

POSITISM:  
THE UNEXPLORED SOLUTION TO  
THE EPISTEMIC REGRESS PROBLEM

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**Abstract:** As we trace a chain of reasoning backward, it must ultimately do one of four things: (i) end in an unjustified belief, (ii) continue infinitely, (iii) form a circle, or (iv) end in an immediately justified basic belief. This article defends *positism*—the view that, in certain circumstances, type-(i) chains can justify us in holding their target beliefs. One of the assumptions that generates the epistemic regress problem is: (A) Person *S* is mediately justified in believing *p* iff (1) *S* has a doxastic reason *q* for *p* and (2) *S* is justified in believing *q*. Assumption (A) presupposes that reasoning is only justification transmitting, not justification generating. The article rejects (A) and argues that, in certain circumstances, reasoning itself is justification generating, even if that from which one is reasoning is not itself justified. It concludes by comparing positism with its infinitist, coherentist, and foundationalist rivals, acknowledging what is right about these other views.

Keywords: epistemic regress argument, foundationalism, coherentism, infinitism, positism, regulative epistemic justification, default reasoning.

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The *epistemic regress argument* presents us with four seemingly unpalatable choices: (a) unmoved epistemic movers (foundationalism), (b) viciously circular reasoning (coherentism), (c) infinite regresses (infinitism), and (d) unjustified assumptions (positism).<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I defend what has traditionally been regarded as the least palatable option of the unpalatable lot, namely, (d)—the view that one can come to be justified in holding a belief on the basis of a chain of reasoning originating from an unjustified assumption. Let me be clear about my thesis. I am not claiming that every justification-conferring chain of reasoning terminates in an unjustified posit. I defend the narrower thesis that, under certain circumstances, one can be justified in coming to believe a proposition on the basis of an unjustified posit. Along the way, I defend a positivist modest nondoxastic coherence theory. I begin in section 1 with some clarificatory terminology and taxonomic distinctions. In section 2, I present the epistemic regress

<sup>1</sup> I borrow the term “positism” from James van Cleve (2005, 168). *Positism* (not to be confused with *positivism!*) maintains that the regress of justifying reasons can legitimately end in an unjustified belief/posit.

argument. In section 3, I argue that the regress argument is predicated on a false assumption. Jettisoning that assumption paves the path to positism. I end with a nod toward ecumenicalism, since I think that there is an element of truth in all four of the supposedly unpalatable options above.

## 1. Preliminary Remarks

### *1a. The Kind of Epistemic Justification at Issue*

Like James Pryor (2005), I find that epistemologists often mean quite different things by the term “epistemic justification.” As I will here understand the term, *epistemic justification* is a normative notion in the regulative, belief-guiding sense. As such, it tells us what we should and should not believe. This conception of justification has variously been described as the reason-guiding conception of justification (Pollock 1986), the deontological conception of justification (Alston 1988), and the regulative conception of justification (Goldman 1980). It is concerned with when a person *S* is epistemically justified/rational in holding a belief.<sup>2</sup> Such justification presupposes *the egocentric perspective* (Foley 1990) and proceeds in terms of reasons internally accessible to *S*.<sup>3</sup> On this conception of epistemic justification, a person is justified in believing that *p* only if she has an undefeated reason for believing that *p*. Call this *the reasons thesis*. There are other important conceptions of epistemic justification, such as the reliabilist conception of doxastic justification,<sup>4</sup> but they are of no interest to me here, for the epistemic regress problem arises in one of its most pernicious forms in the context of the reason-guiding conception of justification.

The regress problem is usually formulated in terms of *ex post* justification, where *S* already believes that *p* and the question is whether or not she’s justified in this belief.<sup>5</sup> I, however, am primarily

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms “justified,” “rational,” “epistemically justified,” and “epistemically rational” interchangeably in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Where reasons are construed broadly to include both doxastic and experiential reasons. Following Steven Luper-Foy (1990, 40), I take a reason to believe that *p* to be a consideration suggesting that *p* is true. Accordingly, an internally accessible reason for *S* to believe that *p* is a consideration, from *S*’s egocentric point of view, that suggests that *p* is true.

