

# Epistemic Circularity

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In this paper I will explore the prospects for justifying, or being justified in accepting, claims that one or another source of belief is *reliable*. I will be particularly concerned with the ways in which these prospects are affected by a certain kind of circularity we often fall into when we try to justify such claims. The results of my investigation will be mixed but mostly, by my lights, on the optimistic side.

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My first task is to identify the claims the justification of which we will be considering, and to indicate their importance for epistemology.

For Thomas Reid the most basic epistemological issue was whether we are proceeding rationally in trusting as we do our basic sources of belief — perception, introspection, memory, testimony, and reasoning.<sup>1</sup> Less metaphorical terms than ‘source of belief’ would be *dispositions*, *tendencies*, or *habits* to form beliefs of certain kinds in certain circumstances. A more currently fashionable term is ‘belief forming *mechanism*’. Whatever the lingo the idea is that we are so constituted, whether by nature, experience, or some combination thereof, as to respond to a certain kind of psychological “input” (experiential or doxastic) with a certain correlated kind of belief “output”; and this in accordance with some function of the input. Thus when it appears to me sensorily that there is a tree in front of me I will normally respond to this by forming the belief that there is a tree in front of me unless I have strong enough reasons to the contrary. Reid noted that we all have a number of such belief-forming habits, and that we ordinarily repose confident trust in their output. We take them to provide us with accurate information about the world; we take them to be reliable sources of such information.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Can Belief in God Be Rational If It Has No Foundations?” in A. Plantinga and N. Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 149 ff.

A thorny question for a reliability theory of justification or knowledge concerns the individuation of belief-forming mechanisms. If the justification of a particular perceptual belief of mine to the effect that a tree is before me depends on whether it was produced by a reliable belief-forming process or mechanism, how wide or narrow a mechanism do I examine in order to answer this question? This particular belief formation was a case of forming a belief about a tree being before me upon its looking to me as if there were, a case of forming belief about a close up tree on the basis of sensory experience, and a case of forming a belief about the immediate physical environment on the basis of sensory experience. And different degrees of reliability may well attach to these three belief-formation-types. We need not get involved in all that in this paper. I shall be considering problems about the justification of reliability claims that will arise no matter how belief-forming mechanisms are individuated. For purposes of illustration I shall choose "wide" mechanisms or sources like perception and introspection; but everything I say could be just as well applied to "narrow" sources, like its appearing to me that there is a typewriter in front of me.

What is meant by 'reliability' in this context? I believe that the following will suffice for present purposes. I am not thinking of the reliability of a belief-producing mechanism as a function of its actual track record, but rather of its *tendency* to produce true beliefs in the sorts of situations in which it normally functions. This understanding may be canonically formulated as follows:

- (I) We and the world about us are so constituted that beliefs about the immediate physical environment, that are based on sense experience in the way such beliefs generally are, and that are formed in the kinds of situations in which we typically find ourselves, are or would be generally true.

Note that this formulation does not take the reliability of a source to imply that it would yield mostly true beliefs in *any* possible situations, e.g., in a "demon-world" or in artificially gerrymandered situations, but only in the sorts we normally encounter. Nor does the reliability of sense perception imply that it would yield true beliefs no matter how used, but only that we will get mostly true beliefs on the usual input-output function. On this understanding of the matter a track record under normal conditions will be strong evidence for a favorable reliability claim, but more indirect evidence can be used where conditions have been abnormal or where there has been little or no actual development.

I have already noted that Reid took the most fundamental epistemological question to be: Are we justified in trusting our basic sources of belief, i.e., in taking them to be reliable? I concur in that judgment. Many contemporary epistemologists would agree that the reliability of belief-forming mechanisms is of central importance epistemologically, and many others will disagree. Let me indicate briefly what I take to be the epistemological importance of the problem of this paper: whether claims to reliability can be justified.

First of all, I take it as obvious that the issue is of intrinsic importance, whatever the relation of reliability to other matters. We certainly do ordinarily suppose perception, introspection, and so on, to be reliable sources of information; and so we will naturally be led to wonder, on reflection, whether we are justified in so supposing, and if so how. But depending on one's general epistemological stance, the question will take on additional importance. If one thinks that reliability is what converts true belief into knowledge, then the question of how we can determine that perception is reliable will be a crucial part of the question of how we can determine that we have perceptual knowledge.<sup>2</sup> There may also be important connections with justification. Those who identify justification and reliability,<sup>3</sup> and those who take the latter as the basic criterion of the former,<sup>4</sup> will suppose that the question of whether sense perception is a reliable source of beliefs about the immediate environment is just the question of whether perceptual beliefs are justified. In another place<sup>5</sup> I have argued that the most adequate concept of epistemic justification is one that will put a reliability *constraint* on principles of justification, even though not all conceivable reliable modes of belief formation will yield justification. By a "reliability constraint" I mean something like this. Take a principle of justification of the form:

If a belief of type B is based on a ground of type G, then the belief is justified.

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<sup>2</sup> See D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), chaps. 12-15; Fred I. Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), esp. chap. 4; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1981), pt. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See Marshall Swain, *Reasons and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), chap. 4.

<sup>4</sup> A. I. Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?", in G. S. Pappas, ed., *Justification and Knowledge* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," *The Monist*, Vol. 68, no. 1 (Jan., 1985).

This principle is acceptable only if forming a B on the basis of a G is a reliable mode of belief formation. On this view, a reliability claim is imbedded in every claim to justification; and so what it takes to justify a reliability claim will be at least part of what it takes to justify a justification claim.

On the other hand, there are theorists who use concepts of justification that are not held subject to a reliability constraint. I think particularly of “deontological” concepts, according to which one is justified in believing that *p* iff one is not subject to reproach in doing so, one has not violated any intellectual obligations in doing so.<sup>6</sup> Using a concept like that, it would seem quite possible that I might be conducting my cognitive activities as well as could be expected of me, doing my best by my lights, even though I am not forming beliefs in a way that is in fact reliable. Just think of a persistent situation in which conditions of observation are quite abnormal, but where I have no way of knowing this.

To summarize. The question of how, if at all, we can be justified in supposing that a common source of belief is a reliable one is, of course, a question of great intrinsic interest. And, depending on one’s further epistemological commitments, it may be a large part of the question of how we can be justified in supposing that we know this or that, or that we are justified in believing this or that.

For the sake of concreteness I shall focus much of the discussion on the reliability of sense perception, understood in terms of (I). We may abbreviate (I) as:

(II) Sense experience is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs.

When I speak in unspecific terms of the reliability of sense perception, or of sense experience as a reliable source of belief, that is to be understood in the way spelled out in (I).

What does it take to be justified in accepting (I)? It seems very plausible to hold that one rationally accepts (I) only if one has adequate reasons for that thesis, either in the form of a favorable track record or in the form of more indirect evidence, e.g., evolutionary or theological considerations to the effect that we would not be here with these belief-forming mechanisms unless they mostly gave us true beliefs. What alternatives are there to justification by adequate reasons? Even if we are justified in accepting propositions that seem self-evident to us, that would not seem to apply here. Any tendency to suppose (I) to be self-evident can be put down to a confusion between self-evidence and being strongly inclined to accept the proposition without question. It does not seem at all plausible to take it to

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

be the sort of proposition that one cannot believe without its being true, or justified. Moreover, whereas propositions about one's own current conscious states, e.g., are plausibly regarded as "self-warranted," (I) is not plausibly so taken. Nor does it appear to enjoy any of the other forms of "direct" justification. Thus I shall take it without more ado that we are justified in accepting (I) only if we have adequate *reasons* for supposing (I) to be correct. What are the prospects of acquiring such reasons, for (I) and for analogous principles concerning other common sources of belief?

The rest of this paper will be devoted to considering what I take to be the chief source of pessimism concerning these prospects. This is a certain kind of circularity, "epistemic circularity," into which we frequently fall when we set out to adduce reasons for the reliability of a belief source. I shall first illustrate and describe this mode of circularity. Then I shall consider its extent and the deleterious effects it does and does not have on the epistemic status of reliability claims and, more generally, on the epistemic status of our beliefs generally.

