

**A “Veritable Jekyll and Hyde”  
Epistemic Circularity and Reliabilist Theories of Justification**

Claudio D’Amato

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
Philosophy

Joseph C. Pitt (Chair)  
Walter R. Ott  
Lydia K. Patton

April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2011  
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: epistemology, circular reasoning, justification, externalism, internalism

**A “Veritable Jekyll and Hyde”  
Epistemic Circularity and Reliabilist Theories of Justification**

Claudio D’Amato

ABSTRACT

In philosophical theories of knowledge (epistemology), *justification* is a desirable property that one’s beliefs ought to have before they can be accepted as part of a rational discourse. Roughly, for internalists about justification, a belief is justified if *the subject* has or has available to him good reasons to believe it; while for externalists a belief is justified if *there exist* good reasons to believe it, regardless of whether the subject actually has or has access to those reasons. One such externalist view of justification is *reliabilism*, the position that a belief is justified if it has been produced by a properly functioning belief-forming mechanism (BFM). Some examples of BFMs available to human beings are sense perception, memory, and deduction.

Epistemic circularity is a notorious problem for reliabilism. If a belief is only justified if it was produced reliably by a certain BFM, how can I ever know for sure *that* a certain BFM is itself reliable? For instance, take the meta-belief that “sense perception is a reliable BFM.” This belief is produced, at least in part, through sense perception itself, for example by analyzing the track record of my past sense perceptions and finding it to be in good order. But if a BFM is thus allowed to vouch for its own trustworthiness, then we have no way to discriminate between reliable and unreliable BFMs. After all, when trying to ascertain if a suspect in a murder case is sincere, it is quite irresponsible to ask the suspect himself. Thus, internalist critics complain, reliabilism is plagued by epistemic circularity and loses sight of the normative goal of epistemology.

Reliabilist responses to this serious charge have been of two kinds: (1) to show that epistemically circular arguments *can* be justificatory, and thus that BFMs *can* vouch for their own reliability; or (2) to concede that epistemically circular arguments *cannot* be justificatory, but then to also insist that *some* higher-level circularity must be allowed in one’s justificatory practices, or no beliefs at all can ever be justified. Here I argue that the first strategy fails and the second succeeds. Internalists are correct that epistemically circular arguments cannot be justificatory in the way that some reliabilists expect them to be, but they are incorrect that *all* circularity must be banished before our justificatory practices can be virtuous. To always allow circularity makes knowledge reprehensibly easy, but to never let it in at all is a kind of epistemic suicide.

## *Acknowledgments*

---

To Dad, who would have read it and spent days debating every word with me.

To Mom, who will read it, understand nothing, and still agree with it all.

Abbreviations	v
Definitions	vii
Introduction	ix
<b>Chapter I: Against epistemic circularity</b>	
<b>I.1</b> <i>Epistemic circularity and the indiscrimination problem</i>	1
<b>I.2</b> <i>Skeptical demands and the indiscrimination problem</i>	6
<b>I.3</b> <i>Bootstrapping and counterfactual reliabilism</i>	8
<b>Chapter II: In defense of epistemic circularity</b>	
<b>II.1</b> <i>Justificatory epistemically circular track-record arguments</i>	13
<b>II.2</b> <i>Questioned and unquestioned source contexts</i>	22
<b>II.3</b> <i>Two tentative solutions</i>	26
<b>Chapter III: Solutions to epistemic circularity</b>	
<b>III.1</b> <i>Van Cleve's dilemma and possible solutions</i>	29
<b>III.2</b> <i>Coherentist and "contextualist" solutions (S1 and S3)</i>	33
<b>III.3</b> <i>Foundationalist solutions (S2)</i>	37
<b>III.4</b> <i>Noncircular solutions (S4)</i>	39
<b>III.5</b> <i>"Agnostic" solutions (S5)</i>	45
<b>III.6</b> <i>Arguing "in the best circles"</i>	45
<b>III.7</b> <i>Actual reliability</i>	50
Bibliography	54

- BFM Belief-forming mechanism.
- C1a Epistemically circular track-record arguments can justify my S-reliability belief if I have good, noncircular reason to affirm S-reliability.
- C1b Epistemically circular track-record arguments can justify my S-reliability belief if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability.
- EC Epistemic circularity (ECTRA = epistemically circular track-record argument).
- I-a S-beliefs from source S are unjustified if I have good reason to suspect S-unreliability.
- I-b S-beliefs from source S are justified if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability.
- II-a S-beliefs from source S are justified if I have an S-reliability belief.
- II-b S-beliefs from source S are justified even if I don't have an S-reliability belief.
- IP If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFMs from unreliable ones.  
*(Indiscrimination problem)*
- IP\* If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability, and so *even if a BFM were unreliable we would still continue to believe that it is reliable*. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable from unreliable BFMs.  
*(Counterfactual indiscrimination problem)*
- |      |  |   |  |
|------|--|---|--|
| K1a. | I lack an S-reliability belief                       | } | <i>Epistemic situation K1 with regard to doubts about the reliability of source S.</i> |
| K1b. | I <u>have</u> good reason to suspect S-unreliability |   |  |
| K2a. | I lack an S-reliability belief                       | } | <i>Epistemic situation K2 with regard to doubts about the reliability of source S.</i> |
| K2b. | I <u>lack</u> good reason to suspect S-unreliability |   |  |
- KR A knowledge source S can yield knowledge only if we know that S is reliable.  
*(Cohen's KR principle)*
- |     |  |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|
| KR1 | We can know that S-beliefs are true only if we first know S is reliable. | } | <i>Van Cleve thinks KR entails these.</i> |
| KR2 | We can know S is reliable only if we first know that S-beliefs are true. |   |   |
- NSS One cannot obtain a justified belief that a belief source S is trustworthy by relying even in part on source S. *(Bergmann's No Self-Support principle)*
- SP Sense perception.

***Solutions to the problem of epistemic circularity:***

- S1 Coherentism avoids EC by making justification appear "all at once" in a system of knowledge rather than progressively through bootstrapping.

- S2 Foundationalism avoids EC by resting our S-reliability belief not on S itself, but on non-inferential processes.
- S3 Contextualism avoids EC by distinguishing two levels of knowledge and allowing EC only at the higher level.
- S3\* EC is allowed when the subject has responsibly employed *all* of the BFMs at her disposal and has run out of sources of independent verification.
- S4 EC is allowed but only after we've established S-reliability noncircularly (C1a).
- S5 EC is allowed but only if we never had doubts about S-reliability (C1b).

By a “belief” I mean a mental content or propositional attitude associated with a proposition.  $P$  is the belief that  $p$ , where  $p$  is any proposition whatever. Two kinds of belief are interesting to discussions of epistemic circularity. One is belief *simpliciter*, a mental content associated with empirical or analytic propositions. Say,  $A$  is the belief that  $a$ , where  $a$  is a proposition like “the sky is blue” or “I exist.” The second and more important kind is a *reliability belief*. A reliability belief is a belief whose associated proposition concerns the reliability of the cognitive faculty that produced that belief. For example, belief-source  $S$  has produced  $B$ , which is the belief that  $b$ , where  $b$  is the proposition that source  $S$  is reliable.  $B$  is thus an  $S$ -reliability belief. The only relevant difference between  $A$  and  $B$  is that belief  $B$  “turns around” and says something about its own origin, whereas belief  $A$  doesn’t. The key aspect of the debate between reliabilists and their critics is whether reliabilism can justify  $B$ -beliefs in addition to  $A$ -beliefs and whether the arguments that justify either can be allowed to be epistemically circular.

Important epistemic concepts such as reliability, justification, and of course circularity itself are more controversial and I will discuss them as the need arises. One lexical note is in order, though, on *belief sources* in general. A belief source is whatever mechanism or process produces a belief, regardless of whether the belief is of the  $A$  or the  $B$  sort. For human beings, beliefs are produced by certain anatomical structures and their physiology. Each of our five senses is a belief source, as are processes made possible by our higher brain functions, such as memory, induction, and deduction. The authors that I discuss variably refer to these mechanisms and processes as belief sources, cognitive faculties, doxastic practices, and epistemic practices. I will consider these terms interchangeable, except when noted. The default term that I will use, since it has found some favor in recent literature, is *belief-forming mechanisms*, or BFM for short.

William Alston first introduced the term “epistemic circularity” in the eponymous 1986 paper. He discusses a simple form of reliabilism according to which a belief is justified iff it was produced by a reliable belief-forming mechanism (BFM), i.e., a belief source such as memory or sense perception whose deliverances are by and large true.<sup>1</sup> But what reasons can we acquire to justify the higher-level belief *that* a particular BFM is reliable? Alston thinks that the prospects of acquiring such reasons are dim: “the chief source of pessimism concerning these prospects ... is a kind of circularity, ‘epistemic circularity,’ into which we frequently fall when we set out to adduce reasons for the reliability of a belief source” (5). The problem is that whenever we try to justify the higher-level belief that X is reliable we must use belief-source X, at least in part, and at least if X is a sufficiently basic belief-source that can’t but be used to some extent, like memory or sense perception.

I will argue that while epistemic circularity is not the fatal problem for reliabilist theories of justification that some critics say it is, it is also not nearly as unproblematic as some reliabilists have proposed. Alston rightfully describes it as “a veritable Jekyll and Hyde”: just as we’re about to apprehend it in the act of a heinous crime, it transforms into a law-abiding citizen. This is the view I will defend. Even if it seems possible to construct epistemically circular arguments that afford justification to both their premises and their conclusions, it comes at the price of endorsing a concept of epistemic justification that’s only marginally philosophically interesting. It is much more tenable, and still philosophically interesting, to accept that epistemically circular arguments will only be justificatory at a higher level of justification, when we have run out of sources of independent verification and we can’t but reason in a circle.

The first chapter briefly summarizes Alston’s seminal 1986 paper “Epistemic Circularity,” which started the contemporary debate, and critical responses by Richard Fumerton and Jonathan Vogel. The second chapter examines two reliabilist responses by Frederick Schmitt and Michael Bergmann and finds them both inadequate. In the third and final chapter I use discussion by James Van Cleve and Stewart Cohen to identify possible solutions to the problem, and then I single out Matthias Steup’s brand of coherentism (which is also endorsed by the early Ernest Sosa) as the most promising.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alston and most reliabilists understand “truth” as simple correspondence, and I won’t debate that.



## Chapter I

### Against epistemic circularity

~\*~

Alston calls a *track-record argument* an inductive inference from the truth of individual beliefs to a belief in the reliability of the source that produced those beliefs. That is, if belief-source X has delivered true beliefs time and time again, then I can conclude by induction that X is reliable. But since the premises of this induction are delivered (at least in part) by X itself, these track-record inferences are necessarily epistemically circular. However, says Alston, this fact should not worry reliabilists: so long as the BFM whose reliability is in question really is reliable, it is fine to use an epistemically circular (EC) track-record argument to show that it is. But Richard Fumerton and Jonathan Vogel object, for if Alston is right, then reliabilists are endorsing a philosophically uninteresting concept of epistemic justification: we should concern ourselves with *whether* our BFMs are reliable and it's unsatisfactory to claim that *if* they are reliable *then* we can justify a belief in their reliability. In this chapter I will first present Alston's argument and then his critics' responses.

~\*~

#### *1.1 Epistemic circularity and the indiscrimination problem*

---

According to Alston, the “simplest way of supporting a reliability thesis” is to “point to a record of success” of the BFM in question, an inductive track-record argument (5). If the BFM is a sufficiently basic one, such as memory or sense perception (SP), then the track-record argument will be obviously circular, for at some point one will have to use beliefs derived from that very BFM whose reliability is at stake. In Alston's words, this kind of argument “will involve a reliance on sense perception to obtain some of its premises,” a procedure which is undoubtedly circular (6). For example, consider this simple induction:

(P1) At  $t_1$ , S believed that p on the basis of SP, and it was the case that p.

(P2) At  $t_2$ , S believed that q on the basis of SP, and it was the case that q.

. . . etc . . .

(C) Therefore, SP is a generally reliable BFM (it generally delivers true beliefs).

Alston thinks that this argument is circular because the inference from P1 and P2 to C could not happen without the further implicit premise

(P3) Beliefs derived from sense perception are generally true;

and P3 expresses the same proposition as the conclusion C.

Why must P3 be present for the argument to work? Because

if I were to ask myself why I should suppose that my premises [P1-P2] are true, or why I should consider myself entitled to assert them, I would have to reply that it is because of the reliability of sense perception [P3] . . . It is only by taking sense perception to be reliable that I can regard it as reasonable to believe that there is a tree in front of me when there visually appears to me to be a tree in front of me. (9)

That is to say, the clause “and it was the case that” in premises P1 and P2 can only be justified by already assuming the conclusion that my SP is in fact reliable, that what my SP tells me matches with what is in fact the case “out there” in the world (again, we are working with a correspondence theory of truth). Were it not for this assumption, P1 and P2 couldn’t provide C with sufficient justification or warrant and the argument would not succeed. Therefore, Alston concludes, if the BFM in question is basic enough, any track-record argument to justify the belief in its reliability will sooner or later have to use the very BFM whose reliability it is supposed to establish, because we have no other way to gain information about the past success of that BFM if not through itself, even partly: sensory beliefs will have to use sense perception at some point, memory beliefs memory, etc.

This still does not mean that we *explicitly* accept premise P3 (or conclusion C) before we come to justifiably believe P1-P2. Perhaps we accept P3 only *implicitly*: “when I form perceptual beliefs I ‘practically’ assume something like [P3], assume it ‘in practice.’ In confidently forming perceptual beliefs in accordance with [P3], I proceed as if [P3] is true. I manifest an acceptance of it in my practice” (9). But the argument is still circular, because again “if my premises were challenged I would have to appeal to the reliability of sense perception to answer the challenge” (9). From this reasoning, Alston draws the following:

What all this comes down to is that in using or taking this argument to establish [the conclusion] one is already, implicitly or explicitly, taking [the conclusion] to be true. In this

way we might say that the argument “presupposes” the truth of the conclusion, although the conclusion does not itself appear among the premises. Note that the necessity of this presupposition does not stem from the logical form of the argument, or from the meaning of the premises. It is not a syntactical or a semantic presupposition. It stems rather from our epistemic situation as human beings. Beings of another sort might have some nonsensory way of ascertaining these premises, but we do not. Thus the presupposition falls into the large basket called “pragmatic.” More specifically, we might call it an “epistemic” presupposition, since it depends on our epistemic situation *vis-a-vis* singular propositions concerning middle-sized physical objects in one’s immediate environment. In parallel fashion we might term the kind of circularity involved “epistemic circularity.” (10; my underlining)

So arguments like the one above aren’t logically circular because the conclusion doesn’t already explicitly figure among the premises. Rather, it is epistemically presupposed, by which Alston means that at some point we can’t but suppose that it is true, since we have no source of information that doesn’t rely in some way or another on the BFM whose reliability is at issue. Notice that this isn’t because of our condition *as human beings*, but because of our condition as *cognizers*: all cognizers, be they human or not, are necessarily forced to use their BFMs to form beliefs. We, as humans, are necessarily limited to using *our* BFMs, while nonhuman cognizers may use BFMs that aren’t available to us (echolocation for bats, telepathy for certain fantastical creatures, etc). In a way, Alston’s claim that “beings of another sort might have some nonsensory way of ascertaining these premises” is misleading, for even those other ways will still count as BFMs and will still be subject to the same problem. So, in all cases, it follows that epistemic circularity is an inevitable predicament for inductive track-record arguments of this sort.

