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Against epistemic circularity

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ABSTRACT: One finds a surprising number of defenses of the legitimacy of some kinds of question-begging (circular) arguments or beliefs in the literature. Without wanting to deny the importance of dialectical analyses of begging the question, what I do here is explore the epistemic side of the issue. In particular, I want to explore the legitimacy of "epistemically circular" arguments and beliefs. My tentative conclusion is that epistemically circular arguments and beliefs are never legitimate.

KEYWORDS: begging the question, epistemic circularity, epistemic justification.

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophical orthodoxy has it that begging the question is a Bad Thing. Pointing out that someone has begged a question in defense of a claim is an excellent way to get that person to either offer a different argument in support of the claim or else retract the claim at issue. Given that orthodox view of begging the question, it is surprising to find so many defenses of the legitimacy of certain kinds of question-begging arguments in the literature. Russ Shafer-Landau (2009: 193), for one, argues that "question-begging claims and arguments are ones that agents may sometimes be justified in believing." Richard Robinson (1971: 117), for another, memorably argued that the charge of begging the question is "nearly always a muddle, or improper, or both."

Although it would be a worthy undertaking to try to defend the orthodox view that question-begging arguments are always bad, I want to keep this paper to a more manageable project. The project undertaken here is therefore limited to a discussion of the epistemic side of question-begging arguments, ignoring the question of the dialectical effectiveness of such arguments. The discussion is also limited to arguments and beliefs of what have come to be called the 'epistemically circular' type, because the most serious defenses of the legitimacy of question-begging arguments, to my mind, are given in defense of certain kinds of epistemically circular arguments.

The paper is divided into two parts. In the first, I explain what epistemic circularity is, and give a reason to think that it is a bad thing, epistemically speaking. In the second, I consider the arguments given by William Alston and Michael Bergmann in defense of the epistemic legitimacy of epistemically circular arguments, and I argue that their defenses face some important difficulties.

2. EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY

We can start the discussion of epistemic circularity with an example of a track-record argument. Suppose that I'm reading some Descartes for the first time, and it makes me wonder what reasons can be given in support of the reliability of my belief-sources. Wondering about my "medium-sized-object-in-normal-lighting-visual-belief-forming faculty" (henceforth just "visual belief-forming faculty"), I proceed to look around my apartment and form beliefs. Then I reflect that, because all of those beliefs are true, my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable. My reasoning process might be represented by the following argument:

P1   I formed the belief that there are books on the shelf, and that belief is true.
P2   I formed the belief that there is a sofa beside me, and that belief is true.
P3   I formed the belief that there is a television on a table, and that belief is true.
...
C   So, my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable.

This argument is circular, because the premises are formed by the use of the very faculty whose reliability they are supposed to establish. It need not be logically circular, in the sense that the conclusion appears in the explicit premise-set or in a charitable reconstruction of the argument, because I need not have ever in fact formed the belief that my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable (and those things that I have not formed beliefs about should not be attributed to me in the reconstruction of my arguments). You might be tempted to think that I must believe that my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable, since I employ it all the time, but given that what I am trying to determine is precisely whether that faculty is reliable, there seems to be a sense in which I don't really endorse that belief. So although there is some kind of circularity here, it is not ordinary logical circularity.

What is wrong with the track-record argument above is that, in seeking to determine whether my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable, I have relied entirely on beliefs produced by that very faculty. My only reason to think that the beliefs generated by my visual belief-forming faculty are true is that my visual belief-forming faculty has generated them.[1] But relying entirely on the testimony of X, when the question at hand is whether X is reliable or not, gets us nowhere.

To see that, consider an analogy. Obviously, you can't lift yourself up by your own bootstraps. It makes no difference how strong you are, or whether you are capable of lifting many heavy things. By the nature of lifting things, your arms pulling upwards on your bootstraps can't get you anywhere. The same goes for epistemically circular arguments: a belief-source can't lift itself up by its own bootstraps. It can perhaps lift many other things, but never itself. A belief-source is like our body, and the premises in a track-record argument are like our arms. No matter how strong they are, they can't lift up the very thing that is supporting them. That picture of epistemically circular arguments as trying to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps no doubt underlies much of the dissatisfaction that many of us feel regarding epistemically circular types of arguments.

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[1]   Of course, I could to some extent verify the truth of my visually-formed beliefs with the use of other faculties, but (1) in the case that we're imagining, I don't do so, and (2) the problem will come back when we consider the reliability of the other faculty that's been called into service. Eventually we'll run into circularity again.