## ii

The simplest way of supporting a reliability thesis like (I) is to point to a record of success. Many beliefs have been formed in accordance with the principle, and they have mostly been correct. But how do we tell that this is the case? You form the perceptual belief that there is a goldfinch just outside the kitchen window, basing your belief on your sense experience in the usual way; and the situation is quite normal. Your belief is correct. But how do I tell that your belief is correct?<sup>7</sup> The most obvious way is to take a look myself to see whether there really is a goldfinch there. But then I am relying on the reliability of sense perception in order to amass my evidence. In supposing that I have ascertained in each case that the perceptual belief under examination is correct, I have assumed that my sense experience is yielding true beliefs. Thus I am assuming (I) in adducing evidence for it, and so it would appear that my argument is circular.<sup>8</sup> Of

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<sup>7</sup> There is also the question of how I tell whether your belief was based on sense experience in the usual way, and how I tell that the situation was of the sort we typically find ourselves in. But we will find problems enough with the initial question, and the further questions would simply give rise to more difficulties of the same sort.

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, (I) is only one of many ways of spelling out the idea that sense experience is a reliable source of belief. Other formulations might be in terms of probability rather than in terms of a lawlike tendency, or they may restrict the relevant class of situations in some other fashion. And I might protest that in trusting my senses I am assuming one of these other formulations rather than (I). Thus a more precise statement of the circularity claim would be that in putting forward the evidence one is assuming some member of a family of theses, each of which constitutes a particular version of the view that sense experience

course I could determine the accuracy of your report without taking a look myself. For one thing, I could get someone else to take a look; but that hardly changes the logic of the situation. More relevantly, I could have arranged to have a continuous photographic record of the scene outside the window. But even in this case I, or someone, must look at the photographs to determine what they show. Or if we have the photograph read by still another instrument, and the output of the instrument recorded by still another. . . , at some point someone must use his/her senses to determine the reading of some instrument. No matter how much sophisticated technology we employ, we must rely on someone's sense perception at one or more points. Any track record argument that depends on ascertaining the truth value of particular perceptual beliefs will involve a reliance on sense perception to obtain some of its premises.

This would not be the case if we had some way of finding out about the physical environment that did not essentially involve the use of sense perception; but it seems that we do not and cannot. Consider something much more roundabout than the use of cameras. Suppose that we had a science of ecology comparable to the Newtonian mechanics of the solar system that enabled astronomers to determine the existence and location of Neptune without having seen it. We might then be in a position to infer that there must have been a goldfinch just outside my kitchen window at that time. But this will not alleviate the circularity. We are still assuming the reliability of sense perception at two points. First, we rely on observed facts as evidence in developing our super-ecology. Second, the inference to the goldfinch in that spot at that time must make use of particular facts about the environment as well as general ecological principles. And in the ascertainment of those facts sense perception must have played a role at some stage(s).

So far we have just been considering the most direct way of arguing for the reliability of sense perception, viz., the comparison of its deliverances, one by one, with the facts. But there are more indirect strategies. "Pragmatic" arguments have been popular. It has been pointed out that reliance on sense perception enables us (1) to successfully predict and thereby (2) to exercise considerable control over the course of events. Furthermore (3) when several independent investigators use sense perception to explore the physical environment they generally come up with the same answer. It has been felt that these facts testify to the reliability of sense perception. For if its deliverances were not accurate why should the general

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is a reliable source of beliefs about the physical environment. For purposes of exposition I shall take (1) as paradigmatic of this family of theses and speak, loosely, of one's assuming (1), whenever one supposes oneself to have acquired accurate information about the physical environment through sense experience.

principles supported by those deliverances give us a basis for successful prediction and control? And if perceptual beliefs were not under the effective control of the facts, why should these beliefs agree to the extent they do? In short, the practice of forming beliefs about the immediate physical environment on the basis of sensory experience *works*. It is a *successful* practice and not just successful in some irrelevant respect; it is cognitively successful. It makes a powerful contribution to the attainment of intellectual goals. And is this not an indication that it is a reliable source?

Well, yes; except for the recurrence of circularity. How do we know that predictions formed on the basis of observationally based principles are often correct? By looking to see whether things came out as predicted, or by using instruments to determine this, which in turn. . . . How do we know that different observers generally agree on what is before them? By listening to what they say. Once more we have to rely on sense perception to gather the data that are being used in the argument for its reliability.

We find less obvious forms of the same circularity in other lines of argument. Consider, e.g., the Wittgensteinian argument that if sense perception were not reliable we would not have a common public language, which, for Wittgenstein, implies that we would not have any language at all.<sup>9</sup> In that case we would not be able to raise the question of the reliability of sense perception. Thus if we can raise the question the only possible answer is that sense experience is a reliable source. But, apart from other difficulties with this line of argument, there is the question as to why we should suppose that unless sense perception were reliable we would not have a common language. We certainly cannot establish this thesis just by sitting at our desks and thinking about the matter. For all we can tell by that method, we might be born with a common language and not have to acquire it at all. It is only by relying on what we have learned about human beings and the world in which they live, through sense perception and reasoning based on that, that we have reason to suppose that this is the only way we could acquire a common language. And so once more the argument is vitiated by circularity.

These considerations strongly suggest that it is impossible to present an (otherwise) effective argument for the reliability of sense perception without assuming that reliability in asserting the premises. I certainly have not established this. I have not considered all the lines of argument that have been used, much less all possible lines of argument. For all I have shown, some argument that uses only *a priori* premises, like that of Descartes in

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<sup>9</sup> My primary source for this particular argument is some unpublished writings of, and conversation with, Peter van Inwagen.

the Meditations, might be successful. But it is no part of my purpose here to *show* that sense perception, or any other source of belief, cannot receive a noncircular proof of reliability. One aim has been to use some familiar arguments for the reliability of sense perception to illustrate the kind of circularity with which I am concerned. Another aim has been to suggest the strong possibility that the reliability of sense perception cannot be established in a noncircular fashion, in order to introduce the concept of a source of belief for which this is true. Let us call such a source “basic,” defining the term as follows.

- (III) O is an (epistemologically) basic source of belief = df. Any (otherwise) cogent argument for the reliability of O will use premises drawn from O.

It is plausible to take not only sense perception but also memory, introspection, and deductive and inductive reasoning as basic sources. The reasons for these judgments are familiar in the literature, though they are widely dispersed in discussions of one or another source.

### iii

Before proceeding to investigate the extent and consequences of the kind of circularity just illustrated, we will need to characterize it and distinguish it from its kindred. First of all, the concept of circularity that is involved here applies primarily to arguments. The most general notion could be stated this way. An argument is circular when the conclusion is being assumed in the attempt to prove the conclusion. The simplest and most crippling form of circularity is that in which the conclusion actually figures among the premises. In setting forth the premises we are, in effect, claiming to already know the conclusion. While this will not render the argument invalid (What can be more obviously valid than ‘*p*, therefore *p*’?), it will vitiate the argument as a way of establishing the conclusion. If we were entitled to assert that *p* before going through the argument the whole procedure is pointless as a way of showing that *p*. Any proposition can be logically deduced if it itself is included in the premises. Let us call this simplest form of circularity “logical circularity.”

This is *not* what is involved in the attempt to establish the reliability of basic sources. Suppose I give a simple inductive argument for the reliability of sense perception. I lay out a large, carefully chosen sample of perceptual beliefs, and report in each case that the belief is true. Thus the argument looks like this.



- (IV) 1. At  $t_1$ ,  $S_1$  formed the perceptual belief that  $p_1$ , and  $p_1$ .
2. At  $t_2$ ,  $S_2$  formed the perceptual belief that  $p_2$ , and  $p_2$ .

. . . . .

Therefore, sense experience is a reliable source of belief.