To summarize, in the first half of his paper Alston makes the following claims: (1) any track-record argument to establish the reliability of a basic BFM will be circular; and (2) this circularity is of the epistemic and not the logical kind because even though the argument’s conclusion is needed to justifiably believe its premises, it is merely practically assumed and does not already figure explicitly among its premises. An obvious observation at this point is the following: how does justification “enter” the picture in the first place? What justifies what and how? Alston dedicates much of the rest of his paper to discussing this problem.

The problem can be stated as follows. The argument above is epistemically circular because my justified belief in its conclusion (that SP is reliable) derives its justification from my justified belief in the premises (P1 and P2), but I can only come to have justified belief in the premises if I already subscribe to the conclusion. However, this “subscribing” to the conclusion doesn’t mean that I must have a *justified belief* in it before I can have a justified belief in the

premises—it's sufficient that I practically assume it, that I make use of it, that I reason *as if* it were true. This is what Alston means when he says that I don't have to believe the conclusion explicitly (and let alone justifiably so) but merely "assume it in my practice." But since my belief in the conclusion doesn't have to be justified, and thus the conclusion cannot transfer its justification to the premises, how *are* the premises justified at all? Alston's discussion of this point is cryptic:

There is a way out of this quandary provided something like the following principle of justification for perceptual beliefs is acceptable. [P4:] If one believes that *p* on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that *p*, that one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that *p*. (12; my underlining)

That is, for a perceptual belief to be justified, it's sufficient for it to "stem from one's sensory experience in a certain way, given the *absence* of sufficient overriding reasons. It is *not* required that one also be *justified* in accepting [P4], or some correlated reliability principle like [P3]" (12). The emphasis on "no overriding reasons" is important. So long as my belief that *p* is undefeated, I am justified in believing that *p*. I will say much more about this in the next chapter, but we should already wonder whether Alston is talking about epistemic circularity anymore. If the premises of the argument derive their justification "directly," merely from the fact that I have an undefeated sensory belief, then in which sense can we still call this an epistemically circular argument? Where's the circularity if the conclusion doesn't need to be justifiably believed for the premises to be justified? Yes, it's still true that I need to accept something like P3 to legitimate my inference from P1-P2 to C, but the argument is no longer circular as concerns the *justification* of its premises and conclusion, for the conclusion no longer does any *justifying* work.

To conclude, Alston doesn't think there's anything wrong with using this kind of epistemically circular argument to prove the reliability of a BFM. If said faculty is actually reliable, there's no reason why this argument should not work: all of its premises and conclusions would be true and the argument would be sound. However, Alston himself acknowledges that it's no longer sufficient if we want to find out *whether* the faculty is reliable. In his 1993 book *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, he puts the problem more clearly:

the argument will not do its job unless we are justified in accepting its premises; and that is the case only if sense perception is in fact reliable. And this is to offer a stone instead of bread. We can say the same of any belief-forming practice whatever, no matter how disreputable. We can just as well say of crystal-ball gazing that if it is reliable, we can use a track record argument to show that it is reliable. But when we ask whether one or

another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in discriminating those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that if a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable, does nothing to indicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats. (148; my underlining)

I will refer to this as the *indiscrimination problem*. It's probably true that if a faculty is reliable we can produce an epistemically circular track-record argument to show that it is, but that's trivially true and rather uninformative. Perhaps epistemologists ought to tell us what our epistemic situation *is*, not what it would be if such and such obtained. This is what Alston means by "to offer a stone instead of bread" and "belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats." Fumerton will offer a similar critique, which I discuss in the next section.

For now, let's formulate the indiscrimination problem more formally:

IP     If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFMs from unreliable ones.

Or, put slightly differently:

IP\*    If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability, and so *even if a BFM were unreliable we would still continue to believe that it is reliable*. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFMs from unreliable ones.

The counterfactual formulation IP\* strikes at the core of the internalist gripe with epistemically circular justification. If we, as epistemologists, are interested in learning about the trustworthiness of our belief sources, we will use certain arguments that show their reliability as *evidence* that these sources are reliable. But if source S is allowed to vouch for its own reliability via argument A, where A is an epistemically circular track-record argument, then A is the wrong evidence to use to establish that S is reliable. It is the wrong evidence because if S were unreliable, then argument A, having been produced by an unreliable source, would be fallacious (or, if it were sound, it would be by accident, hardly the epitome of epistemic virtue). As such, it would not alert us that S is unreliable and we would erroneously believe that S is reliable instead. We would believe it either because we initially assumed that S is reliable and now A is confirming that assumption; or because we initially withheld judgment as to whether S is reliable and now A is convincing us that it is; or even because we initially suspected that S may have been unreliable

and now A is convincing us of the contrary.<sup>2</sup> However you slice it, the problem with A is that it doesn't "track" the reliability of the BFM that produced it; it's blind to it.

With the indiscrimination problem thus understood, I now turn to two critical discussions of it. Both authors—Fumerton and Vogel—agree with the counterfactual formulation of the problem and that the problem is crippling for reliabilism.

## *1.2 Skeptical demands and the indiscrimination problem*

---

Richard Fumerton discusses the indiscrimination problem in the chapter "Externalism and Skepticism" of his 1995 book *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. He complains that reliabilists are unduly confident that our cognitive faculties are by and large reliable: "the skeptic can argue we have no reason to believe that [belief-forming] processes *are* reliable, and thus, even if we accept reliabilism, we have no reason to conclude that the beliefs they produce are justified" (174). This problem stems from the fact that reliabilism is an externalist theory. On externalism (about justification specifically) I am justified in believing that *p* even if I don't also believe the reasons that constitute the basis for my belief that *p*. I needn't even have in-principle access to those reasons. All I need is that *p* be in fact true, together with some other condition that assures me that I do have good reason to believe that *p*. On reliabilism, for example, that condition is that *p* be also reliably produced. Likewise, I need not believe the reasons why I believe that a BFM is reliable: it's sufficient that the BFM be in fact reliable and that my belief that it's reliable be itself reliably produced (in part, perhaps, by the BFM itself).

But, Fumerton complains, this is obviously insufficient:

All of this will, of course, drive the skeptic crazy. You cannot *use* perception to justify the reliability of perception! You cannot *use* memory to justify the reliability of memory! You cannot *use* induction to justify the reliability of induction! Such attempts to respond to the skeptic's concerns involve blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity. Frankly, this seems right to *me* and I hope it seems right to *you*, but *if* it does, then I suggest that you have a powerful reason to conclude that externalism is false. (177)

Why does it "seem right" to Fumerton?

---

<sup>2</sup> There are of course significant differences among these. See chapter II, sections 2 and 3 for a thorough discussion.

the very ease with which externalists can deal with the skeptical challenge at the next level betrays the ultimate implausibility of externalism as an attempt to explicate concepts that are of *philosophical interest*. If a philosopher starts wondering about the reliability of astrological inference, the philosopher will not allow the astrologer to read in the stars the reliability of astrology. Even if astrological inferences happen to be reliable, the astrologer is missing the point of a *philosophical* inquiry... (177; my underlining)

This, then, is Fumerton's main complaint: to allow EC track-record arguments to produce justified reliability beliefs is to miss the point of philosophical inquiries. Return to the counterfactual formulation of the indiscrimination problem that we stipulated in the previous section. The reason that we should not allow the astrologer to use astrology to tell us about astrology's reliability is that if astrology were unreliable, then an astrological argument would be the wrong kind of evidence to adduce in justifying a belief in its reliability. We can't *show* reliability by already assuming reliability.

It may seem that Fumerton and the reliabilist are talking past each other when Fumerton insists that "even if" astrology is reliable, it doesn't matter; and in the next paragraph he insists that if he had doubts about perception, he "would not dream of using perception to resolve my doubt" (177). We may well imagine the reliabilist replying: "And why not, if perception is reliable?" To which Fumerton may say: "Because that's not the point; that's just not what we're really doing here." Taking the reliabilist's side for a moment, I might ask why Fumerton but not the reliabilist is entitled to decide what we're really doing: when he "would not dream" to use perception to justify its own reliability of perception, he's being obtusely obstinate and refusing to grasp that which lies legitimately within his reach. Taking Fumerton's side instead, I might ask why the reliabilist settles for so little and doesn't shoot for the stars: even if she is correct that if our BFMs are working fine we can use them to show that they are working fine, that's a conditional conclusion that proves nothing about how things really are, about our actual, current, real epistemic status. The reliabilist, says Fumerton, is happy fighting windmills; Fumerton, says the reliabilist, stomps his feet and refuses to fight.

To conclude his discussion, Fumerton takes up Alston's 1993 argument. He notes that Alston rejects both "the idea that one needs access to the adequacy of one's grounds for believing that *P* in order to be justified in believing that *P*," for that would lead to vicious regress; and also "the idea that one can use a 'track record' argument" to do the same thing, for that would lead to vicious circularity (178-9). Then what's Alston's point?

He obviously thinks that in some sense all we could ever really conclude is that we *might* have justification for thinking that we have justified beliefs [...] But what “might” is this? Clearly, it is intended to refer to *epistemic* possibility. [...] But this claim about epistemic possibility is precisely the claim that Alston, as an externalist, has no business making. [...] As an externalist he has no reason to deny that we can and do discriminate between reliable and unreliable processes, [and] the concept of epistemic possibility he wants to apply at the second level is not one that can be understood within the framework of the externalism he embraces. (179)

Alston “has no business making” the epistemic possibility claim because his reliabilism is vulnerable to the indiscriminability problem. Of all people who could make the claim that if a BFM is reliable we can use an EC track-record argument to show that it is, the person who acknowledges the indiscriminability problem is the very last one who’s entitled to make it! Fumerton concludes that Alston has failed to give us a philosophically interesting understanding of epistemic justification. Alston’s acknowledgment of the indiscriminability problem is evidence for that claim: “The epistemic concept of discrimination that Alston invokes [...] is precisely the concept that is at odds with his own attempt to defend an externalist understanding of epistemic concepts” (179). Thus, Fumerton concludes, no philosophically interesting concept of justification allows us to use epistemically circular reasoning; and if so, then “the externalist has failed to analyze a philosophically interesting concept of justification and knowledge” (180).

### *1.3 Bootstrapping and counterfactual reliabilism*

---

Jonathan Vogel and Stewart Cohen both argue, like Fumerton, that EC track-record arguments are illegitimate procedures to acquire knowledge. Vogel (2000) calls this problem *bootstrapping*; Cohen (2002) calls it the problem of *easy knowledge*. Both terms are synonymous with what Alston and Fumerton mean by epistemic circularity; see Lammenranta (2009). I will discuss Vogel here and leave Cohen for the third chapter, since his discussion is far broader than simply bootstrapping and will be useful in identifying possible solutions to the problem.

As for bootstrapping, Vogel discusses the gas gauge example borrowed from Michael Williams. A driver, Roxanne, looks at her car’s gas gauge often and each time takes note of its state. When the gauge reads “F,” she believes that the tank is full and has a belief of the form



(B<sub>1</sub>) *At time t, it is the case that F.*

At the same time, she also holds a belief about what the gauge reads, which is a different belief:

(B<sub>2</sub>) *At time t, the gauge reads F.*

She then combines her belief about the state of the gauge with her belief about the state of the gas tank about which the gauge is an indicator. This combined belief has the following form:

(B<sub>3</sub>) *At time t, the gauge reads F, and it's the case that F.*

Beliefs like B<sub>3</sub> are repeated as Roxanne checks her gauge time and time again. Each time she forms one of those beliefs, Roxanne also forms the following reliability belief:

(R<sub>1</sub>) *At time t, the gauge is reading accurately.*

And when enough such reliability beliefs have taken place, Roxanne concludes by induction:

(R<sub>2</sub>) *The gauge reads accurately all the time,*

and thus, still by induction:

(R<sub>3</sub>) *The gauge is reliable.*

All these inferences are legitimate, since Roxanne is using BFMs, such as induction, whose reliability is currently irrelevant (and Vogel agrees that Roxanne isn't to blame for using them; I'll discuss in the third chapter whether or not he's right in doing so). What is the problem with this procedure? Vogel says:

This extraordinary procedure, which I shall call *bootstrapping*, seems to allow one to promote many, if not all, of one's beliefs that were formed by reliable processes into knowledge that those beliefs were formed by reliable processes. I assume that bootstrapping is illegitimate. Roxanne cannot establish that her gas gauge is reliable by the peculiar reasoning I have just described. (614-5; my underlining)

Which is to say, Roxanne cannot establish that her gauge is reliable by appealing only to the gauge itself. She never does anything to independently verify its reliability, such as using a dipstick to check that the tank really is full when the gauge reads F. She does behave somewhat epistemically responsibly when she takes note of the gauge's readings and connects the correspondent beliefs with beliefs about the state of the tank (in Williams' original example, the driver

didn't even do that), but that's about it. The problem, of course, is that Roxanne really shouldn't be forming the first belief  $B_1$  that just because the gauge reads F it is in fact the case that the tank is full. All that she's justified in believing at that point is that the gauge reads F, again assuming for sake of argument that her sense perception is reliable. She has no way to know whether the readings of the gauge reliably "track" the state of the tank. One might think that this critique is unfair to the reliabilist; after all, aren't we assuming that the gas gauge is in fact a reliable BFM? But that's exactly what makes Fumerton fume: the reliabilist can at most make the conditional statement that *if* a BFM is reliable, then its user is justified in believing its deliverances, and that is philosophically uninteresting. Vogel's bootstrapping problem presents a like challenge (the indiscrimination problem) to epistemically circular track-record arguments and will meet a like response from internalist critics. To be sure, Vogel acknowledges that "Richard Fumerton independently arrived at a somewhat similar point [in] *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*" (615fn). The point is in fact exactly the same.

