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Commentary on Cuonzo

Fabio Paglieri

Commentary on Margaret Cuonzo: "On too Common Ground: Collective Circularity, the Sextus Mill Paradox, and a Problem of Infinite Regress"

FABIO PAGLIERI

Institute for Cognitive Sciences and Technologies
National Research Council
Via S. Martino della Battaglia 44, 00185 Roma
Italy
E-mail: fabio.paglieri@istc.cnr.it

1. INTRODUCTION

The main point of Cuonzo's paper is that circularity is often best understood as a feature of a set of arguments, rather than pertaining to any single argument in isolation: hence her insistence on the notion of collective circularity. I certainly agree with her on this point – indeed, I see it as a specific corollary of a more general proposition: argumentation theories should focus more and more on complex instances of argumentative discourse, instead of emphasizing the analysis of single arguments. This indication is not new, of course: in the last twenty years, a growing attention has been dedicated to framing argumentation in the context of prolonged dialogical interchange, and almost all authors have championed and praised such a tendency. Nonetheless, frequent use of single arguments by way of example is still commonplace in many textbooks and scientific essays, either for the sake of brevity or (to be frank) out of sheer laziness. While the habit may be harmless in some cases, extra care should be paid, lest this artificial set of examples should bias our conclusions. In this respect, Cuonzo's contribution provides us a beneficial reminder of the importance of broader dialogical sequences in the analysis of circularity.

Notwithstanding my substantial agreement with Cuonzo's theoretical conclusions, I do have some minor quibbles concerning the exposition of her argument, and I will try to elucidate my perplexities in what follows. In particular, I will first argue that circularity is a rather broad notion, one that covers a multiplicity of cases, so that a certain care should be exerted in disentangling differences and similarities among various instances of circularity. This brief clarification will then provide me the occasion of speculating further on what consequences (if any) the possibility of circularity should have on argumentation theories. In this respect, I will defend the view that certain kinds of circularity do not pose a serious threat to the soundness of our arguments, so that we should not be particularly concerned by them. This, I take, is in partial contrast with Cuonzo's position, as exposed in the second half of her paper.

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2. KINDS OF CIRCULARITY

In her paper, Cuonzo provides the following definition of collective circularity: «A set of two arguments is *collectively circular* if, and only if, each argument's conclusion is assumed in at least one premise of the other argument» – and then she proceeds to generalize this definition to set of *N* arguments. Although she does not mention the fact explicitly, this definition seems to imply that there are also instances of circularity that are not collective, i.e. individual circularities. No further distinction is mentioned among different types of circularity.

This articulation seems to ignore or disregard previous results in the analysis of circularities, and this, I argue, is a partial limitation of Cuonzo's essay, which remains rather weak in terms of integration with the existing literature on the subject (see for instance Gratton 1996). Just to mention a recent source, Eric Krabbe at this very same conference in year 2005 discussed several instances of circularity that are frequently encountered in argumentation theory. The purpose of such a taxonomy was not idle speculation: on the contrary, different types of circularity have different effects on the nature and quality of the inferences they apply to. Some of them are detrimental, others are innocuous, and some others are simply unavoidable, so that we must learn to live with them. In light of Krabbe's considerations, I suggest that Cuonzo's analysis may benefit from a more principled account of various forms of circularity, instead of lumping all of them under a single label. All the more so, in view of the fact that her own examples seem to refer to various types of circularity, that by no means can be treated as interchangeable.

One of the most nice features of Cuonzo's paper is the frequent use of realistic and vivid examples. Here is a short list, using labels of my own invention and arranged in the order in which I shall discuss them:

I. The Bible's authority and the existence of God
II. Smith, Jones, and the problem of collusion in academia
III. Sexy seagulls
IV. Conventions: Reinforcement vs. justification
V. Programs and arguments: Executive loops vs. explorative detours

On the first example there is not much to be said: it is a nice and clear case of circularity involving more than one argument, and as such it serves well to illustrate Cuonzo's notion of collective circularity. Let me just report the example here:

(1) Whatever the Bible says is true.
The Bible says God exists.
God exists.

(2) All communications from God are true.
Whatever the Bible says is a communication of God.
Whatever the Bible says is true.