Let us say it turns out that 97% of the perceptual beliefs were true. The conclusion, "Sense experience is a reliable source of belief," does not appear anywhere in the premises, which consist solely of reports of perceptual beliefs and reports of perceived states of affairs. Then in what way is the argument circular? We can get at this by bringing out several ways in which it is unsatisfactory.

1. If I were to ask myself why I should suppose that my premises are true, or why I should consider myself entitled to assert them, I would have to reply that it is because of the reliability of sense perception. It is only by taking sense perception to be reliable that I can regard it as reasonable to believe that there is a tree in front of me when there visually appears to me to be a tree in front of me. In reposing confidence in the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception in the ordinary way, I am presupposing the truth of (I). That is not to say that I use (I) as a premise to arrive at a perceptual belief as a conclusion each time I form such a belief. I may never have performed such an inference. Indeed I may never have formulated (I), or (II), even in thought. I may just unself-consciously form perceptual beliefs in a way that accords with (I). Therefore in putting forward an argument like (IV) I need not be explicitly presupposing (I). What this paragraph reveals is rather that when I form perceptual beliefs I "practically" assume something like (I), assume it "in practice." In confidently forming perceptual beliefs in accordance with (I), I proceed as if (I) is true. I manifest an acceptance of it in my practice.

2. This is reflected in the dialectical point that if my premises were challenged I would have to appeal to the reliability of sense perception to answer the challenge, at least if it were pushed far enough. At the first stage I could simply point out that I had heard  $S_1$  testify that he had formed the belief that  $p_1$  on the basis of sense experience, and that I had seen that  $p_1$  for myself. But if the challenger persists by asking why anyone should suppose *that* is any basis for that first premise, I would have to appeal to (I).

3. An allied point is this. If one wholeheartedly denied or doubted (I), he could not, rationally, be convinced by the argument, if he kept his wits about him. Being disposed not to accept the reliability of sense perception, he would not accept the premises. Again, one need not have explicitly

accepted (I) in order to be able, rationally, to accept or use this argument. But a person who truly rejects (I) does not accept it even practically, and hence cannot accept the premises.

What all this comes down to is that in using or taking this argument to establish (II) one is already, implicitly or explicitly, taking (II) to be true.<sup>10</sup> In this way we might say that the argument “presupposes” the truth of the conclusion, although the conclusion does not itself appear among the premises. Note that the necessity of this presupposition does not stem from the logical form of the argument, or from the meaning of the premises. It is not a syntactical or a semantic presupposition. It stems rather from our epistemic situation as human beings. Beings of another sort might have some nonsensory way of ascertaining these premises, but we do not.<sup>11</sup> Thus the presupposition falls into the large basket called “pragmatic.” More specifically, we might call it an “epistemic” presupposition, since it depends on our epistemic situation *vis-à-vis* singular propositions concerning middle-sized physical objects in one’s immediate environment. In parallel fashion we might term the kind of circularity involved “epistemic circularity.”

#### iv

Next I want to consider the bearing of epistemic circularity on the epistemic status of reliability claims. To focus the issue, let us assume sense experience to be a basic source of belief, one for which no otherwise cogent, nonepistemically-circular argument for reliability can be given;

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<sup>10</sup> I have been supposing that when one takes oneself to know, or be justified in believing, something on the basis of sense experience, one is assuming the *general* reliability of sense experience as a source of knowledge. This may be contested. It may be suggested that when I take myself to possess perceptual knowledge that there is a typewriter in front of me, I need only be making some more restricted assumption, e.g., that *visual* sense experience is a reliable source of belief concerning the existence and position of *artefacts* (or, even more restrictedly, *typewriters*) in the vicinity. This must be conceded. If an opponent were to make this move, we should have to point out that an adequate inductive argument for (II) would have to cover the whole range of sense modalities and the whole range of perceivable objects, situations, and features thereof. Thus the complete argument would involve a conjunction of assumptions that would amount to the general assumption of the reliability of sense experience. To simplify the discussion I shall make the natural assumption that it is always the general assumption that is being made.

<sup>11</sup> I can imagine someone maintaining that this presupposition is necessitated by the very meaning of ‘There is a tree in front of me’. But such a person would be taking on the very considerable burden of arguing that just by virtue of the meaning of this sentence, no epistemic subject could know, or be justified in believing, this otherwise than by sense perception. A position like this is taken by John Pollock in *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). There he holds that the meaning of (many) sentences are given by what he calls “justification conditions.” See especially chap. 1.

and let us ask how this basicity affects the epistemic status of (I). Since we are assuming that *any* otherwise acceptable argument for (I) will be infected with epistemic circularity, we may as well work with the simplest argument that is otherwise cogent, viz., the track record argument, (IV). Given that this argument is epistemically circular, can it in any way render it reasonable or justifiable for us to accept (I)?

First, let us consider whether I could use an argument like (IV) to justify my belief that (I).<sup>12</sup> That, of course, depends on what it takes for S to justify his belief that *p* by an argument. So far as I can see, the requirements are as follows.

(A) S is justified in believing the premises, *q*.

If I validly derive a conclusion from premises I have no basis for accepting, how does that make it reasonable for me to believe the conclusion?

(B) *q* and *p* are logically related in such a way that if *q* is true, that is a good reason for supposing that *p* is at least likely to be true.

These support relations are studied by deductive and inductive logic, and I will say no more about them here.

(C) Many theorists also require that S know, or be justified in believing, that the logical relation between *q* and *p* is as specified in (B).

I do not accept this requirement,<sup>13</sup> but I will adopt it here for the sake of argument.

(D) by virtue of S's inferring *p* from *q*, justification is conferred on S's belief that *p*.

We cannot absolutely require that as a result of the inference this belief comes to be justified for the first time, for there are overdetermination cases. But we are requiring that the inference is sufficient to produce justification, that if S's belief that *p* were not already justified this argument would ensure that it is. Thus this requirement cannot be satisfied if the situation is such that the argument can do its work (the other requirements can be satisfied) only if S's belief that *p* is already justified. If the argument cannot produce any justification of the belief that *p* over and

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<sup>12</sup> If the reader is puzzled as to what might come second, under the rubric specified by the last sentence of the previous paragraph, the answer is: *being* justified in accepting (I) by the reasons specified in (IV), even though one has not engaged in the activity of justifying (I) by presenting the argument.

<sup>13</sup> See my "Level Confusions in Epistemology," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5 (1980): 143-45.

above what it already possesses, then that belief cannot be justified *by virtue of* its inferential relation to the belief that *q*.

If the epistemic circularity of (IV) interferes with the satisfaction of any of these requirements, it would seem to be (D), in the first instance.<sup>14</sup> For if I have to presuppose the conclusion, (II),<sup>15</sup> in order to be entitled to assert the premises, it would seem that I have to be justified in accepting (II) as a precondition of being justified in accepting the premises. But then the derivation of (II) from the premises could not confer justification on it. It will already have been justified for that subject, else that subject would not have been justified in accepting the premises and so would not have satisfied requirement (A). And if, as we are supposing, all arguments for (II) are infected with epistemic circularity, (II) cannot be justified at all. But then, by the above considerations, no perceptual belief can be justified, and so condition (A) cannot be satisfied either.

There is a way out of this quandary provided something like the following principle of justification for perceptual beliefs is acceptable.

- (V) If one believes that *p* on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that *p*, and one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that *p*.

According to (V), all that it takes to be justified in a perceptual belief about one's immediate environment is that the belief stem from one's sensory experience in a certain way, given the *absence* of sufficient overriding reasons. It is *not* required that one also be *justified* in accepting (V), or some correlated reliability principle like (II). Thus I do *not* already have to be justified in believing (II) in order to be justified in accepting the premises of the argument. Hence the epistemic circularity of (IV) poses no obstacle to my being justified in the perceptual premises of the argument. The circularity certainly does not prevent my having a treelike visual appearance and my basing my belief that *there is a tree in front of me* on this appearance. Moreover, since I do not have to be *justified* in believing (II) in order to be justified in the premises, it is not impossible that my belief that (II) should *acquire* justification from this argument. To be sure, we

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<sup>14</sup> (B) seems clearly unaffected. Surely the appropriateness of the inferential pattern is unaffected by the circularity. As for (C), there could be trouble only on the assumption that one's justification for supposing an inductive argument to be valid involved the use of perceptual premises. But in that case the difficulty would be the same as the one we are about to explore with (A) and (D).