<sup>4</sup> In Engel 1992, I distinguish personal justification (what it is for a *person* to be justified in believing that *p* from her own internal perspective) from doxastic justification (what it is for *S*’s *belief* that *p* to be justified in some more objective sense) and defend a reliabilist account of doxastic justification. That said, the kind of epistemic justification that concerns me here is *personal justification from the internal perspective*, since only this kind of justification can play a regulative role in our belief formation.

<sup>5</sup> Alvin Goldman distinguishes between *ex post* and *ex ante* uses of “justified”: “The *ex post* use occurs when there exists a belief, and we say *of that belief* that it is (or isn’t) justified. The *ex ante* use occurs when no such belief exists. . . . Here we say of the *person*, independent of his doxastic state vis-à-vis *p*, that *p* is (or isn’t) suitable for him to believe” (1979, 21). Accordingly, *ex ante* justification concerns whether or not a person should acquire some new belief that *p*.

concerned with the regress problem as it arises for *ex ante* justification, where *S* does not yet believe that *p* and is trying to determine whether or not she *should* come to believe that *p*. For ease of exposition, I will use “justification” when referring to *ex ante* justification and “*ex post* justification” when referring to *ex post* justification (except where context makes it clear that the justification must be *ex post*).

### *1b. Terminology and Taxonomy*

A *basic belief* is a noninferential belief that a person *S* is immediately justified in believing. *S*'s justification for such beliefs does not rest on other beliefs. A *nonbasic belief* is an inferential belief such that, if *S* is justified in believing it at all, then *S* is mediately justified in believing it on the basis of other beliefs. By stipulation, a *foundations theory* is any internalist theory of epistemic justification that maintains that there is an epistemically privileged subclass of basic beliefs on the basis of which all other epistemic justification proceeds. In order for a foundations theory to work, there must be basic beliefs, and there must be enough of them to support the structure of our justified belief. *Doxastic foundations theories* accept the doxastic assumption, to wit, the assumption that only beliefs can serve as reasons for other beliefs. On these views, since appearance states (e.g., perceptual states) aren't beliefs, they can't themselves provide reasons for ordinary physical object beliefs. So, if we are to be justified in believing our ordinary physical object beliefs, we must base them on appearance beliefs (i.e., beliefs about how we are currently being appeared to), the latter of which are presumed basic. *Nondoxastic foundations theories* reject the doxastic assumption and allow that there can be both doxastic and experiential reasons.<sup>6</sup> On these views, ordinary perceptual and simple physical object beliefs are basic, provided that they are grounded in the right sorts of perceptual experiences. Doxastic foundations theories have fallen out of favor because we simply don't form enough appearance beliefs to support the structure of our justified beliefs. Instead, we form ordinary perceptual and physical object beliefs directly from appearance states (perceptual experiences) without first forming appearance beliefs.

<sup>6</sup> John Pollock (1986) stipulatively restricts the class of foundations theories to doxastic foundations theories. He uses “direct realism” to refer to what I am calling “nondoxastic foundations theories.” One can use stipulative terminology any way one pleases, but since the overwhelming majority of current epistemologists who refer to themselves as “foundationalists” are nondoxastic foundationalists, I think the term “nondoxastic foundations theories” is both less confusing and more apt than “direct realism.”

By stipulation, a *coherence theory* is any internalist theory of epistemic justification that is not a foundations theory.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, foundations theories and coherence theories exhaust the class of internalist theories of justification. Since any internalist theory that denies foundationalism is stipulatively a coherence theory, a number of different coherence theories are possible. There are two ways of denying the existence of a privileged subclass of basic beliefs. *Positive coherence theories* deny that any beliefs are basic and demand positive support from other beliefs for all beliefs. Typically, positive coherence theorists have rejected the linear picture of reasoning favored by foundationalists, opting instead for a holistic model of reasoning. *Negative coherence theories* deny the existence of a privileged subclass of basic beliefs by insisting that all beliefs are *prima facie* justified and hence basic, simply in virtue of being believed. But there is a third form of coherence theory that epistemologists have not recognized. Like foundations theories, *modest nondoxastic coherence theories* acknowledge that some reasoning is linear and admit that some beliefs are basic, for example, simple perceptual beliefs. Unlike foundations theories, however, modest linear noncircular nondoxastic coherence theories insist we can be justified in holding nonbasic beliefs that do not ultimately trace their justification back to basic beliefs.<sup>8</sup> In section 3, I argue that a Positist version of this sort of Modest Coherentism (PMC) allows us to solve the regress problem for *ex ante* justification as it most frequently arises. Let us first turn to the regress problem itself.

