

Scott Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem*

(New York, London: Routledge, 2010)

Reviewed by Eugen Huzum*

Definitely, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* deserves a special and close attention, at least from those interested in topics such as epistemic justification, argumentation, rationality, and the like. The book has at least five qualities that recommend such attention.

First: *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* is very intriguing, challenging and thought provoking (even for experienced and well-trained professional philosophers). This is because, although it offers other things too, the book is, above all, a (very good, careful and ingenious) defense of epistemic infinitism. But, as Aikin himself highlights, infinitism – which is, essentially, the view that epistemic justification requires an infinite chain of reasons (or, in other words, the view that, in order to have a justified belief, we must have an infinite series of nonrepeating, supporting reasons) – is a strongly counterintuitive view, being considered ‘obviously false,’ ‘patently absurd’ or even ‘crazy’ by almost anyone, philosophers (foundationalists, coherentists, contextualists or foundherentists) included. In addition, for the overwhelming majority of contemporary or past epistemologists, infinitism is also a ‘dangerous’ doctrine, because of its supposedly inevitable skeptical implications about epistemic justification (and, if we accept that justification is a necessary condition for knowledge, about human knowledge too).

Being a defender of infinitism, Aikin, of course, disagrees. In his (again, to my mind, well argued) opinion, on close reflection, infinitism (or, more exactly, a particular version of infinitism) proves to be the correct view of epistemic justification (or at least a view that is not at all so implausible as it appears *prima facie*). Yes, Aikin recognizes, infinitism may entail skepticism. But this is not a decisive argument against it. The fact that infinitism may entail skepticism does not prove that infinitism is a false view about the requirements for epistemic justification and knowledge. Skepticism or epistemic pessimism may be, after all, the correct view about the possibility of human knowledge and epistemic justification.

* ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: This paper was made within *The Knowledge Based Society Project* supported by the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), Financed by the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract POSDRU/89/1.5/S/56815.

Second: thanks to its author's writing style – which is very clear, precise, friendly, not excessively technical and often humorous – *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* is not only a provocative, but also a very pleasant and enjoyable reading. This feature makes me strongly recommend the book not only to professional epistemologists, but also to students or even to those for whom philosophy/epistemology is only a collateral concern or simply a hobby.

Third: the book offers a very interesting and, to my knowledge, a quite new interpretation or 'redescription' of its main topic: the so-called problem (or, as it is often considered, the 'danger') of the infinite regress of epistemic justification/argumentation. As interpreted by Aikin (pp. 22-32), the regress problem is a paradox. The paradox is constituted, *in extenso*, by the tension/contradiction between: 1) the principle of inferential justification ("If S is justified in holding p, then there is some q that S is justified in holding, and q supports p for S"), 2) the principle of transitivity of inferential support ("If S's commitment to p is supported by S's commitment to q and S's commitment to q is supported by S's commitment to s, the S's commitment to p is supported by S's commitment to s"), 3) the principle of asymmetry of inferential support ("In order for S to be justified in holding that p, even if p and another of S's commitments, q, are mutually supporting, p must have independent support from some other commitment, r, that S is justified in holding"), which taken together imply infinitism as a requirement of epistemic justification, and 4) the principle of finitism ("If S is justified in holding that p, then S's chain of supporting reasons, C, for p is finite"). As Aikin summarizes his point, "the core of the regress problem is that it seems that supporting reasons need to come in infinite chains, but there cannot be any such chains." (p. 34)

Fourth: As its author also highlights, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* is the first book-length defense of epistemic infinitism as a solution to the infinite regress problem (the solution being, obviously, that of arguing that the principle of finitism is false). More importantly, the book is the most 'updated' and complete defense of epistemic infinitism. All major anti-infinitist arguments find a rejoinder here (pp. 50-71). At the same time, the book defends with great depth all fundamental premises and commitments that lead to infinitism: 'epistemic aspirationalism,' responsibilism and evidentialism, 'anti-populism' in knowledge/justification-attribution, 'doxastic ascent' or 'meta-justification' (pp. 3-49), and, above all, antidogmatism (pp. 158-179).

Fifth: Aikin's theory of epistemic justification is a new version of infinitism. In other words, his infinitism is different from that of Charles Sanders Peirce, Peter Klein or Jeremy Fantl. As Aikin calls it, his theory is a "*strong*,

impure, synchronic, emergent infinitism.” (p. 79, Aikin’s emphasis.) It is ‘strong’ because it holds that infinitely extended chains of inference are necessary for any justification tree, it is ‘impure’ because it allows more sources or forms of epistemic support than infinitely extended chains of inference (accepting and defending, for example, the foundationalist idea that ‘basic’ or independent reasons are also necessary components for a justificatory story), it is ‘synchronic’ because it says that a subject S is justified in holding a belief p at a time t, if S has an infinitely long supporting chain of reasons for p at t, and finally, it is ‘emergent’ because it holds that the support provided for a belief by the infinite series of reasons *emerges from* the fact that the commitment belongs to the series, not that it is *transmitted through* the infinite series. The main feature that distinguishes Aikin’s infinitism is its impurity/consistency with foundationalism. This is also the most important feature of his theory, since, as Aikin shows (pp. 102-111), it is a feature which helps him to solve one of the most powerful arguments against infinitism: the ‘*modus ponens reductio*’ of it (the argument that on the infinitist theory of epistemic justification, we have no rational way of telling the difference between one justifying set of beliefs that is conducive of truth and one that is not).

I am convinced that, if it will receive the attention it deserves, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* will have a significant impact in the theory of epistemic justification/rationality. Of course, I do not expect it to convince all epistemologists (or at least most of them) that “strong, impure, synchronic, emergent infinitism” is indeed the best theory about the structure of epistemic justification/rationality. Such an expectation is undoubtedly unrealistic (due to the highly divergent deep presuppositions, convictions and commitments of the philosophers who are striving to provide a theory of epistemic justification). But I believe that the book will have at least two important effects. The first is that, due to the high standards of its argumentation, it will further improve the image of infinitism, at least among professional epistemologists. Actually, to improve the prospects of infinitism and to show that it deserves at least a place at the table in philosophical discussions of epistemic justification is the main objective of its author. The second – and, perhaps, more important – effect of the book will be that of enhancing the philosophical debates on its main topic, since it will compel those epistemologists who will remain unconvinced by Aikin’s arguments to revise, improve, refine or even renew their arguments against infinitism and for alternative theories of epistemic justification/rationality.