Infinitism and Dispositional Beliefs

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Abstract

In articulating his theory of epistemic infinitism, Klein argues that a belief is justified only if it is supported by an infinite and non-repeating series of reasons subjectively available to the subject in a form of dispositional beliefs. Klein offers about three standard conditions of subjective availability of dispositional beliefs. I submit that the first condition confuses the disposition to believe with dispositional beliefs and the other two yield unpalatable consequences for Klein's theory of epistemic infinitism. Although this problem is not insurmountable, I argue that it poses a serious challenge to Klein's theory of infinitism and the only safe way out is a serious modification to his version of infinitism.

Keywords: infinitism, dispositional beliefs.

Introduction

Infinitism, according to Klein, is the view that S is justified in believing a proposition, p, only if p is supported by an infinite and non-circular series of reasons subjectively available to S. This view has been criticised on the basis that human beings are finite beings and cannot hold infinite set of beliefs.[1] But Klein rejects this criticism by arguing that it relies on an 'old' conception of justified beliefs. He argues that the concept, 'justified belief', inherits an ambiguity from 'belief' (Klein 2005, p. 156). A belief can either refer to a belief state, in which case it could be dispositional or ocurrent, or it can refer to the propositional content of a belief state. According to Klein, it is within the dispositional sense that we can speak of human beings as possessing infinite set of beliefs. He remarks: Humans have many beliefs that are not ocurrent. It is the non-ocurrent sense of 'belief' that the members of an infinite series of reasons might be subjectively available to S" (Klein 1999, p. 300). Put succinctly, our finite minds cannot hold many occurent beliefs at a time but can house many dispositional beliefs. While I agree with Klein that human beings cannot hold infinite series of beliefs occurrently, I reject his idea of subjective availability of dispositional belief. The problem, as I shall argue, is that one of the conditions for subjective availability of beliefs confuses dispositions to believe with dispositional beliefs and the other two present fatal consequences for his theory of infinitism.

Since argument of this nature requires some stage setting, I will as a matter of initial orientation, begin by presenting the conditions for the subjective availability of beliefs. I will next make the case of Klein's confusion of dispositional beliefs with the disposition to believe by an analysis of the first condition. I shall then proceed to show how the other two conditions engender some absurd consequences for Klein's infinitism. Finally, I suggest that the only strategy out of this problem will demand a serious modification to Klein theory of infinitism. But before then, I need to define some terms and expose some pre-theoretical suppositions to guide the discussion.

Some Theoretical Presuppositions

Firstly, I take dispositional beliefs to mean stored beliefs which are not immediately conscious to a subject's mind. By stored beliefs, I mean representations or memorial beliefs which are understood though not directly or immediately accessible to a subject. These stored beliefs usually become immediately accessible to a subject's mind through reflections, observation, dialogues or by some stimuli. On the other hand, I take disposition to believe to mean a kind of cognitive competence or capacity available to a subject to form tacit beliefs. By tacit beliefs, I mean beliefs that are not

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[1] This was a classical objection to epistemic infinitists tracing back to Aristotle in his Posterior Analytic. See 72b10. Traces of this objection could be found in Audi (1993, p. 152) and BanJour (1985, p. 124 and 1996, p. 100).

stored in a representational format on the subject's mind but which a subject can come to form and bring to consciousness. Once these beliefs are manifest and brought to consciousness, the subject can cite them as reasons for a belief in certain particular contexts if the necessary triggering conditions are prompted. My characterisation of disposition to believe is much more general than what Audi specifically defends in his paper, "Dispositional Belief and Dispositions to Believe".[2] Audi's characterization of dispositional belief is couched in terms of a subject's cognitive inclination to form beliefs. Most often, this manner of belief formation are spontaneous. For instance, if I see a group of people murmuring and pointing to my direction, I am disposed to form the belief that they are discussing something about me. Forming the belief this way is spontaneous and reveals a cognitive *inclination* to form beliefs rather than a cognitive *capacity* to form beliefs. Usually, when one is cognitively capable of forming beliefs, such belief formations are mostly premeditated. For instance, if an epistemic situation demands that I form the belief that the capital of the ancient Ghana Empire was Kumbi Saleh, I will be capable of forming this belief by consulting my history books, i.e., if they list Kumbi Saleh as the capital of the famous Ancient Ghana Empire. Unlike Audi, my characterisation of the disposition to believe involves both the "cognitive inclination" and the "cognitive potential or capacity" to believing or to form beliefs.