## 2. The Epistemic Regress Problem for Ex Ante Justification

In its original incarnation, the epistemic regress problem was put forth as a skeptical challenge designed to undermine the very possibility of rational belief. In its contemporary guise, the regress problem has been formulated as an argument from elimination in favor of foundationalism—one designed to show that basic beliefs must exist if we are to be epistemically justified in believing anything at all.<sup>9</sup> The *regress argument* for *ex ante* justification is predicated on two seemingly innocuous assumptions:

- A1. *S* is justified in coming to believe that *p* iff either (1) *S* is immediately justified in coming to believe that *p* or (2) *S* is mediately justified in coming to believe that *p*.

<sup>7</sup> Pollock (1986) restricts the class of coherence theories to doxastic theories, but there is nothing in principle that prevents a coherence theorist from insisting that our beliefs must cohere with both our beliefs and our experiences. See Elgin 2005 and Engel 2012 for examples of such views. Accordingly, I use the term “coherence theory” to refer to any internalist theory of justification that is not a foundations theory.

<sup>8</sup> In Engel 2012, I sketch a modest nondoxastic coherence theory and then defend it in the context of moral epistemology.

<sup>9</sup> For classic discussions of the epistemic regress argument, see Alston 1976 and BonJour 1978.

- A2.  $S$  is mediately justified in coming to believe that  $p$  iff (1)  $S$  has a doxastic reason  $q$  for  $p$  (where  $q$  might be a conjunction), and (2)  $S$  is ex post justified (either mediately or immediately) in believing  $q$ .

The basic idea is this: It is rational for  $S$  to come to believe that  $p$  iff either (1)  $p$  is properly basic for  $S$  or (2)  $S$  has a proper basis  $q$  for  $p$ .

Starting with these two assumptions, the foundationalist reasons as follows: According to A1, for any proposition  $p$ , in order for  $S$  to be justified/rational in coming to believe  $p$ , either (1)  $S$  must be immediately justified in coming to believe  $p$  or (2)  $S$  must be mediately justified in coming to believe  $p$ . If (1), then basic beliefs exist, just as the foundationalist maintains. If (2), then per A2,  $S$  must justifiably hold some other belief  $B_1$  that justifies  $S$  in coming to believe that  $p$ . Of course, if  $S$  is justified in believing  $B_1$ , then either  $B_1$  is properly basic for  $S$  or  $S$  is mediately justified in believing  $B_1$  by believing it on the basis of some other belief  $B_2$  which  $S$  is justified in holding, and so on. As we trace  $S$ 's chain of reasons backward, it must do one of four things:

- (i) Stop at some arbitrary belief  $B_n$ , which  $S$  is not justified in believing.
- (ii) Continue backward infinitely.
- (iii) Loop back on itself forming a circle.
- (iv) Stop at a properly basic belief, which  $S$  is immediately justified in believing.

The foundationalist argues that, of these four types of chains, only type-(iv) chains are capable of justifying  $S$  in coming to believe that  $p$ . Given A2, it follows that type-(i) chains fail to confer justification on  $p$ , for A2 entails that reasoning chains are only justification transmitting, not justification generating. Call this *the transmission-only thesis*. Since  $S$  is not justified in believing the initial belief  $B_n$ , there is no justification for the chain to transmit, and consequently,  $S$  is not justified in believing the target proposition  $p$ . A related reason for thinking that type-(i) chains are incapable of justifying  $S$  in coming to believe that  $p$  is rooted in *the arbitrariness thesis*—the thesis that arbitrarily held beliefs cannot justify us in holding other beliefs. Since  $S$  is not justified in believing  $B_n$ ,  $B_n$  is arbitrary. Given the arbitrariness thesis, no chain of reasons starting with an arbitrary belief can justify  $S$  in believing the target proposition  $p$ . As for infinitely long type-(ii) chains, the foundationalist argues that they cannot justify  $S$  in coming to believe that  $p$ , since it is humanly impossible to instantiate (or even have available) such a chain of reasoning. Type-(iii) chains, regardless of their length, fare no better as sources of mediate justification, because they are either impotent or superfluous. To see why, consider a very short ex post type-(iii) chain:  $B_p \rightarrow B_3 \rightarrow B_2 \rightarrow B_1 \rightarrow B_p$ . If