Track-record arguments need not always be epistemically circular. They are epistemically circular when and only when (i) they conclude with a belief about the reliability of X, and (ii) they employ only beliefs formed by X as premises. Furthermore, track-record arguments are not the only type of epistemically circular arguments. Michael Bergmann's Juror case, for example, is not a track-record argument, but it is epistemically circular. It goes like this:

> Juror #1: You know that witness named Hank? I have doubts about his trustworthiness.
> Juror #2: Well perhaps this will help you. Yesterday I overheard Hank claiming to be a trustworthy witness.
> Juror #1: So Hank claimed to be trustworthy did he? Well, that settles it then. I'm now convinced that Hank is trustworthy. (Bergmann 2006: 180)

What's happened here is that Juror #1 has taken Hank's claim that he is reliable as evidence of Hank's reliability. Although this argument is not a track-record argument, it suffers from the same problem: without an independent reason to think that Hank is reliable, there is no reason to trust any of Hank's claims, including his claim that he is reliable.[2]

Epistemic circularity can infect both arguments and beliefs. When a subject holds a belief based on epistemically circular reasons, that belief is epistemically circular. In this paper, I will mostly talk about epistemically circular arguments, though I will occasionally shift to talk of beliefs in order to remain consistent with the uses of the authors in question.

3. DEFENSES OF EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY

3.1 Alston

The first and most obvious line of defense of the epistemic legitimacy of epistemically circular arguments, I think, is Alston's (1993) externalist argument. Because Alston takes epistemic justification to be externalist in nature, he takes epistemically circular arguments to be capable of providing justification for their conclusions. Externalism about epistemic justification is the view that what it is that epistemically justifies a belief need not be cognitively accessible to the subject who has the belief. So, for example, according to the most common form of externalism, reliabilism, my belief that there are clouds in the sky is justified, as long as it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process. Its justificatory status is independent of whether I have any reason reflectively available to me for holding the belief.

An internalist, by contrast, would hold that if a belief is epistemically justified, what it is that justifies it must be cognitively accessible to the subject. A subject's belief that there are clouds in the sky would only be justified if she had an experience of a cloudy sky, or some other indirect reason that she was aware of, or could become aware of just by reflecting, or if she satisfied some other such condition, for thinking that there are clouds in the sky.

So, because Alston is an externalist about epistemic justification, he argues that epistemically circular arguments are just fine, epistemically speaking. Take a simple track-record argument. Recall that a track-record argument takes as premises a series of beliefs produced by a given belief-forming process, together with the claim that all or

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2   That is (unsurprisingly) not Bergmann's diagnosis of what is wrong with Juror #1's reasoning. We'll get to Bergmann's view in Section 3.2.

most of those beliefs are true, and then inductively concludes that the process in question is a reliable one. On (a simplistic version of) the reliabilist picture, a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process. So, according to reliabilism, the premises of the argument will be justified if and only if the conclusion is true, since the conclusion is precisely that the process that produced the beliefs in question is reliable. Since, if the conclusion is true, the premises will be epistemically justified, it follows that the premises ought to be capable of being used to inductively support the conclusion. In this way, track-record arguments can justify their conclusions, according to the externalist reliabilist picture.

The problem with this picture is one that Alston himself partly recognizes: track-record arguments can be given in favour of both reliable and unreliable belief-sources. Crystal ball-gazing, for example, is presumably not a reliable belief-source, but we are perfectly capable of giving track-record arguments in support of it—as long as it gives us beliefs, and we only verify the truth of those beliefs by using the crystal ball, we can give a track-record argument in favour of crystal ball-gazing, just like we can in favour of our ordinary visual belief-forming faculties.

Now, on the reliabilist picture of justification, the track-record arguments in support of belief-sources that are in fact reliable will be good arguments, because reliabilism (or at least a simple version of process reliabilism) holds that beliefs are justified if and only if they are produced by reliable belief-forming processes. Track-record arguments in support of the belief in the reliability of belief-sources that are in fact reliable, therefore, will have epistemically justified premises, just by virtue of the fact that their conclusions are true. But that is not true of arguments in support of the belief in the reliability of belief-sources that are in fact unreliable. Unreliable belief-sources do not generate justified beliefs, on this picture, so the premises of these arguments will not be justified.