What Vogel adds to Fumerton's discussion is an idealized debate with a reliabilist about what exactly goes wrong with bootstrapping. Vogel isn't clear on just what he wants this debate to accomplish, but I think he is discussing ways in which reliabilists could explain away bootstrapping *while maintaining* that reliabilism as a whole is the right way to think about justification; i.e., to argue that while bootstrapping is clearly illegitimate, it's not crippling to reliabilism proper. This is Vogel's imagined reliabilist response:

[The reliabilist could say:] It is obvious what Roxanne did wrong. Suppose the gauge had not been reliable. Roxanne would have gone through exactly the same procedure, and reached the false conclusion that her gauge was reliable. Hence, she does not know that the gauge is reliable. (615)

Vogel calls this *counterfactual reliabilism*, the position that I can be said to know  $X$  iff I have a true belief  $X$  that satisfies the following condition:

(T) If  $X$  were false, I would not believe  $X$ .

This is a simple truth-tracking condition of the kind discussed by Nozick. Vogel thinks that this position is too strong and that if the reliabilist is forced into it as a way to avoid bootstrapping, she will incur epistemic shipwreck, as none of her beliefs at all will ever be justified. I think Vogel is wrong in thinking so, both because he exaggerates the consequences of this position and (more importantly) because no reliabilist worth his salt *would* endorse such a position in the first

place. Such a position just amounts to the counterfactual formulation of the indiscrimination problem, which is exactly what the reliabilist is trying to avoid. She'd much rather bite the bullet and coexist with bootstrapping instead. Let's see why.

Suppose that a friend, Omar, tells you he just bought new shoes (this is Vogel's own example). If you know that Omar is a perfectly trustworthy chap, then it's also the case that:

- (A) You know that Omar has a new pair of shoes.
- (B) You know that your belief that Omar has a new pair of shoes is true, or not false.
- (C) You know that your belief that Omar has a new pair of shoes is reliable.
- (D) Other things being equal, you know that you know that Omar has a new pair of shoes. (610)

Since C and D depend on B, the key claim is B: do I know that my belief that Omar has new shoes is true or not false? That is, does B meet the truth-tracking condition? No, says Vogel:

If somehow your belief that Omar has a new pair of shoes were false, you would still believe that your belief was true, not false. The alternative is hard to fathom. It is difficult to conceive of your not believing that something you believe is true, whenever the matter happens to cross your mind. So, if your belief that Omar has new shoes were false, you would still believe that your belief was true, not false. You thereby fail to satisfy [the truth-tracking] condition. (610)

Vogel thinks that this reason makes *any* knowledge impossible, but why? Why does it not make just our meta-beliefs impossible? My inability to know that I know that Oscar has a new pair of shoes does not seem to preclude me from still knowing (reliably and justifiably) that Oscar has a new pair of shoes. I see no reason why the inability to acquire a justified higher-level meta-belief should entail the inability to also acquire justified lower-level beliefs. The indiscrimination problem only manifests itself at the meta-level.

But we don't even need to go this far, for again the reliabilist would simply not agree to be backed in the corner that Vogel calls counterfactual reliabilism. The reliabilist would rather deny that bootstrapping is an illegitimate procedure that allows for easy knowledge, because Vogel's counterfactual reliabilism (CR) amounts to nothing more than the counterfactual formulation of the indiscrimination problem, and that's the #1 bad guy in town for the reliabilist right now (at least according to Fumerton). Compare the two positions:

- IP\* If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability, and so *even if a BFM were unreliable we would still continue to believe that it is reliable*. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFMs from unreliable ones.

CR    If a BFM were unreliable, we would still continue to believe that it is reliable, and thus an EC track-record argument using that same BFM would not justify our belief that that BFM is reliable.

If we accept counterfactual reliabilism, then we must solve the (counterfactual) indiscriminatio problem. If we try to escape counterfactual reliabilism, we must solve bootstrapping. There may be ways to solve bootstrapping that don't require us to solve the (counterfactual) indiscriminatio problem, and it's to those responses that I turn now.

## Chapter II

### In defense of epistemic circularity

~\*~

In this chapter I examine two defenses of epistemic circularity. Both authors, Frederick Schmitt and Michael Bergmann, share the same goal: to show that even though Fumerton and Vogel are correct that reliabilists are committed to allowing track-record arguments to establish the reliability of belief-sources, and even though these track-record arguments are necessarily epistemically circular, epistemic circularity may still not be malignant. This is because there are conditions on which the indiscrimination problem should not bother the reliabilist who proposes an epistemically circular track-record argument.

~\*~

#### *II.1 Justificatory epistemically circular track-record arguments*

---

To the question “What is wrong with epistemic circularity?” (2004), Frederick F. Schmitt answers ‘very little.’ He claims that there are only two ways in which epistemically circular arguments can pose a threat to our epistemic situation: by begging the question or by providing an insufficient basis to tell reliable belief sources or belief-forming mechanisms from unreliable ones; the latter is my earlier (non-counterfactual) formulation of Alston’s indiscrimination problem. Schmitt wants to show that both are false problems. His principal claim is that all that’s required for a BFM to deliver justified beliefs is that one have no initial reason to suspect its unreliability. Alternatively, the same result would be obtained if one had reason to positively affirm its reliability (for that would entail that one also doesn’t have reason to suspect its unreliability). Clearly, the former claim is weaker and requires less evidence, but it risks setting the bar far too low; but the latter claim, while stronger, requires more evidence, and this evidence may have to be gathered noncircularly. I will discuss these options at the end of this section, once I’ve made clear what Schmitt’s argument is.

Schmitt first distinguishes, as Alston also had, between logical and epistemic kinds of circularity. Logically circular (LC) arguments fail to support their conclusions for one of two reasons: begging the question or indiscrimination. I'll focus on indiscrimination, since it seems to be the bad guy in town. Clearly, "if merely adducing a logically circular argument succeeded in supporting its conclusion, then any proposition  $p$  whatever could be supported merely by adducing a logically circular argument with conclusion  $p$ " (383). This much seems clear, but it's also easily avoided: one simply has to refrain from adducing an LC argument in the first place! Unfortunately, that way out is unavailable to reliabilists dealing with epistemically circular arguments, for as Alston has shown, at some point we can't help but adduce EC arguments to justify the reliability of our BFM's.

Is indiscrimination as fatal to EC arguments as Fumerton says and as it is to LC arguments? Schmitt thinks not. It may seem so because if an inference from, say, sense perception (SP) beliefs can justify the reliability belief that sense perception is reliable, then "a similar, artificially created track-record inference can justify a reliability belief for a great many sources" (384); and here Schmitt also cites the crystal-ball gazer as the quintessential example of this. But while in LC arguments the indiscrimination problem cannot be resolved and the only way to avoid it is to not adduce the argument at all, Schmitt thinks that "there is a way to restrict the inferences [in an EC argument] so as to avoid the harmful consequences of indiscrimination" (385). That is, to merely adduce an EC argument is not a sufficient condition to fall victim to the indiscrimination problem, and there are EC arguments that can be adduced while avoiding it. Recall the indiscrimination problem as we had understood it in chapter I:

IP\*     If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM is allowed to vouch for its own reliability, and so *even if a BFM were unreliable we would still continue to believe that it is reliable*. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFM's from unreliable ones.

Schmitt's "obvious response is that the mere use of an arbitrary source R to form R beliefs does not necessarily give me justified inputs for the track-record inference. And I need justified inputs if the inference is to give me a justified belief in the reliability of R" (385). This is to say, the counterfactual can be satisfied if only we find a way to track the reliability of a BFM, so that if a BFM truly were unreliable, we *wouldn't* continue to believe that it was reliable. But how does Schmitt think to accomplish this? He claims that there are sources that can lead to justified *relia-*

*bility* beliefs (the output of the EC justifying inference, i.e., the conclusion of an Alstonian track-record argument) and sources that cannot, and thus there is a distinction between sources that can lead to justified *input* beliefs and those that cannot. In other words, only sources S that can deliver justified input S-beliefs can eventually deliver (via an Alstonian EC track-record justifying inference) an S-reliability belief; whereas sources T that can't even deliver justified input T-beliefs will surely be unable to deliver T-reliability beliefs. The key is just being able to identify which sources are S and which sources are T. If the reliabilist can do that, she has sidestepped the indiscrimination problem.

This sounds like a lot of hand-waving, and Schmitt recognizes it: “one might object [...] that my SP beliefs are justified only if I am able to discriminate justifying sources from unjustifying ones, and I am able to do this only if there is available to me a justification of the belief that SP is reliable that is not epistemically circular” (385). The objection seems sensible. Isn't Schmitt merely moving the problem one level up and then looking for a noncircular way out? Don't we still need a non-EC argument to even know which sources will deliver justified input- (and thus, eventually, reliability-) beliefs? Yes, Schmitt says, and that's no problem. In fact, he claims that: (1) there *is* just such a noncircular way to determine which sources will deliver justified input-beliefs; and (2) even if there weren't any, the objection would be merely “adverting to the claim that epistemic circularity entails SP skepticism,” which makes it “parasitic on some other, yet unspecified, objection to the justifying power of an epistemically circular inference to my reliability belief” (385). In other words, Schmitt is claiming that:

- (1) the indiscrimination problem can be solved noncircularly; and
- (2) even if it couldn't, that still wouldn't be a problem for the reliabilist

Rebuttal (2) needs more work, so I'll discuss that first. I'll leave rebuttal (1) for the end of this section, since Bergmann's defense in the next section is also, in a sense, noncircular.

Rebuttal (2) rests on a convoluted argument that Schmitt develops at the onset of his paper. Before we get to the rebuttal itself, let's be clear on exactly what the objection is. First, consider the standard indiscrimination objection that my SP-reliability belief is only justified by my SP-beliefs if my SP-beliefs can answer a doubt as to whether SP is reliable; this is just Alston's charge. But, says Schmitt, one might make an even stronger objection, and it's this stronger objection that he will try to rebut:

One might hold that my SP beliefs are justified only if they are based on reasons that answer a doubt as to whether SP is reliable, and this is so apart from whether my reliability belief is justified on the basis of my SP beliefs. [...] And one might also hold that any reasons for my SP beliefs that answer a doubt as to whether SP is reliable must be such as to make my SP beliefs justified on the basis of my reliability beliefs. Since, by epistemic circularity, my reliability belief is justified (if at all) only on the basis of my SP beliefs, it follows that my SP beliefs are [logically] circularly justified (if justified at all). Since (logically) circular justification is impossible, epistemic circularity entails that my SP beliefs are no more justified than my reliability belief is. Thus, epistemic circularity entails the disastrous consequence of SP skepticism—that none of my SP beliefs is justified. (380; my underlining)

How is this different from the standard objection? The standard objection complained that *SP-beliefs themselves* must answer a doubt about SP's reliability if they are to provide justification for my belief in SP's reliability. The stronger objection complains instead that the doubt about SP's reliability must be answered not by the SP-beliefs themselves, but by the *reasons* on which SP-beliefs are based. So the stronger objection doesn't even get to the question of whether my reliability belief can be based on my justified SP-beliefs: it stops earlier on in the chain of justification and asks whether those SP-beliefs are justified at all, and then it claims that they can be justified only if the reasons that justify them are reasons that answer a doubt about SP's reliability. And how do those reasons justify the SP beliefs? They do so only "on the basis of my reliability beliefs" themselves (380). Circularity ensues, because we have a situation where my SP-reliability belief is justified by my SP-beliefs, which in turn are justified by reasons that supposedly answer a doubt about SP's reliability, but which in turn are only justified by appealing back to my SP-reliability belief. And this circularity, or so the objection goes, *is logical and not epistemic*, since the conclusion already figures explicitly among the premises. Since LC arguments can't justify anything, skepticism about SP itself will follow—an epistemic disaster. So, at bottom, this stronger objection argues that EC arguments "collapse" into LC arguments, really *are* LC arguments after all, and thus just can't be justificatory in any sense.

Let's put this objection in argument form to see where exactly Schmitt attacks it:

*SP = my faculty of sense perception*

*SPB = my beliefs derived from sense perception*

*RB = my belief in the reliability of sense perception*

*RAD = reasons that answer a doubt about SP's reliability*

- 1) SPB are justified by RAD.
- 2) RAD "must be such as to make" SPB justified on the basis of RB.



- 3) RB is justified only on the basis of SPB.
- 4) Hence, RB justifies RAD, which justify SPB, which justify RB.
- 5) Hence, SPB are logically circularly justified.
- 6) But logically circular justification is impossible.
- 7) Hence, EC entails that SPB are only as justified as RB is.
- 8) Therefore, EC leads to SP skepticism—no SPB at all can ever be justified.

Schmitt finds this objection inadequate on two grounds. First, he doesn't "find obvious" either assumption on which the objection is based, namely: 1) that SP-beliefs are justified only if they are based on reasons that answer a doubt about SP's reliability; and 2) that any reasons for my SP-beliefs that answer a doubt about SP's reliability must be "such as to make my SP beliefs justified on the basis of my reliability beliefs" (381). I am not sure what he means by "must be such as to make," but perhaps it's this: my SP-reliability belief justifies my SP-beliefs *through* those reasons, because those are reasons that answer a doubt concerning SP's reliability itself. That is to say, those are reasons for us to think *that* our faculty of SP is in fact reliable rather than unreliable; and only if we have those reasons can we then say that our belief that SP is reliable (= RB) justifies my beliefs delivered by SP (= SPB). If this is right, then what Schmitt really objects to is premise 5): it's not obvious that logical circularity will follow, because "the alleged logical circularity does not even arise for a version of epistemic circularity on which the justification of my reliability belief (if any) is based on SP directly, without being based on SP beliefs" (381). That is, if we "skip a step" and say that my SP-reliability belief is based directly on SP and not on my SP-beliefs (and thus with no need for the involvement of reasons that answer a doubt about SP's reliability), then logical circularity may not arise.

What can we make of this rebuttal (2)? An intuitive rejoinder is that yes, Schmitt is right that to bypass RAD and base RB directly on SP avoids logical circularity... but that's merely because at that point the argument is not circular anymore. How can we say that an argument whose conclusion (the SP-reliability belief) is justified directly by the BFM about which it is a conclusion (SP itself) is a *circular* argument, epistemically or otherwise? Where is the circularity? Originally, the circularity derived from the fact that we needed to use something like the SP-reliability belief to justify the premises, i.e., SP-beliefs. But if SP-beliefs are no longer needed, then what justifying function is there left to do for the SP-reliability belief? This observation seems common to many foundationalist attempts to solve the issue of epistemic circularity. If justification is "injected" into the argument noninferentially, by way of a faculty F that justifies

F-beliefs or even F-reliability meta-beliefs, there seems to be no need for the F-reliability meta-belief to justify anything, not even itself. Justification “begins” noninferentially and that’s that (if it even makes sense to speak of noninferential justification, but I’m not interested in that right now). So while in a sense this strategy does solve the problem of epistemic circularity, it’s only because it denies *that* epistemic circularity exists, not because it acknowledges that it does exist and then finds reasons to either coexist with it or explain it away.