$S$  is unjustified in believing  $B_p$  to begin with, then we essentially have a type-(i) chain with no justification to transmit. If  $B_p$  is properly basic for  $S$ , then the chain is superfluous and does no epistemic work. In short, an ex post type-(iii) chain justifies  $S$  in believing  $B_p$  only if  $S$  is already justified in believing  $B_p$ . The case looks even bleaker for an ex ante type-(iii) chain, where  $S$  does not yet believe that  $p$ :  $p \rightarrow B_3 \rightarrow B_2 \rightarrow B_1 \rightarrow p$ . If  $S$  doesn't even believe that  $p$ , it is unclear how  $p$  could justify  $S$  in believing anything else, much less itself!

Unlike the first three types of chains, the foundationalist argues, type-(iv) chains appear to be genuinely justification conferring. In a type-(iv) chain, the initial belief  $B_n$  in the chain is properly basic for  $S$ , and hence,  $S$  is immediately justified in holding it. As such,  $B_n$  is not arbitrary. Since reasoning chains are justification transmitting and since  $S$  is immediately justified in believing the initial belief  $B_n$  of a type-(iv) chain,  $S$  is mediate justified in believing each belief-link of the chain up to and including the target proposition  $p$ .<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the foundationalist concludes, only type-(iv) chains are capable of providing mediate justification. Accordingly, every nonbasic proposition  $p$  that  $S$  is justified in coming to believe must ultimately trace its justification back to basic beliefs.

Does the regress argument (RA) show that foundationalism is correct? No. Even if sound, all RA shows is that there must be basic beliefs, *if* we are to have any justified beliefs at all, and it remains a theoretical possibility that justification skepticism is correct. But more important, especially for those of us who aren't justification skeptics, even if there are basic beliefs, as RA allegedly shows, in order for foundationalism to be correct, there must be enough basic beliefs to support the structure of our justified nonbasic beliefs, and RA does nothing to show the latter. As a modest nondoxastic coherence theorist, I agree that simple perceptual beliefs, grounded in perceptual experiences, are properly basic, just as the foundationalist maintains. The problem is that many higher-level, nonbasic beliefs that we care deeply about (e.g., moral and philosophical beliefs) and that we take ourselves to be justified in believing cannot trace their justification back to basic beliefs. Take the current debate between foundationalism, coherentism, infinitism, and positivism. No matter which of these positions you believe is correct, you won't be able to trace this philosophical belief back to properly basic beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, some

<sup>10</sup> Assuming, of course, that each inferential step in the type-(iv) chain is deductively valid or inductively cogent.

<sup>11</sup> Alvin Plantinga (1983) used this observation to show that classical foundationalism is self-refuting. After arguing that the belief that *classical foundationalism is correct* [ $F$ ] isn't properly basic (since it's neither self-evident nor incorrigible nor evident to the senses), he argued that since no foundationalist has ever been able to support  $F$  with a chain of reasons terminating in basic beliefs, the belief that  $F$  also isn't properly based. Hence, it's not rational to accept  $F$  according to  $F$ 's own criterion of rationality.

justified nonbasic beliefs owe their justification to something other than basic beliefs. I now turn to my preferred solution to the regress problem for *ex ante* justification—positist modest coherentism—since it explains how such nonfoundationally derived justification can arise.

### 3. Justification Ex Nihilo

I submit that the regress argument rests on a false assumption, namely, A2. As noted above, A2 entails that reasoning is only justification transmitting, never justification generating. I reject A2 and its corollary the transmission-only thesis. I contend that, *under certain circumstances*, reasoning itself can be justification generating, even if one is not justified in holding the belief from which one is reasoning. The burden of the present section is to explain how that could be and to provide several arguments in support of this positist thesis.