Secondly, I conceive Klein's version of infinitism as a structural rather than a dialectical solution to the regress of justification. A structural regress is the regress of support that exists for a particular belief for a particular subject at a particular time while the dialectical regress involves the reason one interlocutor asks another for believing a proposition. Klein is not clear regarding which regress question his version of infinitism is meant to address. But he places epistemic infinitism as a structural alternative to epistemic foundationalism and coherentism. My reading of his version of infinitism as a structural solution hinges on his strategy of juxtaposing epistemic infinitism with both epistemic foundationalism and coherentism. Such a structuralist view of justification makes Klein's view of subjective availability of beliefs and his version of infinitism more susceptible to the problem raised in this essay.

Finally, I focus mainly on Klein's notion of propositional justification. Klein identifies two forms of infinitist account of justification namely, propositional and doxastic justification. For instance, a proposition, p, is propositionally justified for a subject, S, only if there is available to the subject at least one infinite and non-repeating series of reasons such that $r1$ is a good and an undefeated reason for p, $r2$ is a good and an undefeated reason for $r1$ and so on. In contrast, a belief, p, is doxastically justified for a subject, S, only if p is propositionally justifiable for S (Klein 2007, p 10).[3] From Klein's explication of these views, it is obvious that doxastic justification is parasitic on

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[2] See Audi (1994).

[3] Turri has a clear statement of infinitist propositional and doxastic justification. See Turri (2009, p. 298)

propositional justification in that we become doxastically justified in holding a belief at a particular time not because we hold a propositionally justified belief but because we hold such a belief on the basis of what propositionally justifies it. And the reason for what propositionally justifies this putative belief is what Klein says is subjectively available to S as dispositional belief. The lesson drawn here is that the problem of subjectively available propositions does not strictly concern infinitist doxastic justification but infinitist propositional justification. It is against this background that I focus principally on propositional justification. Having said this, let's turn attention to how Klein explains subjective availability of beliefs.

The Notion of Subjective Availability of Beliefs

I begin by looking at Klein's case for epistemic infinitism. Klein's major objective for articulating epistemic infinitism is to avoid question begging or dogmatic answers to questions such as "how do you know that p?" or "why think that p?" To achieve this objective, he formulates two principles namely, the Principle of Avoiding Circularity (PAC) and the Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness (PAA). The following is how Klein explicates these principles:

PAC: If S has a justification for belief p, then for any belief q which is part of S's chain of support for p, it is not the case that p is part of S's chain of support for q.

PAA: If S has a justification for belief p, then there is some reason r_1 available to S for p and there is some reason r_2 available to S for r_1, etc, such that there is no last reason in the series (Klein 1999, p. 298).

Klein employs these principles to eliminate other theories of epistemic justification notably coherence and foundationalist theories. A coherence theory of justification, CJ, is the view that if q is a member of the series of reasons S has for p then p is a member of the series of reasons S has for q. But if PAC is true then CJ is false because CJ allows q to be in S's chain of support for p and p to be in S's chain of support for q. Foundationalist theory of justification, FJ, is the view that the structure of reasons in support of a proposition is finite, thus allowing a last and a final reason in the series of justified reasons which does not require support from other propositions for justification. But if PAA is true then FJ is false because FJ allows that a subject's set of reasons for a belief is not infinite. Klein explains that the reason why infinitism is true is that it does not violate PAC or PAA. We can have infinitely long and non-repeating set of reasons for the propositions we are justified in believing and these reasons are objectively and subjectively available to the subject. I will not focus attention on Klein's notion of objective availability of beliefs because it is not relevant to the purpose of this

essay.[4] Focusing attention on his notion of subjectively available beliefs as reasons, let's look at how he develops this notion.