To summarize so far, Schmitt thinks he has shown that the problem of indiscrimination doesn’t plague epistemically circular arguments like it does logically circular ones, though his response comes at the “price” of giving up circularity altogether. What remains to be done is first to show that the problem of begging the question doesn’t plague EC arguments either; and second to explain Schmitt’s rebuttal (1) to the indiscrimination objection, *viz.* the rebuttal that there exist noncircular ways to establish which sources can deliver justified input-beliefs and which ones can’t. Once again, I want to focus on indiscrimination.

What noncircular way could there be to distinguish sources that can lead to justified input SP-beliefs (and thus, after the Alstonian EC track-record inference, to justified output reliability beliefs) from sources that cannot? Schmitt appeals to the following distinction: “Cases in which the inference does go through (as with SP) and cases in which it fails differ in whether I have good reason to suspect unreliability, not in whether the inference begs the question” (395). By “go through” I think Schmitt means that the inference successfully transfers justification from its justified input beliefs to its conclusion. His claim is thus that lacking good reason to suspect the unreliability of a source also gives me good reason to think that the inference will go through, as is the case with SP, and thus that the source is able to deliver a reliability belief.

Suppose, he says, that I am not very good at coming up with ways of calculating the volume of a cone without having studied solid geometry. Most people aren’t very good at that, so I have good reason to presume that whatever volume-calculating formula *V* that I produce myself may be unreliable; that is, I have good reason to doubt *V*’s reliability, or (in other words) to suspect *V*-unreliability. But this is not our situation with BFM’s such as SP, induction, or memory, because unlike in *V*’s case I do *not* initially have good reason to suspect that they may be unreliable. So while a suspicion of *V*-unreliability is probably sufficient to undermine the justification of my *V*-beliefs, the same does not hold for a suspicion of SP-unreliability and the justification of my SP-beliefs. Put slightly differently, my initial *V*-doubt gives me a *prima facie* defeater for

V-beliefs, while the lack of an initial SP-doubt gives me no such defeater for SP-beliefs. (If you think that V isn't really a BFM after all, but rather just one use of other mechanisms, replace Schmitt's example with some other: the crystal-ball gazer, the clairvoyant, the underground informant, etc—the point remains the same). Now, even if all of this holds, it's still the case that

I could arbitrarily use V to form beliefs about the volumes of particular cones and infer that V is reliable by an epistemically circular track-record inference. But this inference would not justify my belief in the reliability of V, since I would not be justified in my V beliefs. To be justified in such beliefs, I would need to infer the reliability of V from beliefs based on sources other than V itself. (396)

That is to say, Alston's worry over indiscrimination among sources is uncalled for, because V-beliefs can't be justified in the first place: they come from a source whose reliability I have good reason to doubt initially, while that's not the case with SP. So the problem stems "merely from the fact that the justification of my V beliefs is undermined until I have good reason to believe that V is reliable" (396). The wording of this last sentence is misleading, for it makes it sound as if I need to actually procure myself a belief in the reliability of any cognitive faculty F before it's able to deliver justified F-beliefs. But that's not Schmitt's point. Rather, all that's required of me is that I *not* have any initial doubts about F's reliability. *That* is what gives me a good reason to affirm F's reliability in the first place. Only once F's reliability has actually been called into question (or when I've acquired, or think I've acquired, a defeater for my belief in it) is the lack of initial doubt no longer sufficient, and at that point I need to actively procure an F-reliability belief.

Does this work—that so long as I lack good reason to suspect a source's unreliability, then I can know that that source is one that can deliver justified input-beliefs and thus, after an EC track-record inference, a justified reliability belief? And is this procedure really noncircular? The key notion here is the distinction between sources for which I do *not* initially suspect S-unreliability and sources for which I do initially suspect S-unreliability. An example of the former is SP and an example of the latter is V. Call this distinction (I) and put it as follows:

(I-a) S-beliefs from source S are unjustified if I've good reason to suspect S-unreliability

(I-b) S-beliefs from source S are justified if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability

That is, if I do or should suspect that S is unreliable, my S-beliefs won't be justified; but if I don't or even shouldn't suspect that S is unreliable, then my S-beliefs can be justified. However,

this is not the only relevant distinction that can be made. There's also the distinction between sources that can only deliver justified beliefs if I also believe that the source is reliable and sources that can deliver justified beliefs even if I don't also believe that the source is reliable (Schmitt 396). Call this second distinction (II). How is this different? Using the same language, put it this way:

(II-a) S-beliefs from source S are justified if I have an S-reliability belief

(II-b) S-beliefs from source S are justified even if I don't have an S-reliability belief.

It should be clear that these distinctions are actually and importantly different. The first distinction claims that the justifiedness of my beliefs depends on whether or not I have doubts about their source's reliability, while the second distinction claims that the justifiedness of my beliefs depends on whether or not I believe that their source is reliable. A significant difference is that the first distinction allows for a case in which my beliefs will be unjustified, while the second does not. So option I-a is fairly "strict," in the sense that if only I have doubts about the reliability of a certain BFM, that BFM is forever precluded from using an EC inference to justify its own beliefs. Option II-a is also fairly strict in the same sense, since it requires that I believe the reliability of a certain BFM before it can justify its own beliefs via an EC inference. What's particularly relevant is that justification is also possible absent an unreliability suspicion (I-b) or a reliability belief (II-b). I believe that all this has interesting consequences for our discussion of epistemic circularity, which I will try to cash out below.

For example, it's conceivable that I find myself in this epistemic situation K1:

K1a. I lack an S-reliability belief

K1b. I have good reason to suspect S-unreliability,

In K1a, according to II-b, to lack an S-reliability belief is insufficient to prevent me from using an EC inference to justify S-beliefs. But in K1b, according to I-a, I also have good reason to suspect S-unreliability, and *that* is sufficient to prevent my EC inference from being justificatory. I could even say that K1a follows from K1b: I lack an S-reliability belief *because* I have good reason to suspect S-unreliability. (Notice that if this is so, then I-a entails II-b; I'll return to that later). For now, suffice it to say that if I find myself in epistemic situation K1 with respect to (say)

SP, I won't be able to use an EC track-record argument to justify a belief in the reliability of SP. Consider now this other epistemic situation K2 instead:

K2a. I lack an S-reliability belief

K2b. I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability.

K2a is identical with K1a, and so, according to II-b, to lack an S-reliability belief is insufficient to prevent me from using an EC inference to justify S-beliefs. But in this case I also lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability, and according to I-b that too is insufficient to prevent me from using an EC inference to justify S-beliefs. (And neither one follows from the other, in this case). The upshot of all this is that if I find myself in an epistemic situation like K2, epistemic circularity ought not to be a problem for me. I may be perfectly agnostic as to the reliability of a certain BFM, or not even entertain the question at all, and that attitude won't keep the beliefs delivered by that BFM from being justified. But this seems to me to set the bar far too low for the reliabilist, and that spells trouble for Schmitt's rebuttal (1).

I'll return to that soon, but first a brief note on entailment. Notice that on the one hand to have good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-a) entails that I also lack an S-reliability belief (II-b); and likewise to have an S-reliability belief (II-a) entails that I also lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-b), at least if the epistemic agent is minimally coherent. But the converses of these entailments do not hold. To lack an S-reliability belief (II-b) *doesn't* entail that I also have good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-a); and likewise to lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-b) *doesn't* entail that I also have an S-reliability belief (II-a). For that matter, nothing at all follows from I-b, not even II-a. Imagine yet another epistemic situation K2\*:

K2a\*. I have an S-reliability belief

K2b. I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability,

K2a\* (II-a) also doesn't follow from K2b (I-b), i.e., being agnostic about S's unreliability is clearly insufficient to give me a belief in S's reliability. Thus, and once again, option I-b seems to entail nothing at all.

But if the above is correct, then Schmitt is wrong and his rebuttal (1) cannot solve or ignore the indiscrimination problem. Schmitt had claimed the following:

Cases in which the inference does go through (as with SP) and cases in which it fails differ in whether I have good reason to suspect unreliability. (395)

This means that lacking good reason to suspect S-unreliability is sufficient for the EC inference to go through. But remember that by “go through” Schmitt just means that the source used in the EC inference is of the kind that will be able to deliver a justified reliability belief (p. 8). What he’s looking for is some sort of *assurance*, some *reason to believe*, that the source in question will be of the kind that will deliver justified beliefs when used in an EC inference, rather than of the kind that will not. But that means that what he’s looking for is *good reason to actually believe that that source is in fact reliable*. And if so, then simply lacking reason to suspect the source’s unreliability won’t get him what he needs, for we have just seen that lacking good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-b) does *not* entail that I also have an S-reliability belief (II-a). Notice that when I say that I-b doesn’t entail II-a I do not mean that as a matter of “psychological fact” a subject who accepts I-b often or even always doesn’t go on to accept II-a. If that were so, Schmitt may ignore my point altogether, for he is concerned with what a subject ought to believe justifiably and not with what he actually does believe. Rather, my point is that *regardless* of what a subject actually believes, he *ought not* to derive II-a from I-b because that entailment is logically faulty. It would be the entailment that “lacking good reason to suspect S-unreliability logically entails that I have an S-reliability belief,” and that is simply false.

If I am right, then Schmitt hasn’t found what he was looking for. What he really needs for his argument to get off the ground is a noncircular way to discriminate among different sources, a way to tell which sources S are able to deliver justified S-beliefs that can be used as input in an EC inference that will output a justified S-reliability belief.

## II.2 Questioned and unquestioned source contexts

---

I will return to Schmitt’s argument briefly in the next chapter and show what its failure means to other supposed solutions to the problem of epistemic circularity. For now, the take-home point from the preceding discussion should be the acknowledgment of a distinction between having good reason to believe that a belief source is reliable and lacking good reason to

suspect that it is unreliable. I say this is the key distinction because Michael Bergmann's 2004 paper "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign" deals with the same exact distinction, though in terms of questioned vs. unquestioned source contexts.

A questioned source context is an epistemic situation in which the knower has good reason to suspect the unreliability of a certain BFM, while in an unquestioned source context she lacks such reason. For example, in a questioned source context the subject "doesn't trust perception," for she either "thinks it is unreliable, or, at the very least, she is uncertain about whether it is reliable"; whereas in an unquestioned source context she "has no doubts at all about the trustworthiness of her sense perception" (718). That is not to say that in an unquestioned source context the subject actually believes that her SP is reliable. As I have shown in my discussion of Schmitt, one doesn't entail the other, and Bergmann agrees:

In order to qualify as an unquestioned source context, it is enough that the context isn't a questioned source context. There is no need for the subject to believe that her source is reliable. It is the absence of sufficient doubt (and sufficient uncertainty) about a source, not the presence of a belief in its trustworthiness, that makes a context an unquestioned source context. (...) Thus, disbelieving or withholding (because of doubt or uncertainty) the proposition that one's belief source is trustworthy results in a questioned source context. An unquestioned source context is one without such disbelieving or withholding. (718fn)

Bergmann's options correspond to Schmitt's first distinction. In a questioned source context my S-beliefs are unjustified if I have reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-a), while in an unquestioned source context my S-beliefs are justified if I lack reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-b).

Bergmann's argument, then, is simply "that epistemic circularity in a questioned source context is malignant and that epistemic circularity in an unquestioned source context is benign" (719). How so? Because in an unquestioned source context

although [the subject] has no doubt that this newly acquired belief is justified, she wonders how she came to hold that belief and, also, how it came to be that she thinks it obviously is, namely, a justified belief. And we can note that, even if she discovers that she formed the belief in a way that involved epistemic circularity, there is no reason for her to be troubled by this. For she wasn't looking for some *independent* verification of the reliability of her senses. She was merely curious about how it was that she came to hold, with justification, the obviously justified belief that her sense perception is reliable. (718)

But why should that make epistemic circularity acceptable? Why is there "no reason" why the subject ought not to be troubled by her epistemic practices? The answer, says Bergmann, has to

do with defeaters. As Alston has shown that track-record arguments are always epistemically circular, in both source contexts the epistemic agent acquires an X-reliability belief by using (even in part) source X itself. Since in a questioned source context she has good reason to suspect X-unreliability, she acquires “an undercutting defeater for all her beliefs produced (even in part) by source X, including the belief that X is a trustworthy source” (719). But this doesn’t apply to unquestioned source contexts, where the epistemic agent lacks good reason to suspect X-unreliability; indeed, she may not even entertain the question of X’s reliability at all. Therefore, she has no undercutting defeater for her beliefs produced even in part by source X. This isn’t a case of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” as it were. Rather, it’s a case of “if you don’t know whether or not it’s broken, you have no reason to suspect that it is and you should behave as if it were working just fine, and thus you should not try to fix it” (where by “fix it” I mean “acquire a reliability belief”).

What should we make of this? For one, the same remarks apply that I made above about Schmitt’s argument: to simply lack reason to suspect unreliability doesn’t entail to have reason to affirm reliability. Second, it’s hard to see how an epistemic agent may be introspective just enough to be “merely curious” and yet not so much as to be actively doubtful or skeptical of the reliability of her BFM’s. Bergmann claims that so long as I don’t *actually suspect* that S is unreliable, I may still inquire as to *how and why* it functions. After all, my interest in (say) taking apart an engine may well derive from the acknowledgment that the engine works well and my desire to learn more about it; or I could be perfectly agnostic as to the engine’s capacity to function properly and taking engines apart is just my Sunday pastime. But if this is right, then one’s epistemic status depends almost entirely on what one in fact *does* at a given time and almost not at all on what one *ought* to do to be a sensible or virtuous epistemic agent. If we accept Bergmann’s (and, to some extent, Schmitt’s) proposal, we seem to lose a significant chunk of normativity in favor of a more descriptive task. Third, Bergmann’s argument implies that with more scrutiny comes less certainty: if circularity becomes malignant as I come to question my sources, then as soon as I doubt the reliability of my sources I lose the ability to acquire justified beliefs; and “ignorance is bliss” seems hardly passable for a theory of knowledge (as Fumerton has also complained). Bergmann addresses this last objection briefly in two occasions:

In most discussions in the literature concerning beliefs in a source’s trustworthiness, the participants have in mind questioned source contexts, [for] when they are discussing how one



can justifiedly come to believe that sense perception is reliable they are interested in ways a person in a questioned source context can come to hold such a belief. (719)

I suspect that it just doesn't seem very interesting to most epistemologists to explain how a person with no doubts at all about the trustworthiness of sense perception can come to justifiedly believe that her perception is reliable. (720fn)

He dismisses these observations by claiming that even if they are true, the fact still remains that epistemic circularity ought not to bother a subject who finds herself in an unquestioned source context, quite regardless of what most people find interesting to discuss. While I think he has a point on a descriptive level, again it's a point that comes at the price of giving up much of the normativity with which epistemology ought to concern itself.