#### 3a. *The Argument from Rational Commitment*

Suppose I sincerely believe that *p* and sincerely believe that *p* entails *q*, and I care about whether or not *q* is true. In such a situation, I am *rationally committed* to believing that *q*. The only way for me to cease being rationally committed to *q* is to abandon my belief that *p* or my belief that *p* entails *q*. If, however, I continue to believe that *p* and that *p* entails *q*, and I continue to care whether or not *q*, then I *should* believe *q*. Under those circumstances, it would be *irrational* of me *not* to believe *q*, and since it would be *irrational* for me *not* to believe *q*, it would be *rational* for me *to* believe *q*, which is just to say that I would be justified in believing *q* in those circumstances. To refuse to believe *q* under those circumstances would be irrational. That's why conversations like the following strike us as so absurd:

Achilles: Do you believe that *p*?  
 Tortoise: Why, yes I do!  
 Achilles: Do you believe that *p* entails *q*?  
 Tortoise: I certainly do!  
 Achilles: Do you believe that *q*?  
 Tortoise: No! Why would I believe that?

By committing to *p* and *p* entails *q*, the Tortoise has rationally committed himself to *q*. It is irrational of the Tortoise to continue to believe that *p* and *p* entails *q*, but refuse to believe *q*. Given that the Tortoise believes *p* and *p* entails *q*, he *should* believe that *q* (at least, he should if he cares whether or not *q* is true). Notice that in the above dialogue, it is not the Tortoise's *rational* commitment to *p* and to *p* entails *q* that rationally commits him to

*q*. It is his commitment *simpliciter* to *p* and *p* entails *q* that rationally commits him to *q*.<sup>12</sup>

### *3b. Justificational Opacity and the Argument from Norm Followability Against A2*

Epistemic justification in the normative belief-guiding sense that is the focus of this article proceeds in terms of regulative epistemic norms. Such norms prescribe how we should reason and tell us what we epistemically should and should not believe.<sup>13</sup> *S* is justified in coming to believe that *p* if and only if *S* would not violate any regulative epistemic norms by coming to believe that *p*. When believing a proposition would violate a correct regulative epistemic norm, we are unjustified in believing it. When believing a proposition would not violate any such norms, we are justified in believing it. On the plausible assumptions that (i) we *ought* to be able to reason the way we should reason and (ii) *ought* implies *can*, the correct epistemic norms, whatever they are, must be such that we are actually capable of following them and guiding our beliefs in conformity with them. Accordingly, an adequacy constraint on any *regulative* epistemic norm is that it be followable.<sup>14</sup> A person cannot be criticized for failing to follow a norm that is impossible to follow, for no one can be expected to follow an unfollowable norm. As we shall now see, the epistemic norm implicit in A2 is unfollowable. Consequently, A2 can't be a regulative principle of justification and should be rejected as such.

The epistemic norm embodied by A2 can be expressed as follows:

- N1. For any belief  $B_1$  that you hold, employ  $B_1$  as a reason for some new belief  $B_2$  only if you are justified in believing  $B_1$ .

The problem with N1 *as a regulative norm* is that, in order to follow it, we would have to be able to partition our beliefs into those we're justified in

<sup>12</sup> The same is true in Lewis Carroll's original dialogue between the Tortoise and Achilles. That dialogue (Carroll 1895) is couched entirely in terms of what the Tortoise *accepts*, not in terms of what the Tortoise *justifiedly accepts*.

<sup>13</sup> Epistemic norms are typically taken to be permission norms; they tell us what we are epistemically permitted to believe. They don't usually tell us what we must believe, because we might have no interest in some trivial proposition *t* that is knowingly entailed by other propositions we believe. However, when it is stipulated that we care about whether or not some important proposition *i* is true, an epistemic norm can tell us that we *should* believe that *i* under certain conditions.

<sup>14</sup> In addition to regulative epistemic norms, there may be purely evaluative externalist epistemic norms that are relevant to whether or not *S* knows that *p* or has an externalistically justified belief that *p*, but such norms have no role to play with respect to the regulative, belief-guiding conception of justification that is the focus of this article. In order for me to guide my belief formation by appeal to an epistemic norm, the norm must be an internally followable norm.



believing and those we aren't justified in believing, and then restrict our reasoning to inferences based only on members of the first set. Such a requirement is psychologically unrealistic, for we typically are in no position to tell which of our beliefs we're justified in holding and which we aren't. To see the full force of this objection requires a brief look at memory.