Under what conditions does a belief become subjectively available to a subject? Klein does not commit himself to any specific notion of subjective availability of beliefs but he lists some few conditions any of which he considers as compatible with the infinitist notion of subjective availability of beliefs. According to Klein, a belief is subjectively available to a subject, S, as a reason, if it is connected to the subject's other beliefs in a non-occurrent way or requires S's other beliefs to be entailed by S's current beliefs (Call this SA_1). Another condition is that an infinitist could hold that "S believes p just in case S would affirm that p, or endorse p in another fashion-perhaps sotto voce-in some appropriate restricted circumstance" (Call this SA_2) (Klein 1999, p. 300). A third option is that an infinitist could require a proposition to be subjectively available to a subject, S, if there is an epistemically credible way of S coming to believe that p taking cognisance of S's current epistemic practices (Call this SA_3) (Klein 2007b, p 12).[5] Klein uses the consultation of the World Almanac to illustrate SA₃. Suppose that a subject's epistemic practices are such that, if contextually determined strictures required S to know the capital of Montana, S will have to consult the Almanac. This is because the "Almanac is a reliable source and it lists Helena as the state capital of Montana, would be "subjectively available" to S (Klein 2007b, p.13).

I will avoid commenting on SA₁ and SA₂ for now because they are obviously uncontroversial. The reason is the following. According to SA₁, if I believe that Helena is the state capital of Montana then this belief is connected to, at least, one of my infinitely many dispositional beliefs such as a memorial or stored belief that 'the Almanac lists Helena as the state capital of Montana' or I remember reading it in my Geography books and so on. SA₂ states that S believes that p only if she will affirm or endorse p in certain appropriate restricted situations. For instance, if I believe that Helena is the state capital of Montana, then I will affirm or endorse this in certain restricted situation such as when something triggers my memory about it or when I am asked a question concerning the truth of it. In this scenario, I already possess the belief because it is available to me as a dispositional belief only that I am not confident in affirming it. But I will come to affirm or endorse it either by reflectively clarifying

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[4] Klein notes that any of these notions of availability could be useful for the infinitist. For instance one could say that a belief is objectively available to S as a reason for p if (1) q has some sufficiently high probability and the conditional probability of p given q is sufficiently high, or (2) an impartial, informed observer would accept q as a reason for p; or (3) q would be accepted in the long run by an appropriately defined set of people; or (4) q is evident for s and q makes p evident for S; etc... See Klein (1999, p. 299). Note that Andrew Cling has already responded to the issue of Klein's notions of objectively availability in Cling (2004). See pp. 122-118.

[5] These options do not exhaust all the conditions of subjective availability Klein offered in his numerous works on infinitism. However, these three options enumerated here capture the core structure of all his examples. This is to say that all other examples share the structure of SA_1, SA_2 and SA_3.

my thoughts about it or consulting the Almanac to boost my confidence for holding it. Each one of these formulations is uncontroversial and true but their truth has a fatal implication on Klein's infinitism. I will come to that shortly.

However, SA$_3$ is a suspect. It can be read as the following: if S believes p, say, Helena is the state capital of Montana, then there is an epistemically credible way S will come to know p as in S consulting his teacher or books or any other sources; because these source of references are subjectively available to S. This idea immediately gives rise to a disturbing scenario. Are these sources or, at least one of them, already represented on S's mind, so that they are subjectively available to him as dispositional beliefs? If the answer to this question is affirmative, then S already believes p but only that the belief is not directly or immediately present on S's mind. On the other hand, if the answer is negative, then S does not believe or know that p. She will come to know that p or form the belief that p if she were to consult any of these sources. Hence, S has the disposition to believe or know that p but does not possess the dispositional belief that p. Put succinctly, the belief that p is a tacit belief; not a stored belief which S already possessed. S has the disposition to believe p or form the belief, p, by consulting sources that lists p as true. It is this 'belief disposition', as Tommaso Piazza calls it, which is subjectively available to S.