Here the circularity depends on the fact that the conclusion of (2) coincides with the first premise of (1), while the conclusion of (1) is necessary for the second premise of (2) to be true. So far, so good.

The second example, which is also the opening situation presented in Cuonzo's paper, is more intriguing. Here we are faced with a case of complicity in academic assessment and ranking, where two or more people are cross-evaluating each other. Below there is my own summary of the situation as framed by Cuonzo, although I decided to focus on only two agents instead of a whole committee – but this does not affect the point I want to make.

(1) Smith is an expert on P.
Smith says Jones is an expert on P.
Jones is an expert on P.

(2) Jones is an expert on P.
Jones says Smith is an expert on P.
Smith is an expert on P.

By framing the situation as a kind of mutual argument from expert opinion (Walton 1996), Cuonzo indicates this as an instance of circularity. And of course it is, as long as we reconstruct the situation as illustrated above. But it is worth emphasizing that the real problem with this kind of situation is *independent* from circularity per se, insofar as there can be *collusion without any circularity*. Consider for instance the following alternative reconstruction:

(1) Smith and Jones are well acquainted with each other's work.
Smith says Jones is an expert on P.
Jones is an expert on P.

(2) Smith and Jones are well acquainted with each other's work.
Jones says Smith is an expert on P.
Smith is an expert on P.

By framing the situation as two arguments from position to know (Walton 1996) that share one of the premises, the circularity disappears – and yet, the situation has not improved in terms of fairness of treatment and equality. So my point here is not that the example is wrong, but that it would be misleading to suggest that what is wrong in this academic practice is circularity of reasoning. This is not the point, in fact: malpractice in academic selection is due to the fact that evaluators and persons to be evaluated too often coincide or share some mutual interest, whether or not this leads to circular chains of reasoning.

The third of Cuonzo's examples is arguably the most intriguing, although it remains quite underspecified, and this makes it a bit difficult to see what exactly the relevant arguments are. In a nutshell, it happens to be the case that there is a certain species of seagulls in which male birds have the habit of staying on top during sex (a fact probably established on empirical grounds), so that in one study the relative position of a

bird during sexual intercourse was used to determine the gender of that bird: male if it was on top, female if it was at the bottom. But then it seems, as Cuonzo tells us, that in another study the results of the first investigation were used to claim that these seagulls are strictly heterosexual, since no male had been reported copulating with another male, or female with female. Of course, here circularity seems to loom in the background, since non-heterosexual relationships were ruled out in the first study by the same methodologies used to ascribe gender to each bird. However, without further details on the two studies or any precise reference to them, this circularity may be ascribed either to the combination of the two lines of argument, or to only one of them – that is, it can be an instance of either collective or individual circularity. In the latter case, the first study would be perfectly warranted in making use of an inductive generalization for drawing a presumptive distinction between male and female birds. Here the warrant would be adequately quantified, e.g. "Usually, seagulls on top during sexual intercourse are males, while birds at the bottom are females". But the second study would make use of a stronger version of the rule, one which is not supported by the empirical findings – since, as Cuonzo mentions, it is indeed the case that there are instances of non-heterosexual intercourse between these seagulls, albeit rarely. In contrast, the warrant in the second study is unduly strong, e.g. "It is always the case that seagulls on top during sexual intercourse are males, while birds at the bottom are females". According to this interpretation, only the second study would be fallacious, and in two ways: first, because it makes use of a warrant that is an overstatement of the empirical evidence; second, because the argument employed is circular, insofar as the conclusion on the strict heterosexuality of seagulls is based on a premise that already presupposes this very conclusion.

However, it is with the last two examples in the list above that Cuonzo's treatment of circularity runs into some more serious difficulties. In the fourth example, we are told that the kind of reasoning upon which conventions (according to David Lewis) are based is indeed collectively circular. This is the reconstruction proposed by Cuonzo, where p1, p2, …, p*n* stand for individuals:

(1) p1 will obey a convention if, and only if, most or all others (p2 through p*n*) will obey it.
Most or all others (p2 through p*n*) will obey convention C.
p1 will obey convention C.

(2) p2 will obey a convention if, and only if, most or all others (p1, p3, …, p*n*) will obey it.
Most or all others (p1, p3, …, p*n*) will obey convention C.
p2 will obey convention C.