The problem here is that we have identical argument-types, some of which are classified as good and some as bad, and no way to tell the difference. But an argument that we are in principle incapable of distinguishing from a bad argument cannot give us a good reason to believe its conclusion – and therefore, it cannot be a good argument.

The underlying principle that I'm appealing to here is in effect something much like Stephen Wykstra's Condition of ReasoNable Epistemic Access (CORNEA):

> On the basis of cognized situation s, human H is entitled to claim "It appears that p" only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (1984: 85; see also his 2007: 88)

That is, in order for some data to give us a reason to believe a proposition, it must not be the case that it's reasonable for us to think that the data would appear exactly the same as they do, even if the hypothesis were false. For example, if you wonder whether your milk is still good, and proceed to open the fridge and smell the milk, the fact that it doesn't smell sour to you does not give you any reason to think that the milk is good, if you have a cold that robs you of your sense of smell. The milk would smell exactly the same way

to you whether it is good or bad. The smell of the milk therefore does not count as a reason to think that the milk is good.[3]

Similar considerations apply with respect to track-record arguments. We can divide track-record arguments into those that are given in support of reliable belief-sources, and those that are given in favour of unreliable belief-sources. The arguments in favour of reliable belief-sources are not different in any discernable way from those in favour of the unreliable belief-sources, so they cannot give us a reason to think that their target belief-sources are reliable. But it follows from the CORNEA principle that if a track-record argument looks like a good one, but it would look just as good even if it were bad, then we have no reason to think that the argument is a good one, so we cannot legitimately believe its conclusion on the basis of that argument.

Alston recognizes that we cannot use track-record arguments to separate out the good belief-sources from the bad, for reasons much like those I've just given, but he still thinks that good track-record arguments can justify their conclusions. I think we need to go further than Alston does, and say that track-record arguments are never epistemically legitimate: they do not provide any epistemic reason to accept their conclusions. After all, if it is impossible to differentiate the allegedly good track-record arguments from the bad (that is, to differentiate those track-record arguments that involve belief-sources that are in fact reliable from the unreliable ones), there is no reason to think that any given track-record argument is a good one. But if there is no reason to think that a given argument is good rather than bad, then to believe its conclusion on the basis of its premises cannot be epistemically justified.[4]

To put the point another way: granting that externalist reliabilism is correct, and the premises of an epistemically circular track-record argument are justified if and only if the conclusion is true, still we cannot infer the conclusion based on that kind of premise. Externalist justification does not enter into reasoning processes and arguments in the same way that internalist justification does: if the subject has no independent reason to think that her premise-beliefs are justified, then she cannot use them in support of the conclusion of an epistemically circular argument, even though they have externalist justification. In reliabilist terms,[5] the belief in the premises will be justified when they are produced by a reliable process (i.e. when the conclusion of the track-record argument is true). But the conclusion that they are given to support is not justified by virtue of being based on those premises, because the process of drawing inferences about the reliability of a belief-source from premises that one does not have independent reason to think are true, is not itself a reliable process. The reason that it is not a reliable process is that there are any number of unreliable belief-forming processes that are capable of generating epis-

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3   CORNEA has had some harsh critics, but (i) it expresses a powerful intuition about what can count as evidence for a hypothesis, and (ii) Jim Stone—a former critic of CORNEA—demonstrates that it is a direct result of Bayes' Theorem in his (2011). It is therefore as reasonable a principle as we could hope for.

4   Cf. Evnine's (1999) notion of "Indifferent Sets": sets of beliefs at least one of which must be false but none of which has anything that we can see to recommend it over any other. When we are confronted with indifferent sets, it is not rational to believe any of them. Evnine uses this notion in a discussion of the lottery paradox for justification, but it applies here too: track-record arguments are all members of an indifferent set, since there is nothing available to us by which to distinguish the good ones from the bad, and we know that some of them are in fact bad.

5   Alston is not a reliabilist, exactly, but in the context of a discussion epistemic circularity, the difference is not important.

temically circular arguments in support of themselves, and so the belief-forming process of inferring the reliability of a belief-source from premises that one does not have independent reason to think are true has a poor true-to-false belief-output ratio. The reliabilist defense of epistemic circularity therefore does not work.[6]

3.2 Bergmann

Bergmann (2006) gives two direct arguments intended to vindicate epistemically circular arguments and beliefs, and then an explanation of the difference between arguments that fail because of their epistemic circularity and those that do not. His first argument in defense of epistemic circularity is that anyone who accepts that there can be noninferential justification for beliefs, and who does not embrace skepticism, has to endorse some instances of epistemic circularity. His second argument consists of a criticism of alternative positions.