This is true because publicly available potential sources of information upon whose basis we form beliefs cannot become subjectively available to a subject? For instance, consider this Goldman[6] type example in relation to Conee and Feldman's characterisation of stored beliefs and dispositional justification.[7] Suppose Sally is engrossed in her favourite novel and her kid brother just appeared from nowhere to inform her that a Jaguar is parked in front of their house. Sally has never seen a Jaguar parked in the front view of their house before. Curious, she looked out of the window and saw a Jaguar parked right there in front of their house. The question is: does Sally already believe that there is a Jaguar parked in front of their house before she saw the Jaguar? It is obvious that she didn't believe it until she saw it. Thus, as Conee and Feldman argued, Sally does not possess the belief that a Jaguar is parked in front of their house until she saw it. This is because what is available to Sally's mind prior to seeing the Jaguar was not the representation of the Jaguar as a dispositional belief, but the disposition to see the Jaguar by looking at it and forming the belief thereafter. It is a cognitive potential or capacity available to Sally to form the belief that there is a Jaguar parked in front of her house.

Taking this example into consideration, the problem in SA_3 becomes more conspicuous. S will come to believe that Helena is the capital of Montana by consulting the Almanac. However, 'the Almanac is a reliable source and it lists Helena as state

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[6] See Goldman (1999)

[7] See Conee and Feldman (1985) Reprinted in Conee and Feldman (2004). See also Goldman

capital of Montana' is not subjectively available to S as a belief because S has not checked the Almanac and appropriately formed this belief as yet. But there is something available to S in a form of disposition, i.e., the cognitive capacity or inclination with which S will demonstrate the readiness to believe or form the belief that Helena is the state capital of Montana. Granted that this explanation is correct then Klein confuses a disposition to believe with a dispositional belief, a phenomenon Audi calls assimilationism (Audi 1994, p. 430). But this confusion does not afflict SA_1 and SA_2. In spite of the fact that SA_1 and SA_2 appear obviously uncontroversial, both formulations, among other things, yield a fatal consequence on Klein's infinitism.

By now, the difference between SA_3 and both SA_1 and SA_2 is quite apparent. While SA_3 is consistent with the disposition to believe, both SA_1 and SA_2 are consistent with dispositional beliefs. For instance, with SA_1, a belief p is available to S if it is connected with her other beliefs and with SA_2, a belief p is available to S if she will come to affirm it or endorse it in a certain epistemic situation. From this showing, we see that both formulations indicate that S has already formed belief p but the dispositions available to S to bring p to consciousness are what make them different.[8] But with SA_3, the belief p is tacit and not yet formed. In SA_1 and SA_2, the belief p is already formed and awaiting to be brought to S's consciousness.

Characterising SA_1 and SA_2 this way makes sense for Klein to assume that beliefs can be subjectively available to a subject. This is because S can access her dispositional beliefs since they are subjectively available and reflectively accessible to her.[9] This granted, a sketch of the structure of Klein's infinitism can be formulated as the following: a subject, S, is justified in believing p at time t, if p is supported, at least, by one of the infinitely many and non-repeating dispositional beliefs, r, reflectively accessible to S. What this shows is that r is propositionally justified, in the sense that it is justifiable by another dispositional belief available to S which S will make occurrent if triggered by the relevant conditions as the epistemic situation might demand.

The issue about propositional justification concerns the notion of beliefs being potentially justified or being in the position of being justified. Taking SA_1 and SA_2 into consideration, we realize that the dispositional belief r upon which basis p is justified is already present or subjectively available to S. Meanwhile, r awaits S's recognition of another dispositional belief that is justified by virtue of what propositionally justifies it and so on. But there is a problem here; at time t, S can only grasp and bring to consciousness only r taking cognisance of our finite capacity as human beings. The rest of the infinitely many subjective available reasons that propositionally justifies r even

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[8] This is because, as I said earlier, with SA_1, a subject just has to employ the disposition to recall the appropriate dispositional belief while with SA_2; she only needs to confirm the presence of a dispositional belief.