When are we justified in holding a memorial belief? By my lights, Michael Huemer (2008) has provided the most plausible account of memorial justification to date. Here is Huemer's view:

- HV. *S* is justified in holding some memorial belief *M* if and only if *S* had an adequate justification for adopting *M*, and thenceforth, *S* was justified in retaining *M* (where, typically, the absence of reasons for revising *M* is an acceptable basis for retaining *M*). (Huemer 2008, 871)

Except in highly contrived circumstances (which have no bearing on the present point), HV entails *the memory thesis*: Memory is only a justification-preserving faculty, not a justification-generating one.<sup>15</sup> Given the memory thesis, if a belief *M* goes into memory unjustified, it comes out unjustified (unless, of course, *S* has subsequently acquired a reason *R* that justifies *S* in believing *M*). Now here's the rub. Normally, when we recall some memorial belief *M*, we don't recall what our original reasons for adopting *M* were or whether we even had such reasons. We just recall *M*. Now imagine a case where, despite originally acquiring *M* in some epistemically irresponsible way, we have forgotten that fact and now seem to remember that *M*. In such a situation, we would, quite naturally, assume that we were just as justified in believing *M* as we are in believing any other memorial belief, but we would be mistaken. It follows from HV and the memory thesis that we can't tell introspectively which of our memorial beliefs we are justified in holding and which we aren't. The justificational status of a memorial belief, as Huemer rightly observes, "does not supervene on the current, intrinsic state of the believer" (2008, 871). Given the justificational opacity of our memorial beliefs, we can't follow the epistemic norm (i.e., N1) implicit in A2. Consequently, A2 is false, where the regulative conception of justification is concerned.

Contrast the unfollowable A2 norm (as codified by N1) with the following followable norm:

<sup>15</sup> Huemer accepts the memory thesis, except in artificially contrived situations where memory is the means by which one *acquires* a belief in the first place (as opposed to the method of *retaining* it). See his discussion of Russell's five-minute-old-world hypothesis for details concerning this exception in Huemer 2008. For the purposes of the present essay, we can safely put aside worries about Russell's five-minute-old-world hypothesis.

- N2. If you believe that  $p$  and that  $p$  entails  $q$ , and you care about whether  $q$ , then if you have no defeaters for  $p$  as a reason for  $q$ , believe  $q$ .<sup>16</sup>

Like it or not, N2 is the norm we actually follow when deriving new beliefs from our stock of memorial beliefs. N2 correctly captures how we *do* reason. We reason from our beliefs, not just our justified beliefs. The next subsection explains why we are *right* to reason in this way.

### 3c. *Default Reasoning in the Public and Private Domains*

The fact that a belief  $B$  is in one's belief system does not imply that one is justified in holding it. If one neither has nor ever had an undefeated reason for  $B$ , then one is not justified in believing  $B$  (per the memory thesis). When we are unjustified in holding some belief  $B$ , that fact is often obscured from us, however, because we typically forget what our original reasons for  $B$  were or whether we even had such reasons. Since we can't tell introspectively which of our memorial beliefs we're justified in holding and which we aren't, we rightly regard all memorial beliefs as having a default (albeit defeasible) *permissible-to-reason-from* status. Given this default status, we are justified in reasoning from any belief  $B_1$  in our belief system to a new belief  $B_2$  and we're justified in believing  $B_2$  as a result, *unless* we encounter considerations that defeat  $B_1$ 's status as a reason for  $B_2$ .