And so on for each of the *n* individuals. Cuonzo sees this as a straightforward case of collective circularity because the conclusion of each argument is part of the second premise of all the other arguments. However, and suspending the judgment on whether or not this reconstruction does justice to Lewis' analysis, I disagree with this view of conventions, according to which conformity or deviation is justified by a belief on what others will do. In contrast, I consider conventions to be emergent effects, that are

enforced not by rational justification but rather by *practical reinforcement*. An individual remains absolutely free to disregard even the most widespread convention, e.g. driving on the right side of the road in Canada, but in doing so he or she will face some costs (e.g. crashing against some fellow driver), and indeed these costs are proportional to the number of other agents that are endorsing the convention. So the fact that others are obeying to a convention is not a necessary precondition for obeying it myself, but just changes the costs I will suffer if I should fail to comply. In turn, my own act of compliance will rise the stakes for all other people, making harder for them (but not impossible) to deviate from the standard conduct. If this is a loop, it is a *self-sustaining* one, and this marks a difference with cases where the circularity is sterile, i.e. it does not add or subtract anything to the social process taking place. Geometrically speaking, the social mechanism responsible for the evolution of conventions is an expanding spiral, not a vicious circle. Similar phenomena abound both in nature (e.g. galaxies) and in society (e.g. the building up of mass panic from mutual reinforcement between perception of danger and running behavior), and their peculiarities should be acknowledged.

Finally, the last of Cuonzo's examples draws an analogy between circular commands in computer programs and circular arguments in human agents. There is certainly something evocative in this suggestion, but on the whole I think the differences outweighs the similarities in this case. Again, the point that is missed is the function that may be served by a circular process – and indeed, the implicit assumption seems to be that there is none. However, while a circular set of instructions on a computer program is usually just a waste of time, a circular chain of arguments may be highly instructive in the process of collective dialogue, provided that the chain is long enough. This difference is due to the fact that the program is merely executing an ill-conceived list of instructions of which it does not attach any meaning, whereas the human arguer is exploring a previously uncharted landscape of interwoven claims and justifications. Circular they may be in the end, but the very process of discovering such a circularity is often highly instructive for an educated mind, since it leads to work out new connections among previously unrelated elements. Witness the pleasures connected with theorems proving in mathematics and logic, where the conclusion is necessarily just a different re-statement of the premises, but done in such a way as to produce enlightened discoveries. Here the bottom-line seems to be that *circles can be a good thing, provided they are wide enough* – a lesson that will have a role to play also in relation with some of the concerns voiced by Cuonzo in the last part of her article.

To sum up on this first part of my commentary, Cuonzo examples are very effective in conveying how much pervasive and widespread is the phenomenon of collective circularity, as long as we conceive it in a rather broad fashion. At the same time, these examples also show that there are several varieties of circularity, the details of which are not directly addressed by Cuonzo's current contribution. As a tentative suggestion for future work, I would advise making an effort to develop a more fine-grained analysis of similarities and differences among these types of circularity, also to the purpose of better addressing the issue raised in the next session of my commentary – namely, whether and how much argumentation theorists should be worried by the threat of circularity outlined by Cuonzo's work.

3. WHO IS AFRAID OF COLLECTIVE CIRCULARITY AND INFINITE REGRESS?

As Cuonzo mentions in the second half of her paper, circularity has often bugged epistemologists. But should it be of the same concern for argumentation theorists as well? Here Krabbe's contribution is again instrumental in reminding us that some forms of circularity are relatively harmless, and even beneficial. As he notices, «the standard example of non-vicious circularity is the dictionary. A dictionary may define 'rapid' as 'fast' and 'fast' as 'quick' and 'quick' as 'rapid'. These definitions are not inane: a person who knows at least one of these three words may come to learn the meaning of the others. […] Even for those that do not grasp any of the terms involved in a particular circle it may be enlightening to learn how these terms are supposed to be related» (2005, p. 290). Once more, the morale of these considerations seem to be that circularity in argumentation may be highly instructive, as long as its scope is broad enough to allow the subject to learn something new from it.