[9] This view is compatible with other theories of justification such as the weak evidentialist theories that argue that a belief is justified by virtue of it being reflectively recognizable by a subject.

if they are present to S's mind as dispositional belief will be too lengthy for S to grasp or bring forth to memory in a single episode at time t. This setback seems to draw Klein back to the same finite mind objection against infinitism he purports to answer. Even if we agree with Klein that human beings are capable of possessing infinitely many dispositional beliefs, it still doesn't provide a plausible response to the worry that human beings are unable to bring forth into memory many infinite dispositional beliefs in a single episode. This is because, as Audi notes, the series of dispositional beliefs to be brought to memory will be too lengthy for a subject to grasp or decipher in a single moment.[10]

This worry leaves Klein with a dilemma. He either accepts that his theory of infinitism is a theory about the structure of activity of justifying or he endorses the view that his infinitism is a theory of structure of justification. Accepting the first horn of the dilemma offers Klein a tenable escape route out of this problem but also makes his version of infinitism a non-competitor to FJ and CJ.[11] Accepting the other horn of the dilemma solves the problem that the finite mind objection poses to Klein's infinitism but also commits his infinitism to some versions of FJ which has implication on PAA.

The first horn of the dilemma appears self-explanatory. Suppose that S's belief that p will be justified if only if S is able to bring into consciousness the reason, r, for p, then until S takes this action, p remains provisionally justified but not actually justified for S. But FJ and CJ, on the contrary, can account for actual justification in the sense that FJ assumes that basic beliefs are self-justified and can terminate the regress of justification while some versions of CJ argue that one's coherent interconnected set of beliefs provides justification for belief. Hence, while FJ and CJ concerns a belief being justified infinitism concerns the act of justifying a belief.

But the second horn of the dilemma needs a bit more explanation. Suppose that Klein accepts the second horn of the dilemma, he will avoid the worry the finite mind objection poses; that is he can assume that S's belief that p is supported by an infinitely many dispositional beliefs available to S at time t. In other words, he can argue that, since he is offering a structural solution to the regress question, S's structure of knowledge at time t is such that it is supported by an infinitely many dispositional beliefs subjectively available to S. This will mean Klein assuming that the support that exists between S's belief that p and the body of infinitely many dispositional beliefs on

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[10] See Audi (1993). p. 152

[11] FJ theories and some variants of CJ theories are theories of the structure of justification. They are meant to provide solution to the structural regress question. In other words, they provide an account of how one's body of knowledge is structured at a particular time. For instance, proponents of FJ argue that a subject's body of knowledge is structured in a way that it rests on certain foundations at a particular time. Some versions of CJ argue that one's body of knowledge rests on a coherent system of beliefs that provide a foundation for her knowledge claim at a particular time.

which it rests is a kind of existential support but not a justificatory support. A justificatory support mostly expresses the justificatory relation between a belief p and what provides justificatory support for p, say q, while an existential support is the support that exists between p and q such that p cannot exist without q. With this, Klein will able to avoid the idea of a subject being able to show in a particular moment an infinite and non-circular justificatory relation among beliefs, thus resolving the finite mind objection. This seems compatible with the definition of his version of infinitism, namely that a subject is justified in holding a belief only if such beliefs are supported by infinitely many dispositional beliefs available to the subject.

However, this will leave open the issue whether such infinitely many dispositional beliefs can be linear and non-circular. For instance, this will mean that p could be supported by [q or not q etc]. Since the foundational support provided by these infinitely many dispositional beliefs is existential and not relational, we are not able to account for the relation between each potentially justified dispositional beliefs and another.

This strategy has some implications for Klein's infinitism. Firstly, it solves the finite mind objection problem because he can argue that one does not have to bring to consciousness her infinitely many dispositional beliefs as reasons such that each reason in the series of justified reasons has another reason that justifies it *ad infinitum*. On the contrary, he can argue that one's belief, p, rests on the foundation of infinitely many dispositional beliefs thereby endorsing a kind of existential support according to which S's belief that p will not exist without the support provided by these infinitely many dispositional beliefs. Hence, the dispositional beliefs available to the subject provide a secure foundation upon whose basis S is justified in believing p. However, as we can see, this option commits Klein to a kind of FJ that renders his version of infinitism susceptible to the attacks of his own infinitist principles: PAA and PAC.

Conclusion

The lesson learnt from the above submission is that once Klein is committed to SA_1 and SA_2 as explicated above, there is no credible escape route out of this dilemma. In similar fashion, leaning on SA_3 will commit Klein to assimilationism, the notion of conflating the disposition to believe with dispositional beliefs which equally poses serious challenge to his version of infinitism. No matter which strategy Klein adopts, the problem still looms making a serious medication to his theory of infinitism very crucial.

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