INFINITISM AND AGENTS LIKE US:
REPLY TO TURRI

Joshua A. SMITH, Adam C. PODLASKOWSKI

ABSTRACT: In a recent paper, "Infinitism and Epistemic Normativity," we have problematized the relationship between infinitism and epistemic normativity. Responding to our criticisms, John Turri has offered a defense of infinitism. In this paper, we argue that Turri's defense fails, leaving infinitism vulnerable to the originally raised objections.

KEYWORDS: infinitism, regress problem, John Turri, epistemic normativity

The *regress problem* for epistemic justification has it that, since any belief is justified only if it is based on good reasons, and the beliefs serving as reasons also stand in need of justification, as do *those* beliefs serving as reasons, and so on, we face an infinite regress. According to Peter Klein's[1] infinitist response to the regress problem, the most we can hope for is provisional justification amidst an infinite, non-repeating chain of reasons for a given belief. Recently, John Turri[2] defended Klein's infinitism from two objections we raised.[3] Here, we argue that Turri's defense fails, leaving Klein's account vulnerable to the originally raised objections.

We raised two concerns for Klein's position, the first of which is an improved version of the *finite minds* objection. According to the original objection, because an agent cannot possess an infinite number of reasons, infinitism is untenable. Klein's reply is that we need not actually possess each reason in a chain of reasons; rather, each such reason need only be *available* to the agent. A reason is available to an agent so long as she has either an epistemically credible disposition to cite the reason, or possesses a second-order disposition to form a disposition to take on that reason. We deny that appealing to second-order dispositions improves Klein's position. The problem is that, in order for a reason to

---

[1] See Peter Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 297–325, and Peter Klein, "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Progress of Reasoning," *Philosophical Studies* 134 (2007): 1–17.

[2] John Turri, "Infinitism, Finitude, and Normativity," *Philosophical Studies* (2011): Accessed February 10, 2013, doi: 10.1007/s11098-011-9846-7.

[3] Adam Podlaskowski and Joshua Smith, "Infinitism and Epistemic Normativity," *Synthese* 178 (2011): 515–527.

be available to an epistemically responsible agent, she must be able to cite that reason as a step in the relevant chain of reasons. However:

> Unlike many financial transactions, each epistemic transaction (i.e., citing a reason) depends on making another one, and *that* transaction depends on making another one, and so on. One cannot make an arbitrary transaction, breaking into the sequence without having made the transactions leading up to the entry point, and expect to benefit from the justificatory work (i.e., epistemic transactions) that led to that point. Instead, each transaction depends on its place within the sequence.[4]

In order to possess the requisite second-order dispositions to form beliefs to cite as reasons – as Klein suggests – those dispositions must be sensitive to the order of *every* given reason in the pertinent chain of reasons. But because we are finite agents (with limited abilities and lifespans), we lack the requisite dispositions to attend to the particular order in which reasons occur in an infinite chain of reasons. Call this the *finite and less-than-ideally-ordered minds objection*.

Turri puts forward a defense of Klein's position from this objection. His principal reply is that, though we do not possess dispositions *to act beyond* our lifetime, we do possess dispositions that *cannot be manifested* in our lifetime. As Turri puts it:

> We don't have dispositions to act beyond our lifetime, of course, but infinitism doesn't require this. In general, one can have the disposition to do A in conditions C, even if C does not and will not obtain in one's lifetime. For instance, suppose that a cure for AIDS will not, in fact, be found until after I die. Despite that, I'm still disposed to cheer if a cure for AIDS is found. Similarly, the infinitist can say that we also have dispositions to cite the relevant reasons if we were in the relevant circumstances, even though we won't, in fact, ever be in the relevant circumstances.[5]

In way of reply to Turri, while we grant him the point that we might, in some respect, possess dispositions which contingently fail to be manifested, we also maintain that this alone will not secure the infinitist's position. To motivate our reply, consider the following example. Suppose one asks if a normal person is disposed to walk the mile from point *A* to point *B*. Since many people are fully capable of walking a mile, one might be tempted to suggest that a normal person is so disposed (even if they might never do so in their lifetime). But suppose we add to the example the information that *A* to *B* is five billion miles from here, and the

---

[4] Podlaskowski and Smith, "Infinitism and Epistemic Normativity," 521.
[5] Turri, "Infinitism, Finitude, and Normativity," 5.

person must walk all five billion miles before getting to *A*. In this case, is the person disposed to walk from *A* to *B*? It seems that a person might be disposed to do so, if she was motivated to do so, had the necessary resources available, and she had a sufficiently long lifespan to complete the task. But no *normal* person could make the hike; for a mortal like us, it is doubtful that we are disposed to achieve what is, for us, impossible.