Yet another reason that contributes to make circularities not necessarily threatening for argumentation is the fact that they do not stand in isolation from other fragments of reasoning and dialogue. Here Cuonzo's advice of looking at arguments in their mutual interaction may be beneficially applied to her own approach: exactly as circularity often arises from a sequence of interconnected arguments, it can also be redeemed by considering other non-circular arguments that might enrich a given argumentative loop. By way of example, let us consider again Cuonzo's example of collective circularity between arguments on the alleged existence of God based upon the authority of the Bible – and vice versa. Now imagine that the subject has also independent reasons to believe in the existence of God – say, he or she accepts as valid Anselm's ontological proof. This implies considering a system composed of three arguments, roughly summarized as follows:

(1) Anselm's proof is correct.
Anselm's proof demonstrates that God exists.
God exists.

(2) All communications from God are true.
Whatever the Bible says is a communication of God.
Whatever the Bible says is true.

(3) Whatever the Bible says is true.
The Bible says God exists.
God exists.

Here a believer has two independent reasons to accept the existence of God: a rational procedure to prove His existence (1), and revelation through the Scriptures (3). But of course (3) still depends upon (2), which in turn depends upon (3) – although now this circularity does not need alarming us, since (2) could also be justified by means of (1) without any circularity. Still, an itching remains, because in this context (2) and (3) appear to be, if not harmful, at least useless: since we accept Anselm's proof on the existence of God, why should we meddle with potentially circular arguments like (2) and

(3)? The answer becomes apparent if we replace, in the set of arguments above, (2) with the following variation:

(2-bis) All communications from God are true.
Whatever the Yellow Pages for the Windsor area says is a communication of God.
Whatever the Yellow Pages for the Windsor area says is true.

Alas, the Yellow Pages presumably remain silent on the existence of God, so here the believers are not comforted by any direct revelation. Of course they can still infer, and rightly so, that God exists, since otherwise who on Earth could have ever inspired those sublime listings in the Yellow Pages? And they can even rationally back up this belief by invoking Anselm's argument. But their God remains on mute about its existence, leaving them to their own devices concerning its nature and purposes.

A logically-minded spirit might object that, even in this case, the real evidence for the existence of God is the same as before (i.e. Anselm's argument), and that any direct revelation would have not added anything to it, insofar as it would have required to presuppose already the existence of God. Perhaps so, but at the very least it should be acknowledged that the "argument from revelation" carries a distinctive presumptive weight for most real believers in our world. To them, the fact that God decides to disclose its existence, nature and purpose is of the utmost importance: they literally take it as a sign of God's benevolence and love towards them, and thus also as an additional confirmation of its existence – because cold, distant Gods have rarely been in fashion in religious systems.

This allows me to throw in a parenthetical consideration, before saying something more on the alleged threat that circularity may or may not pose for argumentation theories. The consideration is the following: in some parts of her analysis, Cuonzo seems to favor a view of argumentation as an attempt to establish the validity of an argument once and for all. Indeed, I would say that she is worried by circularity precisely insofar as a circular argument is not liable to be settled once and for all, lacking any 'unjustified justification', so to speak. This view is respectable and has a long tradition, with its ultimate roots lying in deductive theories of rationality. However, personally I am more sympathetic with an understanding of argumentation in terms of presumptive weight, so that which one of *N* competing claims should be accepted ultimately depends on how much each claim succeeds in tipping the scale in its favor. In this view, argumentation is *constitutionally* an open-ended and highly context-sensitive endeavor, where also circular arguments are likely to carry some non-negligible presumptive weight, even if possibly lower than that associated with non-circular arguments. Indeed, if one was to look at everyday argumentation with an unbiased eye, it would be hard to deny that most argumentative successes (including very important ones, e.g. in political discourse) are affected much more by the sheer weight of the presumptive reasons adduced by the arguer, rather than by the geometrical perfection of his or her arguments. Of course we may take this as merely indicating that human arguers are far from being rational in their dialogical efforts and inferential capacities. Yet I see no great appeal in a theory of human rationality that distances itself so much from the everyday practice of human reasoners.