I want to set aside Bergmann's positive arguments. I admit that they have some force, but I want to focus instead on the explanation of how some arguments fail due to their epistemic circularity, while others do not. There are two reasons to set the positive arguments aside for now. First, skepticism has not been ruled out; Bergmann's argument takes as an assumption that we do not want to embrace skepticism. It is not my purpose to push for skepticism here, but it is at least a viable alternative. The second and more important reason to set aside the positive arguments for the legitimacy of some epistemically circular arguments is that there are clear cases where arguments do fail due to their epistemic circularity (recall Bergmann's Juror case), so there has to be a good explanation of the difference between malignant and benign epistemic circularity. If there is no good explanation for the badness of those arguments that fail due to their epistemic circularity, which also makes room for some good epistemically circular arguments, then that is a serious problem for the view that epistemic circularity is sometimes not a problem.

Bergmann's case for thinking that there is a difference between good and bad epistemically circular arguments rests on the distinction between QD and non-QD situations ('QD' for Question or Doubt) involving a belief-source X or a belief B:

> *QD-situations*: Situations where, prior to the EC [epistemically circular]-belief's formation, the subject either is or should be seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation.

> *Non-QD-situations*: Situations where, prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject neither is nor should be seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation. (Bergmann 2006: 198)

To seriously question or doubt is to question or doubt to the point where one withholds judgment with respect to, or else positively disbelieves in, the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation. Bergmann's position is that epistemic circularity is malignant in QD-situations, but it is benign in non-QD-situations.

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[6]   Interestingly, the effect of my argument here is to save reliabilism (a view I am by no means committed to) from the objection that it is committed to holding that epistemic circularity is legitimate. See Vogel (2000) for that objection, and Kornblith (2009) for a response.

I don't think that this distinction makes any difference. Someone in a non-QD-situation ought still to reject an epistemically circular argument in favour of the reliability of her belief-source. Let me illustrate, by giving a modified version of Bergmann's Juror example. Suppose that Juror #1 does not doubt Hank's reliability. Juror #1 is just naturally a trusting fellow. But then he overhears Juror #2 say that he is unsure about Hank's reliability. Juror #2's doubts do not affect Juror #1's beliefs, but he does begin to reflect on what reasons there are for thinking that Hank is reliable. Just as he begins his reflection, someone mentions that Hank has said of himself that he is reliable. Obviously, Hank's testimony does not give Juror #1 any reason to believe that he is reliable.

That case is set up to be a non-QD-situation: Juror #1 does not doubt Hank's reliability, and (we may suppose) he has no reason to doubt his reliability,[7] so it is not the case that he should doubt it. Nevertheless, Hank's claim that he is reliable does not give Juror #1 any more reason than he already has (if he had any to begin with[8]) to think that Hank is reliable. If that is correct, then the QD/non-QD distinction doesn't explain the difference between malignant and benign epistemic circularity.

At this point, I'd like to wrap up the discussion of Bergmann's view by pointing out a puzzle that arises from taking the QD/non-QD distinction seriously as explaining the difference between malignant and benign cases of epistemic circularity. The puzzle is that the skeptic, because he seriously questions the reliability of his belief-sources, cannot ever achieve a justified belief in the reliability of his belief-sources. He is in a QD-situation, because he in fact doubts the reliability of his belief-sources. What is puzzling is that there is no way for him to argue in support of his belief-sources; any such argument will be infected with malignant epistemic circularity. However, if he was a less reflective person, and if he was less worried about whether his belief-sources are reliable, or if he simply stopped worrying about the reliability of his belief-sources, then he would not have the doubts that he has, and so he could have justified belief in the reliability of his belief-sources. I find this puzzling, since the skeptic can only gain justified beliefs by being or becoming less reflective.

4. CONCLUSION

What I've tried to do here is to give a reason for thinking that question-begging arguments are never epistemically legitimate, and to respond to the views of Alston and Bergmann, both of whom think that there can be epistemically legitimate question-begging arguments of some sort. Briefly, my argument was this: just as we cannot lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps, so too belief-sources cannot lift themselves up by the

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[7]   Perhaps Juror #1 does have a reason to distrust Hank, given that people become less trustworthy when they are personally invested in something important, as tends to be the case in a courtroom situation. If that is the case, then this is a QD-situation. We can set aside those doubts, though, by simply shifting the case to the type of situation where people are not generally untrustworthy—perhaps Juror #1 is looking for the courthouse, and Hank is just someone on the street whom he asks for directions.