<sup>15</sup> If the reader is puzzled by the flip-flop between (I) and (II), he should remember that (II) is simply a shortened form of (I) and that they are the same thesis, differently expressed. Since (IV) used (II) as the formulation of the conclusion, we shall often refer to (II) when discussing that argument.

have seen that in coming to believe the premises on the basis of sense experience I am “practically” assuming (II). But that by no means implies that I am *justified* in making this presupposition. Hence as far as the epistemic circularity of (IV) is concerned, my belief in (II) might remain unjustified until I bring it into inferential connection with the premises of this argument. I conclude that, assuming the truth of (V), the epistemic circularity of (IV) does *not* prevent its being successfully used to justify one’s belief that (II).<sup>16</sup>

Nor do we have to assume (V) in particular to secure this result. We get the same verdict on any principle that lays down sufficient conditions for the justification of perceptual beliefs that do not include the subject’s being *justified* in the correlated reliability claim that perceptual beliefs formed under those conditions are or would be generally true. Most contemporary epistemological theories of perception adopt principles that satisfy this negative condition,<sup>17</sup> though they differ among themselves in various ways.<sup>18</sup> To be sure, it has been argued by some that one can be justified in a perceptual belief only if one is justified in accepting the correlated reliability claim.<sup>19</sup> But there are fatal objections to the imposition of this additional requirement. Such a position escapes an infinite regress only at the price of arbitrariness. If the mere holding of condition C cannot justify one in believing that *p* unless one is also justified in accepting the general principle that beliefs like *p*, in conditions C, are generally true, would it not be sheerly arbitrary to refuse to take the same attitude to this

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<sup>16</sup> For another presentation of this kind of position, with application to the Cartesian circle, see James van Cleve, “Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle,” *Philosophical Review* 88: 55–91. It must be remembered that we are not seeking to prove that (II) can be justified by (IV). To show that we would have to show that (V) is true and satisfied in many cases, and that reasonable principles of inductive inference are satisfied by (IV). We are only seeking to show that justification is not precluded by epistemic circularity, that if all other factors are favorable the epistemic circularity will not throw things off.

<sup>17</sup> See Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2nd. ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977), chap. 4; Carl Ginet, *Knowledge, Perception, and Memory* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1975), chap. 6; Pollock, *op. cit.*, chaps. 2, 3.

<sup>18</sup> For example, some drop the ‘on the basis of’ clause and merely require that the appropriate experience occur when the belief is formed. There are also different ways of specifying how the content of the experience has to be related to the content of the belief. And there are various conceptions of what it takes to override.

<sup>19</sup> For an explicit presentation of this kind of position see Laurence Bonjour, “Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Jan., 1978), esp. pp. 5–7. I have discussed Bonjour’s argument, as well as a similar argument of Wilfrid Sellars’ in my “What’s Wrong With Immediate Knowledge?,” *Synthese* 55 (1983): 73–95. Some rather similar positions are discussed in my “Level Confusions in Epistemology,” *loc. cit.*

new enriched condition, consisting of C and a justified acceptance of the reliability principle. Call this enriched condition, D. By the same reasoning, the mere holding of D cannot justify belief that *p* unless conjoined with justified belief in a new reliability principle linking D and the belief that *p*. Call this still more enriched set of conditions E. But by the same reasoning, E is not enough . . . And so on ad infinitum. At some point we must rest content with the mere holding of a condition, and not also require that S be justified in believing *that* that condition confer reliability. But if at some point, why not at the outset?<sup>20</sup>

In arguing that S can justify his belief that (II) by a simple inductive argument that uses perceptual premises, we have been thinking of S as *merely* implicitly assuming (II) in the accepting of those premises. But what if S comes to realize that he is making this assumption? What if he becomes conscious that in supposing himself entitled to believe that there is a tree in front of him he is thereby assuming (II)? In this more sophisticated condition can he still use (IV) to justify his belief that (II)? Will he not realize that it is a meaningless charade to first assume a principle in order to get some premises, and then use those premises to justify the principle? And if, when thus enlightened, he realizes that the argument has no justificatory force, does that not show that the argument was deficient all along? How can an argument lose evidential force by its character being seen more clearly?

I think the answer will have to be that while S may lose confidence in the argument, the epistemic situation is unchanged. If (V) is true, and satisfied by the premises of (IV), then the fact remains that by inferring (II) from the premises of (IV) S *has* justified that-belief, has provided adequate reasons for supposing it to be (at least probably) true, however shaky he may feel about it. The shakiness may inhibit him from carrying out the inference and therefore from reaping its epistemic rewards. But if he does carry through the reasoning, he will succeed in justifying his belief that (II), whatever his doubts about the operation. He may not believe that he has justified his belief that (II), and even if he holds that higher level belief he may not be justified in holding *it*; but it will be true all the same.

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<sup>20</sup> It may be objected that I am inconsistent in allowing on p. 11 that S cannot be justified by reasons R in believing that *p* without being justified in supposing that R adequately supports *p*, while rejecting out of hand the view that S cannot be justified by sensory experience in believing that *p* without being justified in believing that this is a reliable mode of belief formation. Indeed, I would be inconsistent, or incoherent, if I were to *affirm* the former and deny the latter. But, as I made explicit at the time, I deny the former as well. I was only pointing out that even if the former were granted, S could still justify (II) by inductive reasons.

Does the epistemic circularity of (IV) prevent its being used to *show* or *establish* that (II)? That, of course, depends on what is required for showing or establishing. Insofar as the conditions for justifying one's belief that (II) are required for showing that (II), we have already taken care of that. What additional requirements are there? I will not try to determine exactly what is necessary for showing that *p* or establishing the fact that *p*. I shall simply list all the plausible requirements I can think of, and consider whether any of them are knocked out by epistemic circularity.

- A. Both the premises and the conclusion of the argument are *true*.
- B. The subject knows the premises to be true.
- C. (If *show* is an audience-relative concept.) The audience must:
  - 1. Accept the premises.
  - 2. Be justified in accepting the premises.
  - 3. Accept the premises without already having accepted the conclusion.

As for C. 1. it is clear that the circularity will not prevent someone from accepting certain perceptual propositions; and we have already dealt with the problems posed by C. 2. C. 3. looks stickier, but it is a plausible requirement only if 'accept' is understood as 'explicitly accept'; and we have seen that epistemic circularity may involve only an implicit prior acceptance of the conclusion. As for A., surely the defects of an argument can have no bearing on the possibility of the premises being true. And as for B., since we have already shown that the epistemic circularity of (IV) does not interfere with one's being justified in accepting the premises, or with the truth of the premises, there would seem to be little ground for supposing it to interfere with any further conditions for knowledge, e.g., one's belief being reliably formed or the absence of defeaters. I conclude, then, that the epistemic circularity of (IV) does not render it useless for showing or establishing that (II).

But then how does epistemic circularity reduce an argument's powers? Why did it seem a crippling disability when first introduced? Was that just a misleading appearance? No, epistemic circularity really does render an argument useless for some purposes. As noted earlier, an epistemically circular argument cannot be used to rationally produce conviction. At least it cannot be used to rationally move a person from a condition of not accepting the conclusion *in any way*, to a condition of doing so. For if the person does not already, at least practically, accept the conclusion he cannot be justified in accepting the premises. Note that this does not prevent

(IV) from being used to rationally bring a person from the state of only practically accepting (II) to the state of explicitly accepting it.