In this regard, private reasoning is very much like public reasoning. When publicly reasoning to (or arguing for) a conclusion, we simply state our premises. We do not attempt to prove our premises, unless they are challenged. If someone does challenge one of our premises, we offer other premises in support of the challenged premise, but we do not attempt to prove those new premises unless they are also called into question. Similarly, when privately reasoning, we reason from our beliefs (our internalized premises). We do not question these beliefs/reasons, unless we encounter some defeating consideration that undermines their status as reasons. When we do encounter some defeater  $D$  for some reason  $R$  for  $p$ , we consider whether there are still other reasons that justify us in continuing to hold  $R$  as a reason for  $p$ ; for example, we consider whether there are any "defeater-eaters" that defeat  $D$ 's status as a defeater. If we find some defeater-eater  $D^*$  for  $D$ , we don't question whether we are justified in believing  $D^*$ , unless counterevidence surfaces, which makes  $D^*$  suspect, as well. If we don't find a defeater-eater for defeater  $D$ , however,

<sup>16</sup> In Klein 2013, Peter Klein basically endorses the N2 norm, only he frames it as a permission norm: "When  $S$  has a belief that  $r$ , and  $rRx$ , and  $S$  believes  $x$  and  $S$  deploys  $r$  as a reason for the belief that  $x$ , then  $S$  may (is permitted to) believe that  $x$ ," and Klein acknowledges that  $S$  need not yet be justified (not even provisionally justified) in believing  $r$  to deploy it as a reason for  $x$ .

then defeater *D* remains in force, and we abandon (or refrain from adopting) the belief for which our defeated reason *R* was a reason.

Computer models designed to simulate human cognition employ just this sort of default reasoning, that is, they “reason” from whatever premises they are given, *unless* they encounter information that conflicts with those premises.<sup>17</sup> Humans reason the same way. We reason from our beliefs (justified or not) until we acquire information that challenges those beliefs. Reasoning in this way is extremely efficient. If we had to stop and reevaluate our beliefs each time before we reasoned from them, we would draw very few conclusions. The point is not merely that we do regularly engage in default reasoning but that, given both the efficiency and the self-correcting nature of such reasoning, it is entirely rational for us to do so. *Objection:* But won’t engaging in default reasoning make us prone to countless irremediable errors? *Response:* No, for when we employ default reasoning, we’re constantly engaged in what John Pollock (1986, 56–57) describes as “primed search”—the subconscious monitoring of our reasoning, constantly being on the lookout for reasoning errors and potential defeaters for our reasons. In this way, faulty reasoning and faulty beliefs are constantly getting corrected, as new information becomes available.

### 3d. *When Is Reasoning Justification Generating?*

I have been arguing that, under certain circumstances, a person can come to be justified in believing that *q* on the basis of a belief *p* that *S* is unjustified in holding, but just what are those circumstances? Here’s a stab at a sufficient condition for positivist justification:

- (PJ) *S* is justified in coming to believe that *q* on the basis of her belief *p*, which she’s ex post *unjustified* in believing, IF:
- (i) *S* believes that *p*,
  - (ii) *S* believes that *p* entails *q* (or that *p* makes *q* sufficiently probable),
  - (iii) *S* appreciates the fact that (*p* & *p* entails *q*) is a reason to believe *q*,
  - (iv) *S* does not realize that she is unjustified in believing *p*,
  - (v) *S* has no reason to believe  $\sim q$ , i.e., *S* is not aware of any rebutting defeaters for *p* as a reason for *q*,
  - (vi) *S* has no reason to deny that *p* would not be true unless *q* were true, i.e., *S* is not aware of any undercutting defeaters for *p* as a reason for *q*, and
  - (vii) *S* has no reason to believe  $\sim p$ , i.e., *S* is not aware of any negating defeaters for *p*.

<sup>17</sup> For a fuller discussion of default reasoning, see Bach 1984. Also see Pollock 1986, chapters 2 and 5.

What about her belief that  $p$ ? Is  $S$  destined to always be unjustified in believing that  $p$ ? No. She could recognize that she has a reason for  $p$  that she hadn't previously appreciated, or she could acquire a new reason for believing that  $p$  either in the form of a direct reason to think that  $p$  is true or an indirect abductive reason, namely, that the best explanation for why  $p$  has given rise to so many other beliefs that cohere with the rest of her belief system is that  $p$  is true.