[8]   I do not want to suppose that he had a reason to begin with, since Bergmann wants to set aside cases of overdetermination (where there is more than one sufficient reason for a belief). I don't think there's a serious difference between cases where there is overdetermination and where there is not, when it comes to epistemic circularity, but we can assume with Bergmann that there is not also some other reason for Juror #1 to trust Hank.

beliefs they've generated. In response to Alston's attempted externalist reliabilist vindication of epistemically circular arguments, I argued that even if the premise beliefs are justified by virtue of having been produced by a reliable process, they do not provide justification for the conclusion, because drawing conclusions on the basis of reasons that one has no reason to think are true, independent of the conclusion itself, is not a reliable process. I did not have the space to discuss Bergmann's positive arguments in defense of epistemic circularity, but I argued instead that the distinction between QD and non-QD situations makes no difference as to whether the premises in an epistemically circular argument confer any justification on the belief in their conclusion, because there are clear non-QD cases that still fail due to their epistemic circularity. If that's correct, then we are left without an explanation of the difference between malignant and benign epistemic circularity. Since we have clear cases where arguments fail due to their epistemic circularity, and we have general reasons to think that epistemic circularity is always bad, and we don't have an explanation of the difference between good and bad epistemically circular arguments, it follows that we have to reject the view that there are good epistemically circular arguments.

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Commentary on "AGAINST EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY" by Patrick Bondy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Patrick Bondy's "Against Epistemic Circularity" offers a clear and coherent critique of two lines of defense that have been offered in support of epistemic circularity, one by William Alston, another by Michael Bergmann. In this commentary we ask whether Bondy's critique of Alston might itself be vulnerable to a charge of begging the question, and offer some considerations about the nature of epistemological intuitions that potentially undermine Bondy's intuitions about particular cases, like Bergmann's "Hank and the Juror" case.

2. RECONSIDERING PRIMA FACIE INTUITIONS

Epistemically circular arguments infer the reliability of a source of belief by inference from premises that are themselves based on the source in question. Proponents of epistemic circularity admit that upon first consideration, epistemic circularity is *prima facie* bad. Nonetheless, they hold that appearances are deceiving, and all things considered, we should not be opposed to epistemic circularity.

This is worth keeping in mind when, after reviewing Alston's "track record" example of epistemic circularity, Bondy writes "What is wrong with the track-record argument above is that, in seeking to determine whether my visual belief-forming faculty is reliable, I have relied entirely on beliefs produced by that very faculty" (2011: 2). But this merely restates what epistemic circularity is, and reaffirms the intuition *that* there's something wrong with such arguments, it doesn't explain *what* is wrong with it. This is precisely the intuition that defenders of epistemic circularity are asking us to reconsider.

Defenders of epistemic circularity use other examples that evoke different intuitions in many people. For example, most people believe that memory is generally reliable, and ground such beliefs based on memory's past successes and failures. But such beliefs are clearly based on memory.

Or consider whether we are justified in believing in the general reliability of our *complete* set of faculties and sources of beliefs (perception + memory + introspection + …). Most non-skeptics would grant this (to deny it is tantamount to skepticism), but of course any such belief will necessarily be infected with epistemic circularity.

Bondy and other opponents of epistemic circularity may resist such intuitions and believe that epistemic circularity in all its forms is bad. But any discussion of epistemic circularity has to distinguish the descriptive task of explaining what kinds of reasoning qualify as epistemically circular, from the normative task of explaining why such reasoning is bad (where "bad" just means "cannot be used to justify a belief").

Fortunately, Bondy does offer substantive arguments for the badness of epistemically circular arguments. We turn to these now.

3. ALSTON'S DEFENSE

Alston's defense of epistemic circularity is grounded in his externalist account of epistemic justification. According to Alston (1993), a belief is justified just in case it is a product of a reliable belief-forming process, even if the reliability of that process may not be cognitively accessible to the subject who has the belief. Thus I may be justified in holding a belief even if I have no reasons to hold the belief that are reflectively available to me.