Notice that Klein's position is even more demanding than the case of a person walking five billion miles, since the infinitist's chains of reasons are *infinitely* long. While Turri is right to point out that we might be disposed to accomplish some tasks if we were to live to such and such a time, we should have more clearly articulated our concern thusly: agents *like us* are not disposed to act in ways that are impossible for them, and citing each reason in an infinitely large series of reasons is impossible for *such agents*.

In response, the infinitist might invoke an idealization of an agent like us – e.g., one with the gift of immortality – in order to make the plausible claim that, in some sense, we possess the requisite second-order dispositions. This appears to be quite sensible, since our identifying dispositions often involves a certain degree of idealization. Still, this move leads to disaster for the infinitist. To see the problem facing the infinitist here, first recall that the regress problem is a problem for creatures *like us*: the problem arises for creatures with *finite* epistemic resources (such as processing power, memory, ingenuity, and time) who are epistemically responsible. Were we in possession of infinite epistemic resources, we would face no such problem. But infinitism, with its emphasis on provisional justification, is intended as a solution to a problem that *we* face. As such, the infinitist cannot help himself to idealizations where epistemic agents are no longer finite without eliminating altogether the need for provisional justification. Even if it is conceded to Turri that the infinitist may idealize away from the fact that we have long histories of giving up on tasks, idealizing away from one's finite nature is not similarly permissible. So though we grant that the infinitist is allowed *some* idealizations, we maintain that not *all* idealizations are permissible.[6]

Even if we are right to deny the infinitist the appeal to idealizations, this might still appear to create a problem for another one of our objections to

---

[6] Compare Gail Stine's claim that she is, "in principle suspicious of all principles of epistemic logic on the general grounds that while the logic of a knower who is in some way simplified and idealized may be useful for limited purposes, what we are ultimately interested in are actual knowers who can be pretty obtuse and idiosyncratic, yet still lay claim to knowledge." Gail C. Stine "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure," *Philosophical Studies* 29 (1976): 250.

infinitism. According to our other major objection, the *normativity objection*, a necessary condition on it being the case that one ought to justify beliefs is that one can, *in principle*, do so; but we cannot justify beliefs, given the finite and less-than-ideally-ordered-minds objection. So we ought not justify beliefs – we are left epistemically blameless. But as Turri points out, we appeal to what one can do *in principle* in the first premise of the normativity objection. At first glance, this seems to allow that one could, for instance, live forever, or supertask.

Our appeal to what a finite agent can do in *principle* should have been given a clearer formulation. Not all idealizations are unhelpful in this discussion, as we suggested above. All we meant to ward off by the qualifier 'in principle' are things like momentary lapses of memory, reason, etc. Idealizing in that way is a far cry from idealizing to the infinite lifespan, processing power, memory, or other things suggested above. Moreover, we submit that the idealizations employed in the service of the normativity objection (if there are any) are also a far cry from what the infinitist needs.

By way of illustrating the difficulty the infinitist faces, we would like to call attention to another point of disagreement with Turri. In response to an objection he credits to Stewart Cohen, Turri suggests that:

> I'm disposed to say 'one thousand and one' if I'm counting by ones and I had just said 'one thousand'. The same seems true for any arbitrarily large finite natural number n: I'm disposed to say '$n + 1$' if I'm counting by ones and I had just said 'n'.[7]

This sounds quite plausible for the small numbers Turri actually mentions. But consider a number in the neighborhood of $1 \times 10^{6000000000000}$. When counting in that neighborhood, do we *really* have the disposition to cite the next number? Do we have the processing power to even keep the whole number in mind, much less get it right? We're dubious of that. While we agree with Turri over what is probably a large range of dispositions, we disagree that we have the relevant dispositions for "any arbitrarily large finite natural number." This example, by analogy, illustrates quite nicely the kinds of dispositions the infinitist requires of us with respect to reasons, but that we most likely lack.

Having clarified the role of idealization in discussions of infinitism, we maintain that our original criticisms stand.

---

[7] Turri, "Infinitism, Finitude, and Normativity," 5.