#### 4. The Many-Solutions Solution to the Regress Problem, or Can't We Just Get Along?

Of late, I've become a rather ecumenical beast, for I've found that, hidden among the weeds, there is a grain of truth in most philosophical positions. So it is with each of the four supposedly unpalatable options/isms with which we began. The foundationalist is right to think that there are basic beliefs, for example, simple perceptual beliefs grounded in sense experience, and also right to think that such beliefs are legitimate regress stoppers, but wrong to think that every justified nonbasic belief owes its justification to a chain of reasoning that traces back to basic beliefs. The holistic coherentist is right to think that explanatory coherence can justify beliefs that the believer was previously unjustified in believing, but wrong to think that all reasoning must be holistic. The positivist modest coherence (PMC) theorist is right to insist that it is our *beliefs* (and not just our justified beliefs) that serve as our reasons and that justify us in holding other nonbasic beliefs, unless their status as reasons is defeated. The infinitist is right to claim that  $S$  is justified in believing  $p$  only if  $S$  has a reason  $R$  that supports  $p$ , right that no belief can be a reason for itself, and right that  $S$  need not possess nor have deployed some other reason  $Y$  for  $R$  in order for  $R$  to be a justification-conferring reason for  $p$ .<sup>18</sup> The infinitist may also be right in maintaining that reasoning is "justification enhancing" in the sense that the longer the chain of nonrepeating reasons that  $S$  can deploy in support of some target belief, the better her justification for  $p$  and the better her knowledge and understanding of  $p$ .<sup>19</sup> Where I disagree with infinitism—at least, as a theory of egocentric regulative epistemic justification—is in its requirement that in addition to having an undefeated reason  $R$  for  $p$ , there must be an infinitely long chain of nonrepeating propositional justification that supports  $R$ , since

<sup>18</sup> Klein (2013) makes this point explicitly: "S can be provisionally inferentially justified in believing x on the basis of believing that y, even if S is not (yet) provisionally doxastically justified in believing that y." In making this claim, Klein commits himself to positivism, at least where "provisional inferential justification" is concerned.

<sup>19</sup> For excellent discussions of how the addition of more and more nonrepeating reasons for  $p$  enhances  $S$ 's justification for and knowledge of  $p$ , see Klein 2005a and 2005b; Peijnenburg and Atkinson 2013; and Aikin forthcoming.

whether or not the latter condition obtains is not introspectively available to *S*. While there may be a *kind* of epistemic justification that requires infinite nonrepeating propositional justification, the regulative belief-guiding conception of justification does not, for *S* has no way of knowing whether or not such a chain of nonrepeating propositional justification exists and, hence, can't guide her belief formation by appeal to such considerations.

## 5. Conclusion: The PMC Scorecard

To its credit, PMC rightly embraces the reasons thesis. A person is justified in coming to believe that *p* only if she has an undefeated doxastic or experiential reason for *p*.<sup>20</sup> PMC is also right to embrace the memory thesis: Memory is a justification-preserving faculty, not a justification-generating one. One cannot come to be justified in holding a memorial belief simply by forgetting that one was unjustified in acquiring it.<sup>21</sup> PMC does reject the widely held transmission-only thesis that reasoning is only justification transmitting, but it does so on the principled ground that the A2 norm (exemplified by N1) is unfollowable, and thus fails as a *regulative* norm. As for the arbitrariness thesis, PMC's combination of default reasoning and primed search for errors mitigates against the charge of arbitrariness. Although *S* might have acquired some belief *B* inappropriately/arbitrarily, the fact *B* has persisted, that is, *B* hasn't been purged due to countervailing considerations, despite *S*'s having been on the lookout for such considerations, makes *B* more than just an arbitrary belief. The longer *B* survives this primed-search-self-monitoring process, the less arbitrary *B* becomes. True, even if *B* persists indefinitely, *S* won't be justified in believing *B*, unless she acquires an undefeated reason for *B*, but *S* needn't be justified in believing *B* in order for *B* to cease being arbitrary. It is a virtue that PMC can both explain and accommodate this important distinction. All told, that's a pretty impressive scorecard!

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<sup>20</sup> Where ex post justification is concerned, PMC maintains that a person is justified in holding some memorial belief *M* only if either (a) she had and deployed an undefeated reason for *M* when she acquired *M*, or (b) after acquiring *M*, she recognized that she had an undefeated reason for *M* that she hadn't appreciated previously or she acquired an undefeated reason for *M*, which she recognized as such.

<sup>21</sup> See Huemer 2008 for an excellent discussion of this point.

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