Bergmann argues similarly in his earlier paper "Externalism and Skepticism" (2000). The internalist complaint, Fumerton's for example, is that if we allow EC arguments to justify our reliability beliefs we end up with an uninteresting concept of epistemic justification. But what's the internalist rationale for saying that that's philosophically uninteresting? For Bergmann, that rationale is that an epistemic property like justification is uninteresting if it fails to satisfy what he calls the "No Self-Support" condition or principle:

NSS     One cannot obtain a justified belief that a belief source S is trustworthy by relying even in part on source S.

This is just the familiar concern that whenever a BFM is used to assess its own reliability, the resulting argument will be epistemically circular. Underlying NSS, of course, is the indiscriminate problem, in any of its formulations. But Bergmann complains that it's not immediately obvious that whatever fails to satisfy NSS will be philosophically uninteresting. Instead, he thinks that any claim to the contrary rests on a gross misunderstanding of reliabilism and of the goal of epistemology as a whole:

[Consider the] different sorts of challenge one might face in connection with the higher-level belief that a belief-source S is trustworthy:

*Challenge One*   Tell me the ways one can obtain a justified belief that source S is trustworthy.

*Challenge Two*   Tell me the ways one can obtain, without relying on source S, a justified belief that S is trustworthy. (172)

Bergmann's point is that epistemic circularity is an unacceptable response only to the second challenge and not necessarily to the first as well. This squares well with his 2004 argument on

questioned and unquestioned source context. It's sensible to raise challenge two in a questioned source context, but not to raise it in an unquestioned one. Challenge one is more appropriate for a context in which the agent's BFM are not under initial suspicion of unreliability.

Of course Bergmann is right that this is only a problem if we make it one by demanding that we not use the very faculty whose trustworthiness we're trying to show, but the question is whether we *should* make it a problem. Perhaps my response to Schmitt is useful here too. Bergmann claims that "if we have no qualms about source S, we can sensibly pose and address challenge one without posing or addressing challenge two" (173). This is just Schmitt's option I-b (that S-beliefs from source S are justified if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability), and so a similar response is in order. Suppose that challenge one is indeed my epistemic situation, an unquestioned source context. Then, if Bergmann is right, an S-produced EC track-record argument will suffice to affirm S-reliability. But if it's true that the reliability of that BFM was never questioned, then why even produce a track-record argument to establish it? That is, I'm not sure that Bergmann's two challenges are all that different from each other, just as I had raised doubts about the distinction of questioned and unquestioned source contexts. If a hypothetical inquirer says "tell me the ways one can obtain a justified belief about source S," doesn't this already entail that this inquirer *wants to know about* source S? This may not mean that she has S-reliability doubts, but it does mean that she's asking us prove that S is reliable nonetheless, or at the very least to tell her something about S. Again, it seems odd to divorce an inquiry into a source's reliability from a skeptical motivation for that inquiry. If that's true, then the very act of producing a reliability argument seems inseparable from a skeptical (or at the very least reflective) attitude concerning the reliability of one's BFMs.

### *II.3 Two tentative solutions*

---

The defenses of epistemic circularity just examined focus on the legitimacy of the "justificatory work" done by epistemically circular track-record arguments (or, for brevity, ECTRAs). These arguments do not fall to the indiscrimination problem, says Schmitt, at least not if we understand them in the right way. And the right way, say both Schmitt and Bergmann (and to some

extent Alston too), is when we lack an initial doubt about their trustworthiness and don't expect to use them to prove reliability to a skeptic. Now, recall Schmitt's two distinctions:

- (I-a) S-beliefs from source S are unjustified if I've good reason to suspect S-unreliability
- (I-b) S-beliefs from source S are justified if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability
- (II-a) S-beliefs from source S are justified if I have an S-reliability belief;
- (II-b) S-beliefs from source S are justified regardless of my having a S-reliability belief.

In light of the defenses just presented, we can simplify:

- (I-a) suspecting S-unreliability → ECTRAs are useless
- (I-b) not suspecting S-unreliability → ECTRAs are useful
- (II-a) having an S-reliability belief → ECTRAs are useful
- (II-b) lacking an S-reliability belief → ECTRAs may or may not be useful

Therefore, the legitimacy of ECTRAs depends on my *epistemic condition*, as follows:

- (C1) I *can* use an S-produced ECTRA to justify my S-reliability belief if either
  - C1a. I have good reason to affirm that S is reliable (II-a); or
  - C1b. I lack good reason to suspect that S is unreliable (I-b).
- (C2) I *cannot* use an S-produced ECTRA to justify my S-reliability belief if I have good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-a); that is, if the skeptic demands that I prove S's reliability to him.
- (C3) I *don't know* whether I can use an S-produced ECTRA to justify my S-reliability belief if I lack an S-reliability belief (II-b), because II-b does not also entail that I have good reason to suspect S-unreliability (I-a): I may or may not have such reason. At most, I shall need to suspend judgment about S, but I don't need to feel compelled to discard ECTRAs as irresponsible epistemic practices.

Now we can say that C1a and C1b suggest two possible ways out of the problem of epistemic circularity. We don't have to worry that if we can't meet the indiscrimination problem we are doomed to skepticism. Some reliabilists will gladly bite the bullet and specify epistemic conditions in which the indiscrimination problem won't be made to count against reliabilism. Indeed, this has been Schmitt's and Bergmann's strategy, and I hope to have shown that considerable

doubt can be raised against it. But these approaches don't exhaust the array of possible solutions to the problem of epistemic circularity. In the next chapter I survey other possibilities and frame Bergmann's and Schmitt's attempts in the appropriate context.

## Chapter III

### Solutions to epistemic circularity

~\*~

Alston argued that epistemically circular track-record arguments (ECTRAs) can still be justificatory on assumption of reliabilism. Fumerton and Vogel complained that that's an uninteresting concept of epistemic justification. Schmitt and Bergmann rebutted that it is interesting, but only on certain conditions. In this chapter I will draw some conclusions about this debate and outline a few more possible ways out of the quandary. I will argue that the most promising solution, based on independent arguments by Ernest Sosa and Matthias Steup, is to accept that epistemically circular arguments *won't* be justificatory at a lower level but *must* be justificatory at a higher level, for if they weren't, normative epistemology as a whole would become impossible.

~\*~

#### III.1 *Van Cleve's dilemma and possible solutions*

---

The previous chapter ended on the acknowledgment of two potential solutions:

- C1a ECTRAs can justify my S-reliability belief if I have good, noncircular reason to affirm S-reliability.
- C1b ECTRAs can justify my S-reliability belief if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability.

A reason to affirm S-reliability would be an argument to discriminate between sources that will deliver justified beliefs and sources that won't, and to avoid the problem this argument must be noncircular. Hence the requirement of noncircularity in C1a. Intuitively, it may seem superfluous: if I have noncircular reasons, why do I need an epistemically *circular* track-record argument at all? But recall that the reason we were looking for noncircular reasons to establish S-reliability aside from an S-produced ECTRA was that we needed to solve the indiscrimination problem, i.e., we wanted to find reasons to identify which sources could deliver justified input beliefs and thus (via an ECTRA) justified reliability beliefs; in short, we wanted to narrow down

the field to only certain sources, and so it's not crazy after all to look for noncircular reasons. Contrast this with C1b, which gladly embraces the indiscrimination problem and claims that it's not really a problem for reliabilism after all.

We have seen how both solutions run into trouble and we will see it again later. What other solutions exist? James Van Cleve discusses three more in his "Is Knowledge Easy—or Impossible?" (2003). But first, consider Stewart Cohen's (2002) KR principle. Cohen argues that epistemic circularity, which he calls "the problem of easy knowledge," is not unique to reliabilism. Any theory of knowledge that rejects the following principle will be equally troubled by it:

KR     A knowledge source S can yield knowledge for us only if we know that S is reliable.

Van Cleve himself had arrived at a similar principle in 1984 when he had claimed that "reliability is *necessary but not sufficient* for justification" and that what must be added is "*knowledge of reliability*" (qtd. in 2003, 49). The idea is the same: for source S to deliver justified S-beliefs, not only must it actually be reliable, but we must also *know* that it is reliable. Thus, Van Cleve takes the KR principle to be making the following claim and its converse:

KR1    We can know that S-beliefs are true only if we first know S is reliable.

KR2    We can know S is reliable only if we first know that S-beliefs are true.

This is just the old problem of the criterion. When taken together, KR1 and KR2 make a logical circle and render all knowledge impossible, thus leading to global skepticism. So while any theory that rejects the KR principle makes knowledge too easy (for Cohen), any theory that accepts the KR principle makes knowledge impossible (for Van Cleve). Hence, says Van Cleve, we only have two choices: reliabilism (which rejects KR) or skepticism.

Any alternatives to these two will have to reject Van Cleve's claim that accepting the KR principle leads to skepticism. That is, an alternative solution must show that it's *false* that whenever we accept the KR principle we fall into skepticism; i.e., it must show that we can bite the bullet and accept the KR principle because doing so doesn't lead to skepticism. How can that be done? Van Cleve's claim that accepting KR leads to skepticism rests on three assumptions:

- A1 The assumption that we need to *first* know S's reliability in KR1 and that we also need to *first* know that S-beliefs are true in KR2.<sup>3</sup>
- A2 The assumption that we can only gain an S-reliability belief *inferentially*, i.e., by reasoning from beliefs obtained through S itself.
- A3 The assumption that the term "knowledge" means exactly the same thing in KR1 as it does in KR2.

Here we reconnect to our discussion of epistemic circularity. Again, what Van Cleve suggests is that if we can find an alternative theory that successfully rejects one of these three assumptions, then that theory won't be plagued by skepticism (for it would allow knowledge) and it also won't be plagued by epistemic circularity/bootstrapping/easy knowledge (for it wouldn't make knowledge too easy). What's relevant to our discussion is to find out whether these alternative theories really do avoid epistemic circularity or whether they just let it back in through the side door; and if they do let it back in, we need to know whether the way they allow it is any less questionable than the way Alston's reliabilism allows it.

So let's recap the three assumptions that support the claim that the KR principle leads to skepticism, and let's also express their respective denials as follows:

- A1 The assumption that we need to *first* know S's reliability in KR1 and that we also need to *first* know that S-beliefs are true in KR2.
  - D1 But knowledge of S's reliability and knowledge of the truth of S-beliefs can be reached simultaneously, with no need for either one to be epistemically prior. This is the coherentist solution.*
- A2 The assumption that we can only gain a S-reliability belief *inferentially*, reasoning from beliefs obtained through S itself.
  - D2 But knowledge of S's reliability can also be reached noninferentially, without reasoning from beliefs obtained through S itself. This is the foundationalist or Reidian solution.*
- A3 The assumption that the term "knowledge" means exactly the same thing in KR1 as it does in KR2.
  - D3 But the term 'knowledge' refers to two different kinds or levels of knowledge in KR1 and KR2. This is the contextualist solution.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Lammenranta (2009) calls this a "strengthened" version of the KR principle because of the emphasis on epistemic priority. It's very demanding that we must know either S's reliability or the truth of S-beliefs *before* we know the other one, more so than the standard KR principle that makes no such request. I agree, but as I show below I also think that's irrelevant.

From all this, then, we glean three more possible solutions to the problem:

- S1 Coherentism avoids EC by making justification appear “all at once” in a system of knowledge rather than progressively through bootstrapping.
- S2 Foundationalism avoids EC by resting our S-reliability belief not on S itself, but on noninferential processes.
- S3 Contextualism avoids EC by distinguishing two levels of knowledge and allowing EC only at the higher level.

To these, we should add the two tentative solutions we had gathered from Chapter II defenses:

- S4 EC is allowed but only after we’ve established S-reliability noncircularly.
- S5 EC is allowed but only if we never had doubts about S-reliability.

One may think that the latter two should not to count as separate solutions, but I think they should. Recall that they were based on these epistemic conditions:

- C1a ECTRAs can justify my S-reliability belief if I have good, noncircular reason to affirm S-reliability.
- C1b ECTRAs can justify my S-reliability belief if I lack good reason to suspect S-unreliability.

Unlike S1-S3, these don’t attempt to escape epistemic circularity. Instead they embrace it, but contingently on either the availability of an S-reliability belief (acquired noncircularly) or on the lack of an S-unreliability belief. Yes, since C1a is compatible with denial D2, we may think that it ought to be subsumed under solution S2, but that’s not so. C1a can obtain without resting on D2 and thus without requiring foundationalism, for example through a noncircular argument that gives us sufficient reason to think that our S-reliability belief is justified, without this argument either using S itself or using noninferentially-justified (foundational) premises. Thus, C1a (now S4) is a solution separate from S2. What about C1b/S5? It too is different from all others and similar to C1a, but in another sense it’s also different from C1a, for while C1a asks us to eschew epistemic circularity at first so that we may allow it later, C1b makes no such demand. So I think that both ought to count as two separate, new potential solutions.

As far as I can see, this exhausts the array of possible ways out: coherentist (S1), foundationalist (S2), contextualist (S3), noncircular (S4), and “agnostic” (S5) solutions. There are other alternatives still, such as infinitism or even a defense of skepticism, but these would take us too far off track and have little to do with epistemic circularity. Right now, our task is to examine these five solutions and show whether they really eschew epistemic circularity or instead allow it



in a different form, and whether that different form (if there be one) is preferable to Alstonian ECTRAs. If none of these solutions obtain, then Van Cleve is right that we must pick our poison between reliabilism or skepticism. If at least one solution obtains, then Van Cleve is wrong and we have an alternative theory, which may or may not allow some epistemic circularity. After some analysis, Van Cleve concludes that S1, S2, and S3 fail. I will agree, because all are still circular and not significantly differently from Alston's reliabilism (incidentally, I will discuss S1 and S3 solutions together, for what Van Cleve calls contextualism isn't really contextualism at all, but another brand of coherentism). Then, as I have already done in part in the previous chapter, I will contend that S4 also fails; and so does S5, because Fumerton is right that it allows circularity only at the cost of making epistemic justification philosophically uninteresting.