These distinctions have interesting implications for the possibility of using (IV) against skepticism. (IV) cannot be used against a skeptic, if there be such, who totally doubts or denies (II), even practically. But epistemic circularity does not render the argument ineffective in the following situation. Suppose that, while continuing to rely on (II) in practice, I cannot see any adequate reasons for accepting it and am in a state of perplexity about whether I am rational in accepting it. (This is, of course, the situation of Descartes in the *Meditations*.) I can quite legitimately use (IV) to assure myself that I do have adequate reasons for supposing (II) to be correct. Or at least epistemic circularity has no tendency to show that this is not the case.

The fact that epistemic circularity renders an argument useless for producing conviction *de novo* is hardly of great moment epistemologically. So far we have not seen any way in which the *epistemic status* of a principle of reliability is seriously affected by the fact that it has to do with a basic source of belief. In sections vi — viii we will explore one arguably serious epistemic consequence of epistemic circularity.

We are interested not only in the prospects of an argument like (IV) being used to *justify* belief in (II), but also in the prospects of one's *being justified* in believing (II) by virtue of the reasons embodied in the premises of (IV). The distinction being invoked here is that between the *activity* of *justifying* a belief that *p* by producing some argument for *p*, and the *state* of *being justified* in believing that *p*. Of course one way to get into that state is to *justify* one's belief by an argument. We have already seen that this is possible with (IV). However it is a truism in epistemology that one may be justified in believing that *p*, even on the basis of reasons, without having argued from those reasons to *p*, and thus without having engaged in the activity of justifying the belief. Since we do not often engage in such activities we would have precious few justified beliefs if this were not the case. Indeed, we have exploited this possibility in claiming that one may *be justified* in accepting the premises of (IV) without having justified them by argument. If the latter were required one would have to appeal to (II) as a premise, and the enterprise of justifying (II) would run into logical circularity. It even seems possible to be justified, on the basis of reasons, in believing that *p* without so much as being able to produce an argument from those reasons to *p*. It may be that the reasons are too complex, too subtle, or otherwise too deeply hidden (or the subject too inarticulate), for the subject to recover and wield those reasons. Consider beliefs based on perceptual cues one is unable to specify. The way my colleague looks,



talks, and acts may give me adequate reasons for supposing that he is angry, and thus justify me in that belief without my being able to articulate what those ways are, and hence without my being able to mount an adequate justifying argument.

Where no argument for (II) has been given, can the epistemic circularity of (IV) prevent S from being justified in believing (II) by virtue of having the reasons embodied in the premises of (IV)? A thorough discussion of the issue would require us to specify the conditions under which a set of reasons can render S justified in believing that *p*, where S has not argued from those reasons to *p*. And we have no time for that here.<sup>21</sup> However we can see that, whatever the details of the conditions, the epistemic circularity of (IV) cannot prevent S's being justified by those reasons. For, just as with the argument, the crucial requirement for S's being justified by those reasons in accepting (II) is that justificatory status be transferred from the belief in the reasons to the belief in (II), that otherwise absent justification can be conferred on the belief in (II) by virtue of its appropriate relation (whatever that is) to the reasons. And, just as with the argument, the only way epistemic circularity can interfere with that is either by preventing S from being justified in the reasons or by preventing that justification to obtain antecedently to the justification of the belief in (II). But in considering the argument we saw that the epistemic circularity of (IV) has neither of those effects. Therefore it cannot prevent those reasons from rendering S justified in accepting (II).

## v

If what I have been saying is correct; we can justify (II), and be justified in accepting it, even if any otherwise cogent argument for it is infected with epistemic circularity. But what about knowing, or being justified in believing, that I have justified (II) or that I am justified in believing it? Does epistemic circularity rule out these higher level cognitive achievements? No, we get the same story on the higher level. To see this let us consider the prospects for justifying the belief that one has justified one's belief that (II). If we can see that the epistemic circularity of (IV) does not throw that off, this result can be transferred to being justified in supposing that one is justified in believing (II), in the way indicated at the end of the last section.

In the light of the conditions we earlier suggested for S's justifying S's belief that *p*, the strongest, most explicit argument for *S has justified S's belief that (II) by presenting argument (IV)* would go something like this.

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<sup>21</sup> One thorny issue we are bypassing is the interpretation of 'based on', in speaking of a belief's being *based on* certain reasons.

- (VI) A. S has presented (IV).
- B. S is justified in believing the premises of (IV).
- C. The premises of (IV) imply (deductively or inductively) the conclusion.
- D. S is justified in believing C.
- E. by virtue of S's deriving the conclusion of (IV) from the premises, the conclusion, (II), could thereby acquire previously unpossessed justification.
- ∴ F. S has justified S's belief that (II).

Let us suppose that S has presented this argument. Does the epistemic circularity of (IV) imply that S has not justified his belief that F?

Now we saw that the lower level argument, (IV), could be used to justify (II), despite epistemic circularity, just because the justification of the premises only presupposed the practical acceptance of (II), not its justification. This left the premises of (IV) free to confer justification on (II). But that out may not be available to us here. If we adopt the previously mentioned "reliability constraint" on justification,<sup>22</sup> then I can be justified in supposing that my belief that *p* is justified by arising from source O in a certain way only if I am justified in supposing that O is a reliable source. But then I can be justified in the higher level belief that *I am justified in accepting the premises of (IV)* only if I base that supposition on justified beliefs about the reliability of perception. And this means that I can be justified in accepting (VI) B. only if I am justified in accepting (II). Does this not commit us to supposing that S cannot be justified in believing (VI) B. without antecedently being justified in believing the conclusion of the argument?

No. This argument too comes through unsullied even if there is a reliability constraint on justification. The reason is that just as premise B., and the requirements for its justification, has moved up a level from the analogue in (IV), so has the conclusion. If the conclusion of (IV) were still (II), then it would indeed be the case that one could not be justified in accepting B. without already being justified in accepting the conclusion. But the conclusion of (IV) is the higher level proposition, "S has justified S's belief that (II)." It would be a level confusion to suppose that since S cannot be justified in accepting B. without being justified in accepting (II), S cannot be justified in accepting B. without being justified in accepting F.

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<sup>22</sup> See section i and the article of mine referred to there, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification."

Thus the epistemic circularity of (IV) poses no bar to S's being justified in supposing that he has justified (II) by the use of (IV).

What about *knowing* that one has justified (II)? Well, if knowledge requires justification, that will be the only requirement of knowledge that might fall victim to epistemic circularity. Surely the epistemic circularity of arguments for (II) cannot prevent (II) from being true, or from being believed; nor does it have any bearing on whether there are states of affairs that defeat a claim to know (II). And we have seen that epistemic circularity does not interfere with justification. Whereas if what converts true belief into knowledge is not justification but rather something like reliability, it seems clear that the circularity of an argument cannot prevent it from being the case that beliefs of a certain type are reliably formed under certain conditions.

In drawing the fangs of epistemic circularity an essential tool has been the distinction between *being justified* and *justifying*. It is because only the former is required for the premises of a justifying argument that one can use (IV) to justify (II). For if that required *justifying* those premises by argument, one would have to appeal to (II) to do so, and the original enterprise would run aground on logical circularity. And because of this same distinction one can *be justified* in accepting (II) without arguing for it at all. I conjecture that the neglect of this distinction is largely responsible for the widespread impression that epistemic circularity is more potent than is the case.

## vi

The epistemically deleterious consequences of epistemic circularity are proving most elusive. This mode of circularity is a veritable Jekyll and Hyde. Whenever we are about to apprehend it in an act of destruction it metamorphoses before our very eyes into a benign, law-abiding citizen. But surely it interferes with justification or knowledge in some way. Surely it does not leave us totally unimpaired in our capacity to reach our cognitive goals. Surely it is not just a matter of the forensic effectiveness of arguments.

Well, yes and no. Epistemic circularity does leave our capacities for justified belief and knowledge just where they were. We have seen that, with respect to any given belief, it does not render us less capable of justification or knowledge than we would be without it. And it is really true, so far as I can see, that it affects only the status of arguments. But it does not follow that the only significant consequences of the circularity have to do with the conditions under which I can mount an effective argument against someone else. There is one respect in which the basicity of a belief source does affect the epistemic status of the belief in the reliability

of that source and, as we shall see, the epistemic status of many other beliefs as well.

