way she wants him to, he isn't being irrational, nor is his belief that he's in pain unjustified, simply in virtue of his refusal to go along with her questions about it (and this is so even if he's having a philosophical conversation with her about foundationalism and skepticism). In short, Fred could begin by asserting PB (and that his pain belief is noninferentially justified) and he could reasonably stand by his endorsement of PB even after Sally's persistent questions about his pain belief.

Klein at one point says that "the fundamental claim endorsed by foundationalism [is] that there are some beliefs immune to further interrogation" (2011b: 254). That doesn't seem right. The fundamental claim endorsed by foundationalism is that, upon considering the Inconsistent Set, we should reject UF, CR, IR, and RS and accept PB. As for being "immune to further interrogation," I'm not quite sure what that means. But it's worth noting that the foundationalist doesn't claim that Jack or Fred is immune to interrogation by Sally in the above conversations. They get interrogated by her and they have things to say in response to Sally, even if they aren't always the direct answers to her questions that Sally is looking for.

At the end of section 4, before considering Klein's objection to foundationalism, I noted that PB seems very plausible and UF seems very implausible. We then considered Klein's anti-foundationalist argument at the beginning of section 5. In light of the above discussions of various ways in which Jack and Fred could respond to Sally's persistent questioning, it seems that Klein's anti-foundationalist argument makes no dent at all in the plausibility of PB. We can, therefore, continue holding the very plausible PB, and preferring it to UF, despite the imagined conversations with Sally that Klein brings to our attention.³⁴

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³⁴ My thanks to Michael Rea, John Turri, and Josh White for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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