According to Alston one can use a reliable source as the basis of epistemically circular reasoning to acquire a justified belief, but one cannot use an unreliable source as the basis of epistemically circular reasoning to acquire a justified belief. For example, we can use our senses as the basis of epistemically circular reasoning to acquire a justified belief, since (by hypothesis) sense experience is a reliable source of belief, but a crystal ball gazer cannot use judgments based on crystal ball gazings to acquire a justified belief, since crystal balls gazings are not a reliable source of belief.

Bondy's objection to this line of reasoning is based on the fact that in these two cases we have identical argument-types, one of which is classified as good and one as bad, with no way to tell the difference between the two. Bondy's claim is that one cannot acquire a justified belief on the basis of an argument that one cannot distinguish from a bad argument. He appeals to Wykstra's (1984; 2007) CORNEA condition (Condition of ReasoNable Epistemic Access), which states that we have no reason to believe a hypothesis H based on evidence E if the evidence would appear exactly the same whether or not H was true. The point is that arguments in favor of reliable belief-sources are not different in any discernable way from arguments in favor of unreliable belief-sources, so they cannot give us a reason to think their target belief-sources are reliable.

Bondy infers from the fact that we can't distinguish good from bad arguments of this form, that conclusions drawn from such arguments can never be justified. "…[A]n argument that we are in principle incapable of distinguishing from a bad argument cannot give us a good reason to believe its conclusion—and therefore, it cannot be a good argument" (2011: 4).

It seems to us that there is something question-begging about this line of criticism, particularly as it applies to Alston. Alston's defense of circularity turns on accepting an externalist view of the reliability of belief-forming processes. But the requirements for epistemic justification suggested by Bondy are all internalist requirements that Alston explicitly argues against. Of course if you reject Alston's externalism, you get the result

that epistemic circularity cannot be used to acquire a justified belief. But that's hardly surprising, Alston would surely grant that.

Alston would likely want to direct our attention back to the challenges of adopting additional internalist requirements in this context. Consider once again the track-record arguments of SE—the individual who uses sensory experience to ground beliefs in the reliability of sensory experience, and who (on externalist grounds) is justified in such beliefs—and CB—the individual who uses crystal ball gazings to ground beliefs in the reliability of crystal ball gazing, and who (on externalist grounds) is not justified in such beliefs. Bondy's claim is that even if SE is justified in her basic sensory-based beliefs, SE is not justified in inferring the general reliability of her sensory experience (the conclusion of the track-record argument) because there is no way for SE to articulate why her reasoning is good while CB's reasoning is bad.

But this just highlights Alston's main point, which is that the difference between the two individuals in question is *not* a difference in the arguments or reasoning that they use. *Both use an inductive argument of exactly the same form*. The difference is that SE relies on an inductive argument from premises she is justified in believing, while CB relies on an inductive argument from premises that he is unjustified in believing.

So the problem is not with the crystal ball gazer's good inductive reasoning. Rather, it is that he is using unjustified beliefs as the basis of good inductive reasoning. If we grant this, then what sort of internalist requirement could suffice to distinguish the two arguments? The natural requirement would seem to be something like this:

- To be justified in believing P on the basis of E, one must be justified in believing that one is justified in believing E.

But this kind of requirement is notoriously susceptible to a vicious regress.

CORNEA-type requirements also have their problems when applied to cases like this. The CORNEA principle suggests that we have no reason to believe hypothesis H1 over H2 based on evidence E if the evidence would appear exactly the same under H1 or H2. So let H1 be a non-skeptical hypothesis, and let H2 be a skeptical hypothesis that is evidentially indistinguishable from H1 (e.g. that a Cartesian demon is systematically deceiving our senses). Then CORNEA implies that we have no reason to believe H1 over H2; or in other words, CORNEA implies skepticism.

The internalist demands of CORNEA-type requirements also suggest that very small children may never be justified in their beliefs, given that they don't have the cognitive resources to discern reliable from unreliable sources of belief.

To sum up the comments in this section, Bondy's analysis of what's wrong with epistemic circularity in track-record arguments is that epistemic justification requires that an agent be able to distinguish good from bad track-record arguments, but this is impossible without imposing an additional internalist requirement of some sort. Our concern is that this line of reasoning threatens to beg the question against externalist accounts of justification like Alston's. Further, it is unclear how CORNEA-type requirements can do the job when they are vulnerable to a number of compelling objections.