But the internalist shouldn't rejoice, for there's more to S3 solutions than Van Cleve appreciates. I do not think that S3 obtains as Van Cleve puts it, but an amended version, discussed somewhat differently by Sosa and Steup, is much more promising:

S3\* EC is allowed when the subject has responsibly employed *all* of the BFMs at her disposal and has run out of sources of independent verification.

S3\* still allows for epistemic circularity, but only at a level of justification where it's simply unavoidable. To still rue circularity at that point is criminally unreasonable, given the kinds of epistemic agents that human beings are. So instead of swallowing the lower-level bootstrapping of Alston and Vogel or accepting Cohen's charge that all knowledge is impossible, we will simply have to redefine the ways in which we can accept epistemically circular arguments. But before we get there, I will examine all the inadequate solutions and explain why they fail.

### *III.2 Coherentist and "contextualist" solutions (S1 and S3)*

---

Van Cleve (2003) and Markus Lammenranta (2009) both argue that coherentist solutions do not avoid the problem of epistemic circularity and are thus not a significant improvement over reliabilism or foundationalism. The reason is that justification happens still too easily and, more importantly, the end result is the same. According to Van Cleve, both reliabilism and coherentism accept the KR principle as it is; but unlike reliabilism, coherentism rejects the key element in

KR1 and KR2, the requirement of epistemic priority. Under coherentism, knowledge of S-reliability is still necessary to know that S-beliefs are true, and to know that S-beliefs are true is still necessary for knowledge of S-reliability—but it's no longer the case that one has to come before the other. Supposedly, if the epistemic priority requirement is removed, skepticism will no longer follow, for we will no longer be caught in the logical circle of KR1 and KR2.

But even though this coherentist approach gets us far enough from skepticism, it is also still uncomfortably close to easy knowledge: As Lammenranta has it: “All this still happens too easily. It happens in fact as easily as before” (7). Similarly, Van Cleve asks us to imagine two epistemic agents. The first agent, a reliabilist, wants to arrive at knowledge via bootstrapping, but the second agent, a coherentist, complains that that's far too easy: instead, he thinks that knowledge of S-reliability and knowledge that our S-beliefs are true will come simultaneously the moment that the belief system has achieved a sufficient degree of coherence. Yes, one will still be necessary for the other and vice-versa, but that's okay: while the first agent has to wait for one to be epistemically prior to the other, and thus will be caught in an endless logical circle and never get anywhere, the second agent's theory can get off the ground.

“But where is the extra toil?”, Van Cleve wonders. There seems to be none:

Might the knower as envisioned by the externalist and the knower as envisioned by the coherentist go through exactly the same steps, coming to believe all the same things at all the same times and concluding in the end that their belief-forming processes are reliable? [...] Items that are known sequentially for the one are known only at the end for the other. But it is hard to see how these differences in the times at which the title of ‘knowledge’ is bestowed can make [the coherentist's] knowledge either more genuinely knowledge or knowledge more laboriously obtained. (55-6)

Well, if the coherentist gains knowledge “at the end” and the reliabilist does so gradually, then it's not true that they gain knowledge “at all the same time,” but it's still hard to see why that should make any difference. Lammenranta echoes:

The steps by which we gain such knowledge [of reliability] may be exactly the same as in the foundationalist version. The only different is that when, according to foundationalism, knowledge is first generated in the premises and then transmitted to the conclusion, coherentism makes it appear simultaneously in the premises and in the conclusion. [This fact] does not make it any less easy to attain knowledge. (6)

These worries are well founded. What exactly *has* changed that makes the coherentist position an improvement over the reliabilist one? Nothing at all, for the coherentist still has to achieve his knowledge of reliability in *some* way, and that way is still an epistemically circular track-record

argument involving knowledge of reliability (the S-reliability belief) and the truth of the premises (S-beliefs). If it's true that the reliabilist has no way to break into the circle formed by KR1 and KR2, neither does the coherentist.

Likewise, take Sosa's brand of coherentism, which he would call virtue reliabilism. Here I refer especially to his two-volume work on virtue epistemology (2007; 2009), but he has presented a very similar view in various other papers for the last 15 years. Sosa claims that human knowledge is of two kinds: animal and reflective. Animal knowledge is apt true belief and reflective knowledge is apt true belief believed aptly, or in the right way. Say that source S, for example SP, is reliable (apt) and gives us largely true beliefs. Then we can use these SP-beliefs as premises of an EC track-record argument whose conclusion is an S-reliability belief. The only difference with an Alstonian ECTRA is that this S-reliability belief that we end up with is still animal knowledge. It doesn't count as reflective knowledge yet, because it wasn't believed aptly. Only when our belief system has achieved a certain degree of *coherence* is our animal knowledge of S-reliability "transferred" into reflective knowledge of S-reliability.

But if Van Cleve and Lammenranta are right, then not even this constitutes any significant improvement over bootstrapping. Animal knowledge of S-reliability is still arrived at via an ECTRA, and anything that happens after that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that Sosa acknowledges that no actual (reflective) knowledge is gained until the system has achieved a certain degree of coherence, because it can only achieve that degree of coherence through ECTRAs. Consider the analogy of knowledge with a building. With bootstrapping, I climb a ladder that's hanging from the side of the building and make my way up. With each floor that I reach, I gain increasing assurance that the ladder is firmly secured at the top, and when eventually I've made my way to the top, I become certain that the ladder is firmly secured. But with coherentism I gain no increasing assurance with each floor, and it's only when I reach the top that I gain *all* my knowledge (all at once) that the ladder is firmly secured. The only difference between the two procedures is what I allow myself to call "knowledge" at which level and why. The result is the same (getting to the top) and so is the method, for in both procedures I need a belief that the ladder is secure before I can climb. Hence, this coherentist solution is no significant improvement over Alston's position and does nothing to solve the problem of epistemic circularity.

Interestingly, Van Cleve thinks that Sosa's animal/reflective knowledge distinction can be called "contextualist," for it posits two levels of knowledge and two sets of criteria for meet-

ing the definition of knowledge on each level; specifically, coherence is required for reflective knowledge but not for animal knowledge. But I'm not sure that to differentiate between two levels of knowledge is sufficient for contextualism. The way contextualism is usually articulated, for example by Keith DeRose, centers on *utterances*. The focus is on which utterances (including, and most importantly to this case, skeptical demands) are legitimate and in which contexts. But of course, Sosa's solution is not contextualist in this sense, since it merely redefines "knowledge" and then applies it in two different ways. Sosa is entirely unconcerned with utterances and with the propriety of the skeptic's demands.

Why, then, does *Van Cleve* think that Sosa's solution is contextualist? I think it's simply by association with a superficially similar discussion by DeRose, who of course does accept the tenets of contextualism proper. In "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and *Scientia*" (1992) DeRose presents a contextualist solution to the supposed "Cartesian circle," the charge that Descartes needs to know that God exists (G) before he can know that his clear and distinct perceptions are true (CD) but that he also cannot know G before he knows CD. DeRose argues that allegations such as these lose much of their appeal if we construe Descartes' epistemology contextually. Recall that Descartes distinguished between two kinds of knowledge: *cognitio* and *scientia*. Perhaps if we have knowledge (*cognitio*) of the truth of our clear and distinct perceptions, then we can acquire knowledge (*scientia*) of the existence of God. That would no longer be viciously circular, for the skeptic wouldn't be allowed to question Descartes' support of his knowledge of G with his knowledge of CD, and vice-versa, since they exist on two different levels and respond to two different definitions of knowledge. This argument is what makes Van Cleve conclude that DeRose's solution to the Cartesian circle closely resembles Sosa's solution to the problem of epistemic circularity. We can roughly equate Sosa's animal and reflective knowledge to Descartes' *cognitio* and *scientia*, respectively, as Sosa himself is fond of doing.

The problem with this move is that while DeRose's argument is properly contextualist, Sosa's isn't, for Sosa is unconcerned with utterances and with levels of knowledge. The animal-reflective distinction is a distinction of types of knowledge, not of levels in the way that contextualists usually define this term. As concerns my present project, I have no interest in assessing whether DeRose's defense of Descartes is correct, or even if Sosa is correct to base his animal-reflective distinction on the *cognitio-scientia* distinction. What does interest me is that there does not seem to be sufficient grounds (not from Van Cleve's discussion alone, anyway) for identify-

ing two separate possible solutions to the problem of epistemic circularity: the coherentist and the contextualist one. Sosa's solution is exquisitely coherentist and there is neither the need nor the grounds to equate it to a contextualist solution. With that said, there may well exist a properly contextualist solution to the problem of epistemic circularity, but that will have to wait for another time (likewise, we are not exploring defenses of infinitism and skepticism itself).

### III.3 Foundationalist solutions (S2)

---

In "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign" (2004), Michael Bergmann proposes a foundationalist solution to the indiscriminability problem: we but need to appeal to the "faculty of common sense," understood in the manner of Thomas Reid. Common sense is a cognitive faculty that all human beings possess and that can provide us with justified beliefs about the reliability of our other cognitive faculties. How? Bergmann claims that Reid

disagrees with Alston's conclusion that one can't know that sense perception is reliable without relying on sense perception, [because] one can know directly and noninferentially, via the cognitive faculty we have for knowing first principles, that sense perception is reliable. (722fn)

It seems that Reid thought of this cognitive faculty for knowing first principles as being itself an actual BFM, one separate from all other BFMs that we have: "to judge of things self-evident [...] is the province, and the sole province, of common sense [...] and is only another name for one branch or degree of reason" (qtd. in Bergmann 722fn). Now, among the first principles that are self-evident to us thanks to our faculty of common sense is the principle that our other BFMs are by and large reliable. This is why nature has given us the emotion of *ridicule*, for whenever we tried to accept some argument whose conclusion defied the deliverances of common sense, we would think that argument absurd; literally, it would be laughable, and we would think insane whoever seriously proposes it (723). This, for Reid and for Bergmann, is a way to satisfy the skeptic's demand that we be justified in our belief that our BFMs are reliable: common sense can give us all the justification we need because it takes it upon itself to do the justificatory work that each individual BFM cannot do for itself.

What can we make of this? It's obvious that this solution is foundationalist, for the belief in the reliability of our BFMs would receive its justification noninferentially via the faculty of common sense. The obvious issue with this response, raised also by Baron Reed (2006) in a reply to Bergmann, is the following: if common sense is able to provide us with justified beliefs about the reliability of our cognitive faculties, and common sense is itself a kind of faculty with which we are all equipped, then aren't we just moving the problem one level up? Will we not then need a way to justify our belief in the reliability of common sense itself?

Bergmann's response is simply that "the first principle Reid mentioned earlier was that *all* our natural faculties are reliable; this includes the faculty of common sense itself" (723). That is, take a noninferentially justified reliability belief R about the trustworthiness of faculty X; call it R(X). Among such beliefs delivered and justified by common sense—like R(M) about memory, R(SP) about sense perception, etc.—there's also one about common sense itself, R(CS). Of course, Bergmann realizes, this answer is itself epistemically circular: "This is where the epistemic circularity enters on Reid's account" (723). Yet, he claims, we've done more than simply move the circularity one level up, for this account "is an improvement over 'track record argument' accounts of how we come to know that our belief sources are trustworthy" (723). It's an improvement, says Bergmann, because it is more consistent with how human beings actually operate. We don't know that our faculties are reliable through argumentation: we just take it for granted, noninferentially, that they are. This is intuitively true and works well with Bergmann's questioned/unquestioned source context distinction. Our BFMs truly are unquestioned by default, and for the most part we do live our life as if it were one big unquestioned source context. But for one, that alone doesn't make this an epistemically responsible behavior: I don't see a problem with saying that the majority of human epistemic subjects behave epistemically irresponsibly. And even more importantly, if this is how it works, then there's no reason to postulate the extra faculty of common sense: we can just claim that our basic BFMs—memory, induction, etc.—are noninferentially justified, and leave it at that. Why does there have to be a faculty whose sole purpose is to grant noninferential justification? And even if there were, why posit *that* as a solution to a problem about epistemic circularity?

Someone more sympathetic with Bergmann's argument may object that common sense is not only an extra BFMs, but a kind of BFM that's altogether *different* from our basic ones. The very point of common sense is that unlike other faculties, it doesn't require that we hold a justi-

fied belief in its reliability before we can trust its deliverances. That is: while it may be legitimate to demand that we hold a SP-reliability belief before our SP-beliefs can be justified, it may not be legitimate to demand the same for common sense at the next level up. I may need a good reason to affirm the reliability of basic BFMs before they can deliver justified beliefs, and to have such good (noninferential) reason I will need to use common sense; but in the case of CS itself, all I need for my CS-beliefs to be justified is that I lack good reason to suspect CS-unreliability. And certainly this *is* the epistemic situation of us human beings day in and day out, for while it may be epistemically irresponsible to never doubt our basic BFMs, it is not also epistemically irresponsible to never doubt our common sense. This strategy thus drives a wedge between common sense and all other faculties, a wedge grounded in the C1 epistemic condition and the I-b/II-a options (i.e., the difference between BFMs for which I need good reason to affirm reliability and BFMs for which I only need to lack good reason to suspect unreliability). Does this work?

I have two problems with this argument, and thus with all solutions of this kind. One, which I already discussed in the previous section, is that positing the extra level of justification seems to provide no significant improvement. If it's true that there are cases in which a BFM can provide me with justified beliefs if only I lack good reason to suspect its unreliability, that can be true of literally any BFM. Why does that BFM have to be common sense? Why can't I just say that of my firmly established practices like SP? I see no reason why not. The second problem, which I discussed amply in the previous chapter, is that *whenever* I appeal to the option I-b the bar is being set far too low. It's so low in fact that there's no reason why I couldn't use the same rationale for justifying virtually every BFM, from those that are actually reliable to those that are actually unreliable. It's not difficult to imagine how a subject could think that he lacks any good reason to suspect the unreliability of a BFM, even when such good reason would be available to him. And more importantly, it's not difficult to imagine *there actually being no such good reason* to suspect unreliability, regardless of the reliability of the BFM at stake.