To bring this out, let us consider once more someone, S, who is concerned with whether he is justified in believing (II). To settle the matter he seeks to show that his belief in (II) is based on adequate reasons; or else he seeks adequate reasons on which to base it. Since, as we are assuming, sense perception is a basic source, some of these reasons will be perceptual beliefs, in accepting which S is relying on (II). Since we will run into epistemic circularity whatever the otherwise adequate reasons, we may as well continue to work with the simplest kind of argument for (II), viz. (IV). Thus S's argument for supposing that:

(VII) S is justified in believing that (II)

will run something like this.

- (VIII) A. S's belief that (II) is based on a number of pieces of inductive evidence of the form, 'At  $t$  A formed the perceptual belief that  $p$  and  $p'$ '.
- B. This evidence constitutes adequate support for (II).
- C. S is justified in accepting each of the pieces of evidence.
- D. S is justified in accepting B.
- ∴ E. S is justified in accepting (II).

It may be that this argument suffers from epistemic circularity in a way similar to its lower level analogue, (IV). But if so, there will be analogous reasons for denying that this renders it unfit for being used to justify or establish its conclusion. In any event, that is not my present concern. I am interested now in the way the story continues. S is in too reflective and critical a mood to rest content with the mere possibility that (VIII) has shown that he is justified in accepting (VII), or with the negative point that epistemic circularity does not preclude this. He wants to determine whether the argument *has* shown this. An essential component of that will be determining whether the premises of this argument are true. Let us focus on premise C, since this is where epistemic circularity is most germane. Consider a particular premise of the sort referred to in C.

- (IX) At  $t_1$  A formed the perceptual belief that there was a tree in front of him, and at  $t_1$  there was a tree in front of him.

Let us further focus on the second conjunct:

(X) At  $t_i$  there was a tree in front of A.

Let us make the simplifying assumption that S has checked out all the perceptual premises of (IV) himself, so that his belief in (X) is a perceptual belief. Now let us go back to S's attempt to determine whether he is justified in believing that (X), an attempt to which he was driven in trying to do an ideally thorough job of determining whether he is justified in accepting (II). How can he show that he is justified in accepting (X)? It seems overwhelmingly plausible to suppose that I can only show that a particular belief is justified by showing that it satisfies a sufficient condition for justification. This means that my argument will have to contain a general principle of justification as one premise, and a claim that this belief satisfies the requirements laid down in that principle, as the other premise. Let us suppose that the principle S picks for this purpose is (V). Then the argument he uses to show that he is justified in believing (X) will go as follows.

- (XI) A. If one believes that  $p$  on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that  $p$ , and one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that  $p$ .
- B. S believes that (X) on the basis of its sensorily appearing to him that (X), and S has no overriding reasons to the contrary.
- ∴ C. S is justified in believing that (X).

This argument would appear to be in good order. If S is justified in accepting its premises he can use it to show that he is justified in believing (X). But, still driven by the thirst for reflective assurance, S is not content with this conditional. He wants to know whether he is justified in accepting those premises. Just as at earlier stages, S cannot shirk the challenge of looking into this. Let us focus on his attempt to show that he is justified in accepting (XI) A, (i.e., (V)) the principle of the justification of perceptual beliefs. What does it take to be justified in accepting a principle that lays down sufficient conditions for the justification of beliefs of a certain kind? Recall once more the "reliability constraint" on justification. This is the assumption that the satisfaction of conditions C can suffice to justify beliefs of type B, only if B's are reliably formed when C holds, and that this latter, reliability claim, is part of what is asserted when one asserts the former, justification claim. As indicated earlier, I argue for this assumption in my paper, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," but it is controversial. However I am going to conduct the rest of this discussion on that assumption. This will enable me to show that when S attempts to carry his enterprise beyond the present point, it will soon bog down in logical circularity.

If my reliability constraint is unjustified, it will only follow that epistemic circularity is even more benign than I am claiming, by no means an unwelcome result.

Assuming, then, the reliability constraint, (V) can be true only if beliefs that arise from sense experience in that way are, or would be, generally true. That is, (V) can be true only if sense experience is a reliable source of belief.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, (II) is part of what is asserted by (V). But then one is justified in believing (V) only if one is justified in believing (II). And so any argument that is designed to show that S is justified in believing (V) will have to include as a premise the proposition that S is justified in believing (II). But that is precisely what S set out to establish.

Thus when the attempt to show that one is justified in supposing a basic belief source to be reliable is pressed in the way S has been doing, the attempt will founder on *logical* circularity. At some point back along the way, and not so very far back at that, one will be appealing to the very reliability thesis one is seeking to justify. So this extended argument for the reliability of the source goes, in part, like this.

- (XII) A. J(Reliability of source).
- ∴ B. J(Principle of justification of beliefs from that source).
- ∴ C. J(Beliefs from that source).
- ∴ D. J(Reliability of that source.)

(The 'J' operator indicates that what we are concerned with in each case is the proposition that the subject is justified in accepting the proposition in parentheses.) So long as we keep pushing the problem back in this way the attempt to show that one is justified in the reliability claim will inevitably run into logical circularity; and this for the very same reason that made arguments like (IV) epistemically circular, viz., the fact that any adequate reasons for the reliability claim will include beliefs from that very source. And whatever may be the case with epistemic circularity, logical circularity obviously renders an argument useless for showing, establishing, or justifying its conclusion. It is clearly impossible that justification should be conferred *de novo* on the conclusion by virtue of its being inferred from justified premises, when the conclusion is one of the premises. The

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<sup>23</sup> Of course (II) is much less explicit than (V) as to how beliefs must arise from sense experience if they are to be justified or reliably formed. But remember that (II) is to be taken as an abbreviation of (I); and (I), though still much less explicit than (V), does restrict the class of beliefs in question to those that are based on sense experience *in the way such beliefs generally are*. I am taking it that (V) makes that usual way explicit; and so I take it that (I) and (II) is precisely the assumption that beliefs that satisfy (V) are reliably formed.

conclusion is justified just by *being* one of the premises; bringing it into an inferential relation with the premises comes too late.

We run into this logical circularity “so long as we keep pushing things back the way S is doing.” But why should we insist on pushing things back in this way? What importance, if any, does it have? As a preliminary to considering these questions, let us get a clearer idea of the character of S’s procedure.

S was taking what we might call the attitude of “critical reflection” toward his beliefs. He was seeking what we might call “full reflective assurance” with respect to his beliefs. The belief under initial scrutiny was (II). S produced argument (VIII) to show that it was rational for him to accept (II). But, of course, he made use of various other beliefs to show this; and what about them? If they have not already been shown to be justified, why should they be exempted from the demand for rational credentials? What sort of critical reflection would this be if one were to make a fuss over the status of (II), while accepting uncritically the premises of (VIII)? If we are to accept those premises without showing ourselves to be rational in doing so, why did we boggle at (II)? Once the enterprise of critical reflection has been launched, its momentum carries it forward for as long as new beliefs come into the picture. For every premise that is adduced in the attempt to show any given belief to be justified, there is a question as to *its* epistemic credentials, and it would be arbitrary to cut this off at any particular point.

Thus in seeking “full reflective assurance” with respect to his belief that (II), S has committed himself to seeking the same for any belief employed in showing (II) to be justified, any belief employed in showing any of those beliefs to be justified, . . . .<sup>24</sup> Let us say that when this enterprise has been completed the belief with which we started has been “fully reflectively justified” (FRJ).<sup>25</sup> When a belief has been FRJ, no questions are left over as to whether the subject is justified in accepting some premise that is used at some stage of the justification. Clearly, every premise that is used in a procedure of fully rationally justifying a belief will, when that procedure is completely followed out, itself be FRJ.

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<sup>24</sup> Obviously an infinite regress looms. We shall turn our attention to that side of the matter in the next section. For now we are exploring the way in which epistemic circularity queers things far short of infinity.