3. BERGMANN'S DEFENSE

Bondy next turns his attention to Bergmann's defense of epistemic circularity. Bergmann (2006) argues that any non-sceptical epistemological theory is committed to some form of epistemic circularity. Bondy's focus is not on Bergmann's positive arguments for this claim. Rather, his focus is on Bergmann's analysis of what distinguishes good ('benign') from bad ('malignant') cases of circularity. He aims to show that Bergmann's analysis fails to account for the difference, and thereby undermine the inference that some forms of epistemic circularity are not bad.

Bergmann argues that epistemic circularity is (i) malignant when the question of the trustworthiness of a belief source is, and should be, at issue (what he calls "QD situations", for Question and Doubt); and (ii) benign when the question of the trustworthiness of a belief source is not, and should not be, at issue ("non-QD situations").

Bondy doesn't see the relevance of the QD/non-QD distinction, and argues that someone in a non-QD situation ought still to reject an epistemically circular argument. To motivate this position he asks us to consider a modified version of Bergmann's Juror example (p. 7):

> Suppose that Juror #1 does not doubt Hank's reliability. Juror #1 is just naturally a trusting fellow. But then he overhears Juror #2 say that he is unsure about Hank's reliability. Juror #2's doubts do not affect Juror #1's beliefs, but he does begin to reflect on what reasons there are for thinking that Hank is reliable. Just as he begins his reflection, someone mentions that Hank has said of himself that he is reliable. Obviously, Hank's testimony does not give Juror #1 any reason to believe that he is reliable.
>
> That case is set up to be a non-QD-situation: Juror #1 does not doubt Hank's reliability, and (we may suppose) he has no reason to doubt his reliability, so it is not the case that he should doubt it. Nevertheless, Hank's claim that he is reliable does not give Juror #1 any more reason than he already has (if he had any to begin with) to think that Hank is reliable. If that is correct, then the QD/non-QD distinction doesn't explain the difference between malignant and benign epistemic circularity.

Bondy thinks it obvious that Hank's testimony does not give the juror any reason to believe that he is reliable, even though he is in a non-QD situation. Thus this example is meant to serve as a counter-example to Bergmann's general principle and thereby undermine that principle.

Bondy notes in a footnote that some may view the testimony of anyone in a courtroom situation as a QD situation, since people may have special incentives to lie on the stand. But he allows us to modify the case further to eliminate the QD elements, such as imagining that Juror #1 is outside looking for directions to the courthouse, and Hank is just someone on the streets whom he asks for directions. In this case he thinks it's clear that Hank's proclamations about his reliability give Juror #1 no reason to believe that he is reliable.

We aren't interested in defending Bergmann's criterion for distinguishing benign from malignant cases of circularity. Rather, we would draw attention to the status of Bondy's intuition that Hank's testimony provides Juror #1 with *no* reason to believe that Hank is reliable. While most people may share this intuition, this fact alone would not be compelling to the defender of epistemic circularity, who holds that appearances may be deceiving.

Consider for example the case where Hank and Juror #1 meet on the street and Juror #1 asks Hank for directions to the courthouse. Hank responds that he's *not* a reliable source for directions, but does his best to give directions. In this case most of us will

judge that Hank's testimony that he is not a reliable source of belief offers Juror #1 a reason to *lower* his confidence in the reliability of his directions. But if so, then on consistency grounds we should allow for the possibility that if Hank said he *is* a reliable source for directions, this would give Juror #1 a reason to *increase* his confidence in the reliability of his directions.

Our main point is that epistemological intuitions about such cases may not be as uniform or stable as the critic of epistemic circularity might hope. We suspect that disagreement over particular cases is fuelled in part by a failure to distinguish *prima facie* and *ultima facie* justification for belief. Everyone may agree that Hank's testimony in favour of his own reliability does not provide a *sufficient* reason to believe what he says, but the question at issue is whether it provides *any* degree of support for what he says. Intuitions are not as clear on this question. But if so, then Bondy's intuitive response to "Hank and the Juror" cases may not be as conclusive as he would like.

4. CONCLUSION

Patrick Bondy's "Against Epistemic Circularity" offers a critique of externalist defenses of epistemic circularity that is motivated by the perceived need for an additional internalist requirement that would allow an agent to distinguish good from bad circular arguments. Externalist defenses lack such a requirement and thereby fail.

In this commentary we asked whether the demand for such a requirement might be viewed as begging the question against the externalist, and offered some considerations about the nature of epistemological intuitions that further complicate objections to epistemic circularity based on intuitions about particular cases.

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