#### *III.4 Noncircular solutions (S4)*

---

We have already seen a noncircular approach to solve the problem, namely Bergmann's foundationalist/Reidian solution. But as I've shown at the onset, not all noncircular solutions

must be foundationalist. A solution can count as noncircular if it provides me with an argument that gives me good reason to affirm the reliability of a BFM without either using that same BFM (circularity) or justifying the arguments' premises noninferentially (foundationalism). Frederick Schmitt, whose contribution I've discussed in detail in chapter II, also presents a noncircular solution at the end of his paper. Alvin Goldman had advocated something very similar in 1994, and Schmitt discusses that too. In short, this is the idea that so long as a source S is native to the human species, we can have good reason to affirm S-reliability, and thus that it can deliver justified S-beliefs, and thus that we can use its deliverances as premises of an epistemically circular track-record argument to prove S-reliability.

Goldman suggests that Schmitt's distinction (II)—see below, or in chapter II.2—really is the distinction between *acquired methods* and *native processes*. Acquired methods (A), for example Schmitt's independently concocted volume-calculating formula, are “new” to us and thus require a reliability belief before they can deliver justified beliefs. But native processes (N), for example sense perception, are old friends and don't require that we affirm their reliability before they can deliver justified beliefs. In keeping with the same language used so far, Goldman's point can be put as follows.

(II-a) A-beliefs from source A are justified if I have an A-reliability belief

(II-b) N-beliefs from source N are justified even if I don't have an N-reliability belief.

Why does all of this matter? Because if Goldman is right, we already have a discriminating reason to tell the BFMs for which the inference will “go through” from those for which it won't: we just need to look at whether or not the BFM is a native one. If it is, then we're in good shape and we need not demand a reliability belief; if it isn't, we need that reliability belief.

Does this work? Remember that by “go through” Schmitt means that the inference will deliver a justified reliability belief if its input beliefs are also justified. If so, one would think that Schmitt would jump at this opportunity, since it lines up well with his previous argument, but he rejects it. He claims that Goldman is focusing on the wrong distinction, because it's conceivable that my N-beliefs *do* depend on my also having an N-reliability belief, *so long as I suspect that native process to be unreliable*. Take the set of all native belief processes, {N}. Goldman says of {N} that it only contains BFMs that fall under option II-b, that is, BFMs that can deliver justified beliefs regardless of whether or not I have a belief in their reliability:



(II-b) N-beliefs from source N are justified even if I don't have an N-reliability belief.

But Schmitt wants to say that {N} may also contain BFM's that fall under II-a, that is, BFM's that can only deliver justified beliefs if I have a belief in their reliability:

(II-a) N-beliefs from source N are justified if I have an N-reliability belief.

And the opposite holds for the set of all acquired processes {A}: Goldman wants to put them all under II-a, but it's conceivable that some acquired processes can deliver justified beliefs regardless of my belief in their reliability, as per II-b. Why? For example, some native processes do not by default work very well until they have been honed; many of our higher reasoning skills belong to this category. And perhaps some acquired processes, like basic logic or dexterity games, need no second-guessing or a reliability belief before they can deliver justified beliefs. (Of course, a definition of what exactly constitutes a BFM would be in order here, but I can grant that Schmitt can come up with one). So if Schmitt is right on this, the distinction between native and acquired processes is irrelevant and the only distinction that matters is (I):

the key distinction is not that between a native process and an acquired process, as Goldman has it, but between a source for which I lack good reason to suspect unreliability and one for which I have such a reason. [...] It so happens that the distinction between sources for which I lack good reason to suspect unreliability and those for which I have such reason roughly coincides with that between native processes and acquired methods.  
(397)

But that wasn't Goldman's point. Goldman's point was to make the *second* distinction (II) align with the A/N distinction, not the *first* distinction (I). Goldman does not care whether native processes can deliver justified beliefs if only I lack good reason to suspect their unreliability, or whether acquired processes cannot deliver justified beliefs if I have good reason to suspect their unreliability.

But perhaps we should ignore what Goldman meant and follow Schmitt; that is, maybe we should *make* the distinction between native and acquired processes align with Schmitt's argument. If he is right that the distinction between native and acquired "roughly coincides" with that between processes for which I have reason to suspect unreliability and processes for which I lack such reason, then we would end up with this:

(I-a) A-beliefs from source A are unjustified if I have a reason to suspect A-unreliability.

(I-b) N-beliefs from source N are justified if I lack a reason to suspect N-unreliability.

But that can't be. If I have good reason to suspect *any* BFM's unreliability, then that should be sufficient to prevent that BFM from using an EC inference to justify a belief in its own reliability—quite regardless of whether that BFM is native or acquired. Why should it be that only acquired processes are disqualified if I have reason to suspect their unreliability? If I have good reason to suspect the unreliability of a native process, then shouldn't I disqualify that process too, even if it's native? To deny this is to say that I have some sort of *special* reason for thinking that a native process is immune from suspicion of unreliability, i.e., that N-beliefs would still be justified even if I acquired a defeater for N-reliability (e.g., that I am prone to hallucinating or that I've taken a hallucinogenic drug should make me question the reliability of my SP).

Can I ever have such reason? Does the fact that a process is native actually *give* us good reason to believe that it *is* in fact reliable? A full discussion of this would take us too far off-topic, but suffice it to say the following. What evidence can one adduce for the claim that native processes enjoy some sort of “special” justifying status by virtue of being native? Alvin Plantinga has argued (in two books and many papers since 1993) that if we embrace a certain theistic worldview we will be virtually assured of the overall reliability of our cognitive faculties, for a good god would not have created us as significantly unreliable cognizers. Some of Plantinga's critics have countered, instead, that a naturalistic worldview is sufficient to achieve the same result, since natural selection selects for *adaptive* cognitive faculties: they are evolutionarily advantageous and unreliable faculties pose a significant disadvantage. Regardless of who's right in this debate, both sides give us *some* reason why we should not suspect the unreliability of our native processes. In fact, both sides give us even more: they give us good reason to actually affirm the overall reliability of our BFMs. If our native processes evolved naturally, then that's our reason: they are very probably reliable, because if they weren't they wouldn't have evolved. And if our native processes were divinely designed, then *that* is our reason: they are very probably reliable, because surely a good god wouldn't allow us to be unreliable cognizers. Whatever the answer, both theists and naturalists can have strong reason to believe that our BFMs are by and large reliable.

Can these “teleological” arguments do what we need, i.e., provide us with a noncircular reason to affirm the reliability of our BFMs (as opposed to just make it so that we have no good reason to suspect their unreliability)? I think not. For us to reap the epistemic benefits provided by these arguments, we need to be able to accept them first. “To lack good reason to suspect N-

unreliability” is a relatively weak requirement because it demands very little of us; specifically, it doesn’t demand that we have any reason to accept any argument to support it, or even that we give it any significant thought; it’s sufficient that we withhold judgment about N processes entirely. On the other hand, “to have good reason to affirm N-reliability” is a much stronger requirement and it does demand reasons, or arguments, in its support. The problem is that whatever argument we accept to support it we will have accepted through our native cognitive faculties themselves, or at least the basic ones. How do I know that a teleological argument obtains? I’ll know by using cognitive faculties such as induction, deduction, memory, my knowledge of logic, and maybe even sense perception, at least if I wish to independently verify certain claims about (say) evolutionary biology. But then I will have used my native processes to accept an argument that gives me good reason to believe that my native processes are themselves reliable. That’s epistemically circular, and since we were looking for a noncircular solution to the indiscrimination problem, that won’t do us any good.

So much for Schmitt and Goldman. Alston himself thought that a noncircular way did exist to tell reliable from unreliable sources. Recall that for Alston, track-record arguments are epistemically circular because the conclusion is merely assumed and doesn’t explicitly figure among the argument’s premises: “I manifest an acceptance of [the conclusion] in my practice” (6). Now the reason why the conclusion is assumed is that that’s simply the way that we as human beings operate: “It is not a syntactical or a semantic presupposition. It stems rather from our epistemic situation as human beings. [...] Thus the presupposition falls into the large basket called ‘pragmatic’” (12). Alston further develops this argument in his 1993 book *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Recall that by this time he has become convinced that the indiscrimination problem is fatal to epistemically circular arguments and that we must find other ways to deal with it: “I shall disqualify epistemically circular arguments on the grounds that they do not serve to discriminate between reliable and unreliable doxastic practices” (17). His other way to deal with it is to insist that the practically-assumed reliability of certain BFM’s is by itself sufficient to perform the task of discrimination, and that this way of discriminating is noncircular.

Alston claims that it is “practically rational” to use our “firmly established doxastic practices,” such as sense perception and memory; and what counts as a firmly established doxastic practice is just “our customary ways of forming beliefs about the external environment” (130). By this Alston does not mean that we have incontrovertible evidence that (say) SP is reliable, as

we would under C1/I-b, but only that it's reasonable for us to *assume* that SP is reliable; i.e., to “pragmatically imply” that it is. But why should we assume even that much, pragmatically or not? Because even if we had ways of forming beliefs other than our basic BFMs, “the same factors that prevent us from establishing [their] reliability ... without epistemic circularity would operate with the same force in these other cases” (125). That is to say, whatever BFM we use in arriving at our beliefs will have to face the problem of establishing its own reliability without epistemic circularity; thus, we might as well allow it for our basic BFMs, since these are the ones we already use on a daily basis and whose practice has been “firmly established” over time.

Sosa criticizes this argument in his “Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity” (1994). Sosa claims that to endorse “firm establishment” as a way to solve the indiscrimination problem is not a significant improvement on the very epistemic circularity that Alston is trying to avoid. Sosa puts Alston's proposal in these terms: “Presumably this feature of a doxastic practice of its being FE (firmly established) is thought to have an advantage over the feature of a doxastic practice of its being R (reliable)” (281). But it has no such advantage. Consider the reliability belief R(SP), which is the belief that sense perception is reliable. If Alston is right in his 1986, this belief will have been arrived at through an epistemically circular track-record argument. If we replace reliability with firm establishment, we obtain the belief FE(SP), that sense perception is a firmly established practice and thus that SP-beliefs will by and large be justified. But why think that FE(SP) differs significantly from R(SP)? Hasn't FE(SP) been arrived at epistemically circularly too? Yes, says Sosa, because we can't avoid using SP itself in order to reach FE(SP), the belief that SP is a firmly established doxastic practice, and so we're back to the same exact situation we were in with reliability. Not to mention that Alston's solution doesn't even actually solve the indiscrimination problem:

it is not hard to see that indefinitely many crazy ways  $W^*$  of forming beliefs might (conceivably) be equally effective, if used by one in one's circumstances, in leading to the belief—B:FE( $W^*$ )—that  $W^*$  is firmly established for us, even if  $W^*$  is clearly unacceptable. What is more, it is also conceivable that there be a way  $W^*$  that might in fact become firmly established, even though  $W^*$  remained unacceptable. (Sosa 281)

In short, Alston's proposition that we take refuge in firm establishment is no improvement over reliability, for it relies just as heavily on the need for epistemic circularity.

### III.5 “Agnostic” solutions (S5)

---

I have already explained in chapter II why I don’t think that this kind of solution works; see the latter half of section II.1 and the whole of section II.2 for more detailed discussion. To recap briefly, Schmitt’s and Bergmann’s argument was that so long as I don’t have any initial doubt about the reliability of a certain BFM, then I can use an ECTRA produced by that same BFM to justify my belief that the BFM itself is reliable. The reason was that it’s not necessarily the case that our epistemic condition will be a questioned source context, one where the reliability of our BFMs is called into doubt. If we are in an unquestioned source context instead, one where we’re perfectly agnostic on the reliability of our BFMs, there’s no in-principle reason why ECTRAs should be barred. I found this argument to be sensible in its explanation of how most human beings actually function, but far too weak for the purposes of a normative epistemology. It sets the bar too low by allowing completely unreflective subjects to gain knowledge, and while I’m sympathetic with Bergmann’s attitude that it’s better to allow too much knowledge than none at all, there has to be a more normatively appealing middle ground.

### III.6 Arguing “in the best circles”

---

If all other solutions fail, we are left with this modified coherentist solution:

S3\*    EC is allowed when the subject has responsibly employed *all* of the BFMs at her disposal and has run out of sources of independent verification.

Sosa himself accepts something like this in a much earlier (1994) paper, parts of which he also used for his 2007 first volume of *Virtue Epistemology*. I think that his solution is incompatible with his broader distinction of animal and reflective knowledge, or at the very least that it adds something substantial to that distinction. To understand why, I will begin with a 2003 paper by Matthias Steup that puts this S3\* solution especially clearly.

In “A Defense of Epistemic Circularity,” Steup defends the view that epistemic circularity is ultimately unproblematic because if it weren’t we couldn’t justify *any* of our beliefs, includ-

ing the claim itself that epistemic circularity is problematic. This is a good, if simplified, illustration of the S3 kind of solution developed more fully by Sosa and Van Cleve in the next section, and it shows clearly what the S1-S2 solutions discussed above are missing. Steup first lays out a simple reliability inference, the truck argument (TA):

- (T1) A good track record is evidence of reliability.
- (T2) My truck has a good track record.
- (T3) Therefore, my truck is reliable.

We would say that it is rational to make the truck argument, but we would *not* say that it is rational to make the following, very similar memory argument (MA):

- (M1) A good track record is evidence of reliability.
- (M2) My memory has a good track record.
- (M3) Therefore, my memory is reliable.

The obvious difference is that in the memory argument we are using memory to obtain a justified belief about memory's reliability, whereas in the truck argument we aren't using a truck to justify a belief about a truck's reliability. So while MA is infected with epistemic circularity the way that Alston has described, the same isn't true of TA.

However, says Steup, there isn't much difference between the two at all, and if we accept TA, then we should accept MA as well. The reason they stand or fall together is that TA uses MA to function. I can only justify premise T2 with the use of memory, because I only know that my truck has a good track record if I *remember* that it does; and I can only know that my memory is reliable by using MA. So if MA is epistemically circular, so is TA, albeit indirectly (and for Steup there's no reason that an indirectly epistemically circular argument should be any different than a direct one). Generalizing this reasoning, Steup notes that *every* argument we make to assess the reliability of cognitive faculty A will make some use of another cognitive faculty B; and we can only assess the reliability of B by another argument using C; and so on. But since we have only a finite (indeed small) number of cognitive faculties, epistemic circularity is inescapable in the final analysis. Steup thus concludes that either we bite the bullet and accept that epistemically circular arguments aren't vicious and can be justificatory or we are stuck with a slew of consequences that are both intuitively unpalatable (like rejecting the truck argument as irrational) and, which is more, plainly self-defeating.

With this argument in mind, Steup discusses Alston's (and Vogel's, and Fumerton's, and virtually everyone else's) crystal-ball gazer example. Consider an argument such as this:

(B1) My crystal ball has a good track record.

(B2) Therefore, my crystal ball is reliable.