<sup>25</sup> Here ‘justified’ is used in the *upshot of a successful activity of justifying* sense, rather than in the *in a desirable position vis-à-vis the belief* sense. That is, ‘B is justified’ means here that someone has *succeeded in justifying* it, rather than that someone *is justified in believing* it.

Let us recur to the point that it is by appreciating the distinction between *justifying* and *being justified* that we can see the (relative) innocuousness of epistemic circularity. We have finally found some negative consequences thereof, but *only by washing out that distinction*. The quest of FRJ is undertaken just when we ignore, or lose interest in, merely being justified. To demand FRJ is to demand that any premise we use in justifying a belief itself be justified by argument. Hence it is not at all surprising that an enterprise that depends on ignoring our basic distinction should be scuttled by epistemic circularity.

So far we have seen that beliefs in the reliability of a basic source are not susceptible of FRJ. This disability attaches as well to all the beliefs that stem from such a source. For to show that it is rational to accept such beliefs one would have to appeal to the reliability of the source. And since a given belief can be FRJ only if any premise used to show it to be justified can itself be FRJ, the unavailability of FRJ for the reliability claim extends to the particular beliefs that depend for their justification on that reliability. Moreover since a principle of justification like (V) can be justified only if the corresponding principle of reliability, (II), is also, the latter will have to be appealed to in any attempt to show that the principle of justification is justified. And so the unavailability of FRJ for (II) will extend to (V) as well. Where basic sources are concerned, it will be in principle impossible to attain full reflective assurance with respect either to the principles of justification or reliability, or to the particular beliefs that fall under those principles. So the consequences of basicity for FRJ are not insignificant.

Thus the situation with respect to basic sources of belief is this. So far as epistemic circularity is concerned, I can justify, and *be* justified in, taking the source to be reliable and to be a source of justification. But as soon as I direct a critical scrutiny on this happy state of affairs it disappears before my eyes; it eludes my reflective grasp. When I try to be fully critical about my justification, I very soon run into logical circularity. I can justify, or be justified in, accepting either particular perceptual propositions or a general principle of perceptual justification or reliability, only by practically accepting that principle of reliability. But in the enterprise of seeking to answer critical questions whenever they arise one is driven to convert that practical acceptance into theoretical justification. And that is where we run into logical circularity. All is well so long as we rely on justification that obtains in fact and do not insist on demonstrating it. But as soon as we look back with a critical eye, we meet the fate of Orpheus.

vii

Thus far the consequences of epistemic circularity for FRJ have been restricted to basic sources of belief. How extensive is that domain? We



have not provided a conclusive answer to this question. I have indicated the plausibility of supposing that sense perception and various other sources are basic, but I have not established this. I have not even shown that there are any basic sources. It *may* be that for any reliable source of belief a cogent argument for its reliability could be constructed that would exclusively use premises obtained from other sources. What I want to do now is to explore the prospects for fully reflective justification without assuming either that there are or that there are not basic sources of belief.

Let us consider a randomly selected principle of reliability,  $Q_1$ .  $Q_1$  states that beliefs of type P are justified when based on source  $R_1$ . Now  $R_1$  is a basic source or it is not. If it is, the previous argument has shown that because of epistemic circularity we cannot attain a fully reflective justification of  $Q_1$ . If it is not, then to attain a FRJ of  $Q_1$  we must be FRJ in accepting the reliability of the other source(s) of the reasons we have for accepting  $Q_1$ . For simplicity, let us suppose that there is only one such source,  $R_2$ , and that the principle of reliability making reference to it is  $Q_2$ . Now  $R_2$  is either a basic source or not. If it is, then the project grinds to a halt at this point. If not, then if  $Q_2$  is justified, there is another source for the reasons that provide this justification. This other source is either  $R_1$  or some other. If the former, then the enterprise bogs down by reason of a slightly larger epistemic circle. If some other, then the same question arises with respect to the principle of reliability for beliefs that stem from that source. It is clear that either this quest for FRJ generates an infinite regress and cannot succeed for that reason, or at some point it is vitiated by circularity, either because we encounter a basic source or because our reasons for a given source are obtained from a source we were relying on at an earlier stage. Whichever of these possibilities is realized we get the same conclusion that FRJ of any principle of reliability is impossible, and hence that FRJ of any belief is impossible.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This argument, with its alternatives of circularity and infinite regress, is very similar to the standard argument for foundationalism. Those who are disenchanted with that position may seize on this as an indication that my argument has force only if one has antecedently made a commitment to foundationalism. But this would be a mistake. So far as I can see, the argument is neutral between foundationalism and coherentism, and holds on any view that allows for principles that lay down sufficient conditions of epistemic justification. Consider how the quest for FRJ would look from a coherentist perspective. There are, of course, various forms of coherentism. On one extreme version the one and only principle of justification is that a belief is justified *iff* it is a member of a coherent system of beliefs. Here the relevant reliability principle is that a member of a coherent system of beliefs is thereby likely to be true. To justify this principle we would have to show *it* to be a member of a coherent system, since, according to the theory, that is the only thing relevant to justification. But then, by the line of argument we have been using, in order to fully reflectively justify the principle we would have to show that what we are appealing

Let me say a little more about the infinite regress horn of the argument. First, since this regress concerns an actual process of demonstration it is more unquestionably vicious than the infinite regress of justification invoked in the standard argument for foundationalism. It is not obvious that we are incapable of an infinitely complex structure of mediate justification, for it may be possible for a human being to have an infinite number of beliefs. But it does seem quite obvious that one cannot carry out a demonstration that involves an infinite number of steps. And this is what it would take to actualize *this* infinite regress. Second, I do not think that this infinite regress horn need be taken seriously. For it seems clear that there is not an infinite variety of sources of human belief, at least on any natural way of dividing such sources into types. Therefore, what would actually happen in any such regress is that either we will run into a basic source of belief or we will come back to sources that had already made an appearance; thus we will encounter circularity fairly quickly.

Even if one accepts the foregoing one may doubt that it throws any new light on the prospects for FRJ. For, it may be said, if we countenance infinite regress arguments, there is a much simpler way of establishing the impossibility of FRJ, a way that makes no appeal to epistemic circularity. Start with any belief and give reasons for supposing it to be justified. The original belief is not justified until we have shown the beliefs in those reasons to be justified. And, in turn, we must show the reasons involved in this second showing to be justified. It seems clear that this process must either go on infinitely or bog down in circularity. So what new light does a consideration of epistemic circularity throw on the matter?

I agree that the above argument demonstrates the impossibility of FRJ for any belief. But I still feel that a consideration of epistemic circularity adds to our understanding of the matter. More specifically, it shows that an attempt at FRJ runs into logical circularity rather quickly, so that, as pointed out above, the infinite regress horn of the dilemma can, in practice, be ignored. The very general, abstract infinite regress argument of the

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to in attempting to justify it (membership in a coherent system) yields beliefs that are mostly true. But that is precisely what we set out to justify. And so once more the quest for FRJ bogs down in logical circularity.

On a more moderate form of coherentism one would allow secondary principles of justification in terms of sources of belief, of the sort we have been considering, but one would regard any such principle as valid only if it passes the basic coherence test of being a member of a coherent system of beliefs. On this view we arrive at the circularity pointed out in the last paragraph when we seek FRJ of the lower level principles of justification.

There are many other forms of coherence theory that put various additional restrictions on the system in question and that differ in other ways. I cannot go into all that in this paper. Let me just say that I cannot see that these variations help us to avoid the above conclusion.

last paragraph may leave us feeling that we can keep up the regress indefinitely; so long as there is never a day of reckoning we are in no way a loser. This may be an irrational reaction, but to show the justificatory inefficacy of an infinite regress has proved to be a singularly difficult task. The argument of this section shows, or at least makes it plausible, that in the quest for FRJ we run into logical circularity fairly quickly. If we begin with a basic source, or outputs thereof, we encounter logical circularity in a few steps. If we begin with a nonbasic source, it is reasonable to suppose our epistemic situation to be such that we will be thrown back on a basic source fairly quickly.