This said, it remains to be faced what Cuonzo indicates, albeit only in passing, as the main philosophical worry entailed by her analysis of collective circularity: in her own words, «we are left […] with a troubling consequence of the existence of collective circularity, namely, the possibility that any of our arguments are part of a collectively circular set. And […] circularity on such a grand scale calls into question our ability to know whether our arguments are sound». As the reader might have surmised by now, I am among those that are not particularly worried by this alleged peril. But I must also hasten to add that I am not, epistemologically speaking, a "coherentist" – a recurrent label in Cuonzo's discussion. Instead, I am a firm believer in the *bounded nature of our cognitive capacities*, therefore of our reasoning, therefore of the way in which we produce, interpret and evaluate our arguments. This is more than enough to quell any excitement concerning threats of infinite regress and hidden circularities – not because reasoning and argumentation need to be finite, but because we most certainly are. The safeguard against these alleged dangers is not to be found either in the nature of rationality and dialogue, or in the way in which we conceptualize them, but rather lies in our own modest cognitive powers. Whenever I am faced with a complex set of arguments *n*, the question on whether or not there exists a chain of *N* arguments that makes *n* circular cannot and should not worry me, insofar as my cognitive and temporal resources allow me to master only a tiny fraction of such a chain.

However, this most evident limitation of our empirical cognition is completely overlooked by the scare tactics of the sceptic, like evoking the possibility that every argument, if explored in full details (whatever that means), may turn out to be ultimately (i.e. collectively) circular, and insisting that such a possibility cannot be ruled out in principle. I am ready to agree with both claims, but the point is that we do not need to rule out this possibility in principle, since it is already ruled out *in practice* – and this should be enough to stop worrying once and for all about the vertigo of infinite regress. It is worth noticing, by the way, that this commonsensical conclusion is not new in argumentation theories, insofar as it echoes, among other things, Toulmin's maxim that recursion of an argument, although open-ended in principle, has to stop somewhere in practice (1958/2003, pp. 98-99).

So what are the boundaries for a meaningful distinction between patently circular arguments and apparently non-circular arguments, if the latter may still in principle depend upon some circular extension? Quite simply, the distinction is in terms of *intelligibility*, given the cognitive skills of the subject and the nature of the context: if the argument is blatantly circular, as in most of Cuonzo's examples, then we have often good reason to steer away from it, and to strive to develop independent non-circular arguments to support our claim; but if the circularity remains only a theoretical possibility, without that the arguer is able to detect it after careful scrutiny, then the argument is to be taken as formally legitimate for all practical purposes – although whether or not it is also effective is a different issue, of course.

In the end, my answer to the question that opens this section is that only who endorses an idealized view of unbounded rationality should be seriously concerned by the fact that any argument is, in principle, always potentially open to infinite regress and circularity. In a sense, this view further expands on a theme already surfaced in previous considerations: not only circularity can be instructive, when the circle is large enough – in addition, whenever the loop becomes sufficiently ample, it ceases to be perceived as

such, therefore the argument is no longer circular, as far as the practical purposes of finite agents are concerned. And since we have been talking of circles all the time, a final metaphor seems particularly fitting: like the fact that the Earth is round does not prevent us from perceiving the horizon as a flat line, so the fact that any argument may be in fact circular does not hinder our capacity of using fragments of that circle as linear reasons to support our provisional conclusions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The minor contentions that I voiced in this commentary were mainly motivated by the role I was assigned, rather than by any substantial disagreement with Cuonzo's basic claims. On the contrary, I fully endorse her emphasis on the need to analyze circularity with reference to complex systems of arguments, instead than focusing on single arguments. In this respect, her contribution is very insightful, well argued for, and enriched by a wealth of suggestive examples. Indeed, my additional remarks were rather marginal with respect to her main claim, and revolved instead around two minor points:

- the opportunity of developing a more articulated taxonomy of different types of circularity, consistently with the existing literature on the topic, instead of using a unique, overarching label;
- some doubts that can be raised on the alleged threat that the notion of collective circularity may pose for the evaluation of the soundness of our arguments.

If anything, my considerations should indicate that Cuonzo's work on collective circularity is definitely worth further investigation. In particular, I would suggest focusing more on the argumentative peculiarities of different forms of circularity, and less on the alleged epistemological consequences of collective circularity. But this, of course, might well be just a matter of personal inclination.

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