This argument too is epistemically circular, directly so if premise B1 is arrived at by asking the crystal ball itself whether it's reliable and indirectly so if I assess that the crystal ball is reliable by using my other BFM's. In the indirect case I'll have to inquire about the reliability of the other BFM's that I used to conclude that the crystal ball's deliverances are true, and I'll want to do so without relying on each of them in turn, as explained above (for example, I can establish SP's reliability using memory, memory's by deduction, deduction's by induction, and so on). Enter the indiscrimination problem now. What if a clairvoyant, whom Steup names Walter, should use a set of clearly unreliable BFM's that justify each other's reliability in just this way? Say that Walter uses tarots to establish the reliability of crystal balls, tea leaves to establish the reliability of tarots, Ouija boards to establish the reliability of tea leaves, and so on. Clearly Walter is not in a virtuous epistemic position, because these BFM's are notoriously unreliable. But that is not the epistemic situation of *the rest of us*, says Steup, even if it's true that we use our BFM's in turn to establish one another's reliability (and thus to justify our reliability beliefs). This is because Walter's epistemic situation "is one of painful incoherence" with what he himself knows about the way the world works. If Walter used *all* of the cognitive faculties available to him, including sense perception and memory and induction and deduction, he would see that the deliverances of tarots and crystal balls are inconsistent with the deliverances of his other faculties, and it's those other faculties that give us beliefs about how the world works.<sup>4</sup>

Much the same discussion as Steup applies to the clairvoyant can be applied to Vogel's bootstrapping problem. Bootstrapping as Vogel understands it is a false problem precisely because there is actually no such thing as employing only one BFM to establish its own reliability. Each time that the driver Roxanne reads her car's gas gauge, she uses at least SP to read the

---

<sup>4</sup> A similar point is raised by William Fleisher (in an unpublished paper and personal conversations). A virtuous epistemic situation is one of "mechanism coherence," in which the deliverances of our BFM's are not inconsistent with one another. An epistemic subject such as Walter does not display mechanism coherence when he uses a small circle of BFM's to justify one another's reliability, because there *are* other BFM's that he *could* use that *would* contradict his beliefs acquired through the unreliable BFM's. I will discuss this point again briefly in the next section.

gauge; she uses memory when she remembers the previous gauge readings; she uses induction when she puts together all of her gauge-beliefs; and so on. Notice that this has nothing to do with whether or not the gauge should be considered a BFM. The gauge may well be stricken from the picture entirely and bootstrapping would remain much the same. For example, each time that Roxanne wanted to check the level of her gas tank she would have to physically insert a dipstick into it; or, if we want to remove that too, perhaps the tank can be made to be open and the gas level within it plainly visible to the naked eye. It really does not matter. What matters is that we never actually do rely on only one BFM to ascertain its own reliability. A series of mutual checks and balances is always in place. Thus, it's Vogel's bootstrapping problem that's philosophically uninteresting.

Likewise, if Steup is correct, then reliabilists shouldn't worry about the indiscrimination problem either. Of course Alston is right that using faculty A to determine A's own reliability is epistemically circular and will not help us discriminate between a reliable and an unreliable faculty, but there's no reason why we should limit our reliability claims in that way. When we use *other* BFMs, we will be able to detect inconsistencies among them and probably tell the good from the bad ones. That will still be epistemically circular, but the circle will be so large that it ought not to worry us. We can no longer be blamed, then, because we *don't* have a choice as to whether or not to escape this circle: it's simply unavoidable, because at some point we will run out of available sources of "independent" confirmation. To demand the opposite is to demand that we form certain beliefs (namely, reliability beliefs) by using some mechanism other than belief-forming mechanisms, which is impossible by definition.

Ernest Sosa argues much along the same lines as Steup's in a 1994 paper, "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity." There he notes that the problem of epistemic circularity refers to the "dialectic of the diallelus," a problem "as ancient as philosophy itself" (276). Any demands for knowledgeable philosophical understanding, such as the demands of Fumerton's idealized skeptic, derive "from a distinctively epistemic circularity that came to philosophical consciousness long ago" (276). Sosa cashes this out to mean that epistemic circularity necessarily ensues *whenever* we engage in metaepistemological reflection, and thus we shouldn't fear it.

Call "W" our total way of forming beliefs, that is, the sum of all of our BFMs. Surely any higher-level belief about W, such as the reliability belief R(W) that W is generally reliable, will have to be formed through W itself. This seems clearly true, for again it would be unreasonable



for a critic to demand that we form R(W) in another way, since W is the *total* ways in which we are able to form beliefs: there simply *isn't* another way. Sure, says Sosa, “we must sympathize with the critics of ‘externalism,’ who argue that this is to ‘give us a stone instead of bread,’ and that the externalist ‘is at best in the position of someone who ... can see what he *would* have good reason to believe if the theory he believes were true’” (279). But the reason that this is a problem for reliabilism is because it’s a problem for *any* metaepistemological analysis simply by virtue of its being a metaepistemological analysis. And if the problem is so pervasive, then what’s the sense in calling it a “problem?”

Sosa asks us to imagine even the “best conceivable outcome” of our epistemic status, a best-case scenario in which all our cognitive faculties (W) are generally reliable, our descriptions of them are correct, and we justifiably believe that they are all reliable. What more can the critic possibly demand at that point that would improve our epistemic situation? In Sosa’s words:

Just how would any further argument provide a fundamentally different and superior source of justification or rationality for our accepting the reliability of our overall way W of forming beliefs, as compared with what we are provided already by our conviction that W is indeed that overall way of ours? (284)

That is to say, any argument that we could produce to justify R(W) would not add anything to our overall justification if we are already convinced that W is in fact the total way in which we form beliefs. If there be such an argument, it “would *have* to be epistemically circular, since its premises can only qualify as beliefs of ours through the use of way W” (283). To complain about that kind of circularity would be quite silly, for it is unavoidable. Sosa’s delightful analogy is that to still complain about circularity at this point is “like pining for a patron saint of modesty (who blesses all and only those who do not bless themselves), once we have seen that there could possibly not be such a saint” (284).

This argument is very similar to Steup’s. By focusing on our total way W of forming beliefs, Sosa asks that we include all the available BFMs in assessing the reliability of each of them. Recall once again the counterfactual formulation of the indiscrimination problem that started our entire discussion of epistemic circularity:

IP\*     If EC track-record arguments are allowed, then each BFM can vouch for its own reliability, and so *even if a BFM were unreliable we would still continue to believe that it is reliable*. Thus, we are unable to tell reliable BFMs from unreliable ones.

But that's simply not the case anymore, if Steup's and Sosa's solution is adopted. Say that Walter the clairvoyant uses crystal-ball gazing as a way of forming beliefs. He will be troubled by IP\* because if crystal-ball gazing were unreliable (as it is) he would continue to believe that it is reliable, so long as he can produce an epistemically circular track-record by the use of crystal-ball gazing alone. But there's no reason to produce a track-record argument of such limited scope and succumb to IP\*. If he did, he would be epistemically irresponsible. And as we saw, it's not even true that he *can* produce such a limited track-record argument, for when he's attempting to verify the deliverances of the crystal ball (and thus its reliability) he is also using other BFM's. As Steup says, even in the truck argument I am not using *just* the truck, but at least also memory and sense perception. So even in the restricted case Walter uses many more BFM's than bootstrapping would have us think, and that improves his epistemic position. His epistemic position will continue to improve as he employs more and more BFM's, and it will be satisfactory only when Walter has used all the BFM's that are available to him.

To conclude, it is probably impossible for an epistemic agent to use an epistemically circular track-record argument to justify his belief in the reliability of an unreliable BFM by only using that one BFM. It *is* possible, instead, for an agent like Walter the clairvoyant to verify the deliverances of some of his unreliable BFM's with other unreliable BFM's, forming a small circle. But that position is still epistemically irresponsible, because the agent hasn't enlarged the circle as much as he possibly could have. Only when he does will he be allowed a kind of "epistemic circularity," because at that point it will be positively unavoidable and it would be epistemically irresponsible to demand that we avoid it.

### *III.7 Actual reliability*

---

My discussion has shown the following:

- Alstonian epistemically circular track-record arguments are insufficient to justify a reliability belief, because they set the bar too low for which such beliefs should count as being justified. The internalist critics have rightly accused re-

liabilists of endorsing a philosophically uninteresting concept of justification, and reliabilists have been unable to reply convincingly.

- The internalist critics are wrong, however, in dismissing reliabilism altogether merely because lower-level defenses of epistemically circular track-record arguments have failed, for a better and higher-level solution to the problem of epistemic circularity is available.

My discussion has not focused on other solutions that have also been proposed. Specifically, a properly contextualist solution may question the requirement that one *first* needs to be justified in believing that a source is reliable before one can justifiably believe that that one source's deliverances are true. On the other hand, infinitists may acknowledge the impossibility of foundationalist, circular, or contextualist solutions and instead defend the propriety of an infinite regress of justification. For that matter, a defense of skepticism as a reasonable epistemic position may just concede to the problem of epistemic circularity and do away with this entire discussion.

A question that remains open is that of the *actual* reliability of our BFM's. I have claimed, with Steup and Sosa, that a subject who employs all of the BFM's available to her cannot be accused of vicious circularity, for she is as justified as she's ever going to be in holding an epistemically circularly produced belief in the overall reliability of her BFM's. But it is still possible that her BFM's as a whole *are not* in fact reliable and that she may still be massively or even slightly deluded. This is also a common objection to coherentism, for example, because if coherence is the main requirement for justification, then our fully coherent (and thus justified) belief system may still not map onto the world accurately, or at all for that matter. Fleisher's requirement of mechanism coherence is supposed to defuse this threat, for the deliverances of a certain BFM (or the individual deliverances from various BFM's) will be disqualified if they are at odds with the deliverances of others, at least if the subject is sufficiently reflective. Sure, there is still no guarantee that even the deliverances of all those other BFM's will be true, but the more BFM's agree with one another, the more coherent one's epistemic position will become, and the less likely it is that one's beliefs don't map accurately onto the world.

Another way out is to construe reliability socially: my daily interactions with other human beings determine whether or not my BFM's are by and large reliable. Presumably, if they aren't I will find my interaction more difficult than if they were, or in some cases impossible. A

reason to think that this pragmatic solution doesn't fall to the actual reliability problem is that it outright rejects the *legitimacy* of the skeptical demands that motivate the problem, including for example skepticism about other minds and about the external world. But of course radical skeptics won't accept that kind of rejection. Suppose that we do endorse the pragmatic solution. How do we know—says the skeptic—that there are other minds at all, since the metaphysical makeup of the external world is itself at issue in our quest for reliability? And even if we conceded that there are other minds, how do we know that we construe their deliverances and utterances reliably, since we can only become acquainted with those things through our BFMs and the reliability of our BFMs is precisely what's at stake? And even if we should somehow discover that their deliverances and utterances are by and large true, why should we settle for a descriptive consensus rather than seek a more virtuous normativity that allows us to believe in our BFMs' reliability *for the right reasons* and not just because the other minds let us get away with it?

The skeptic could go on in this vein for quite a while—but should he? DeRose aptly notes in his aforementioned 1992 paper that this kind of skeptic “should be left to enjoy his own skepticism” (229), since it cannot possibly lead to anything philosophically interesting and is doomed to self-defeat. After all, eventually the skeptic will be forced to taste his own medicine by questioning the legitimacy of his own demands and the truth of his own assertions, and when that happened his entire system would collapse. I am not sure, in general, when it is appropriate for us to heed to skeptical demands or when we should stop trying to answer. In defense of the skeptic, we must acknowledge that the threat of skepticism is a useful deterrent against theories that make knowledge too hard; in a strong sense, it is the prime motivator of *any* normative epistemological inquiry. Against the skeptic, though, we must note that on the one hand his stated project is to “weed out the weak” and help us achieve normative stability, but on the other hand his method will succumb to itself if he's consistent in applying it, and then no normativity at all will be achieved—and if so, then we're better off finding solace in that “descriptive consensus” that the pragmatist can give us right now, no questions asked.

But at any rate, solving this major problem is unnecessary for present purposes and what I have said about epistemic circularity remains unchanged either way. Say we go with the skeptic and agree to seriously question the existence or reliability of the external world and other minds. In doing so we are still using the totality of our BFMs, which is still the best we can do as human cognizers; the skeptic himself, after all, is using his BFMs to even pose his skeptical demand. If

so, then there is no possible way that our epistemic situation can be improved, and we're back to Sosa's suggestion that the skeptic is asking for the impossible, like "pining for a patron saint of modesty (who blesses all and only those who do not bless themselves), once we have seen that there could possibly not be such a saint" (284). Or say instead that we accept the suggestion to construe reliability socially. We will still need to use our BFM's to do so, as social interaction is impossible unless we employ our BFM's in partaking in it. But of course using our BFM's in this way is already included in the requirement that we use the totality of the BFM's at our disposal, and so once again we cannot improve our epistemic position and it's still the case that a belief in the reliability of our BFM's will have to be arrived at epistemically circularly. In short, the actual reliability problem, however we choose to tackle it, is irrelevant to the necessity of justifying our reliability beliefs circularly.

## Bibliography

- Alston, William. "Epistemic Circularity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47.1 (1986): 1-30.
- , *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press (1993).
- Bergmann, Michael. "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69.3 (2004): 709-727.
- , "Externalism and Skepticism." *Philosophical Review* 109.2 (2000), 159-194.
- Cohen, Stewart. "Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65.2 (2002): 309-329.
- DeRose, Keith. "Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and *Scientia*." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 73 (1992): 220-238.
- Fumerton, Richard. *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield (1995): 173-183.
- Lammenranta, Markus. "Epistemic Circularity." *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ep-circ/>
- Reed, Baron. "Epistemic Circularity Squared? Skepticism about common sense." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72.1 (2006): 186-197.
- Schmitt, Frederick. "What Is Wrong with Epistemic Circularity?" *Philosophical Issues* 14 (2004): 379-402.
- Sosa, Ernest. "Philosophical Scepticism and Epistemic Circularity." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 68 (1994): 263-290.
- Steup, Matthias. "A Defense of Epistemic Circularity" (2003). Draft retrieved from his web site at [web.stcloudstate.edu/msteup/Circ.pdf](http://web.stcloudstate.edu/msteup/Circ.pdf)
- Van Cleve, James. "Is Knowledge Easy—or Impossible? Externalism as the Only Alternative to Skepticism." *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*. Ed. Steven Luper. Hampshire: Ashgate (2003): 45-60.
- Vogel, Jonathan. "Reliabilism Leveled." *The Journal of Philosophy* 97.11 (2000): 602-623.