But even if the epistemic circularity argument added nothing to the more general infinite regress argument, as far as demonstrating the impossibility of FRJ is concerned, the main point of this section would remain. That point is that the impossibility of FRJ is the only significant implication epistemic circularity has for the epistemic status of principles of reliability and of our beliefs generally.

### viii

Thus no epistemic principle can be FRJ, and hence no belief can be FRJ.<sup>27</sup> How shocking a result is this? Into what depths of despair would it be appropriate to fall? Does it leave us a prey to the ravages of skepticism?

To start with the last question, our result certainly does not support any of the most dreaded forms of skepticism. Not only does it not imply that we cannot know or be justified in believing *anything*. It places no limits whatsoever on what we can know or be justified in believing. Any skeptic emboldened by the absence of FRJ would be but a paper skeptic. It is true that some classical skeptical arguments have appealed to the impossibility of establishing, in a noncircular fashion, all the epistemic principles presupposed in a putative case of justification by reasons.<sup>28</sup> But, as we have pointed out, this establishes the nonexistence of justification or knowledge only if we make the gratuitous assumption that justification by reasons requires the *justification* of the epistemic principles presupposed.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> We have been conducting our discussion in this paper on the assumption, defended in section iii, that I can be justified in a belief about reliability only if I have adequate reasons for it. But this last argument for the impossibility of FRJ for any belief will go through without that assumption. Suppose that I can be immediately justified in accepting (II) because it is self-evident. Still the goal of FRJ requires me to show this, i.e., to show that it is self-evident and that this suffices for justification. In order to do this I will have to use premises that are either themselves self-evident or come from some other source. Whichever alternative is chosen, we will be launched on the argument just given, and so impaled on the dilemma of infinite regress or circularity.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g., Sextus Empiricus, *Outline of Pyrrhonism*, bk. 2 chap. 4.

Nevertheless I think that this result has fatal implications for certain traditional philosophical aspirations. Philosophers are wont to inculcate the ideals of “critical reflection,” of converting the implicit into the explicit, of letting nothing pass without critical examination, of subjecting all our beliefs, assumptions, and presuppositions to critical scrutiny, determining which of them are based on adequate reasons and jettisoning the rest. “The unexamined principle is not worth accepting.” When we engage in these lofty flights of rhetoric, these solemn exhortations, we are likely to treat all this as too self-evident to itself require scrutiny or critical examination. What I have shown in these last sections is that there are definite limits to the realization of these ideals. Not everything can be subjected to the test of critical examination, or else we shall be bereft of all belief. We can establish some conclusions only by assuming other propositions, not all of which can themselves be established. There is, perhaps, no particular assumption that cannot be disengaged and successfully argued for, but we cannot turn the trick with the whole lot all at once. We can make some justifications explicit only at the cost of leaving others implicit. We can *show* that some sources of belief are reliable only by dint of an implicit reliance on others. We can justify our theoretical acceptance of some principles only by exploiting our merely practical acceptance of others. Or, to give the point a more Wittgensteinian flavor, we can set out our reasons for certain particular beliefs only by engaging in “language games” (I prefer the term “epistemic practices”) our mastery of which must remain largely implicit. This may be a severe blow to philosophical pride, but by the same token it is a salutary lesson in intellectual humility.

Let us not overreact on the *significance* side of the ledger either. It is only the *total* explicit rationalization of belief that is ruled out. It is the finishing of the job *once and for all* that is beyond our powers. This does not imply that we cannot make fully explicit what justifies a particular belief. For any belief we are justified in holding it is possible, in principle, to show that we are justified. At least nothing in this paper goes against that possibility. It is not that each individual piece of justified belief crumbles into dust once we scrutinize it, as my earlier Orpheus analogy might suggest. We can tie down any particular belief as securely as we like. It is just that we cannot also tie down the rope with which the former is tied down, and the rope with which that is tied down, and. . . A closer Orpheus analogy would be one in which the legendary bard had an infinitely large harem that has been lost to Hades. And now the point is that although he can *have* the whole harem as his possession, he has lost his power to survey the whole lot in one glance. I must admit that this is a

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<sup>29</sup> See my “Level Confusions in Epistemology,” loc. cit., pp. 147-48.

poor second to the original Orpheus legend in dramatic force, but it is a close analogue of our epistemic situation.

The last two paragraphs are reminiscent of the position known as “contextualism,” classically expounded by C. S. Pierce and John Dewey. According to contextualism, all justification must take place in a context defined by the assumption of certain beliefs that are, in that context, fixed, not subject to question. These beliefs can be questioned in turn, but only in some other context that is defined by some other (temporarily) fixed assumption. For contextualism the attempt to justify our belief system as a whole is quixotic. All justification is relative to some context. Contextualism meshes with the pragmatist insistence that the need for justification arises only when there is some special reason to question a belief. Those beliefs there is no special reason to question can serve as the context within which the questionable belief can be examined. The main difference between contextualism and the position of this paper is as follows. Contextualists, like many other epistemologists, concentrate on the activity of justifying to the neglect of the state of being justified. Hence they miss the point that one can *be justified* in believing that *p* (without having engaged in the activity of justifying that belief) absolutely, not just relative to some context. Since no activity of justifying has taken place, there is no question of identifying a context relative to which it has taken place. And hence they miss the point that even where one does justify a belief by argument one may simply *be justified*, absolutely, in the premises for that argument, rather than simply assuming those premises for the purposes of that demonstration. This paper agrees with contextualism only in finding fully reflective justification to be impossible. From the present standpoint, contextualism has erred in taking this result to be the whole story about epistemology, just because it has been unaware of the other dimensions of justification we have distinguished.

## ix

Since this paper has been dealing with the epistemic status of reliability claims, I should say a word about its bearing on reliability theories of knowledge or justification. Such theories have been taxed with making it impossible for us to determine when we have knowledge or justification. The strongest reasons for this charge have to do with what in this paper we have called epistemic circularity. If I have to know that sense perception is reliable in order to know that my perceptual beliefs are justified, and if I have to be justified in perceptual beliefs in order to gain that knowledge about reliability, then I am in a pretty pickle. In this paper resources have been provided for answering this charge. We have seen that, despite appearances, epistemic circularity will not prevent one’s

using what is learned from perception as a basis for knowledge or justified belief that perception is reliable. Hence a reliability theory of knowledge or justification does not make it impossible, at least for this reason, to know (be justified in believing) that we know (are justified in believing). Hence the effect of this paper on reliability theories is to remove one objection thereto.

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Let us pull together the threads of this paper. We have been primarily concerned to explore the bearing of epistemic circularity on the epistemic status of claims to the reliability of sources of belief. We have seen that even where an argument for reliability involves epistemic circularity, as it does with basic sources, one may still justify, and *be justified* in, the reliability claim by virtue of basing it on the reasons embodied in the epistemically circular argument. On the other hand, assuming the “reliability constraint” on justification, epistemic circularity does prevent “fully reflective justification” of a reliability claim and, hence, of the corresponding principle of justification. Furthermore, when it is FRJ we are pursuing we inevitably fall into logical circularity sooner or later, whatever source of belief we start with. This implies that no reliability principle can be fully reflectively justified; and since the FRJ of any belief requires the FRJ of one or more reliability principles, we arrive at the result that no belief whatever can be fully reflectively justified; FRJ is a pipe dream. But though this result runs counter to much philosophical ideology, it puts no limits whatever on the beliefs that can be justified, nor does it limit what can be known. Hence it lends no aid or comfort to any of the more familiar forms of skepticism. Though reflection on epistemic circularity serves as a check on overweening philosophical ambition, unsuited to our condition, it by no means reveals that condition to be a hopeless one. It leaves us free to pursue knowledge and rationality with good cheer and lively hopes, albeit without a cosmic guarantee of success.<sup>30</sup>

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