

Is Agrippa's Trilemma a Practical Problem?

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Agrippa's Trilemma (AT) argues that any chain of reasoning ultimately rests on dogma, circular reasoning or an untraversable infinite chain, allowing sceptics to claim that no knowledge is justified (Sextus Empiricus, 2002). This essay will argue that this poses no *practical* problem for justifying beliefs.

AT assumes that all beliefs must either be (a) "derived beliefs" built up on other beliefs or (b) "basic beliefs" which are not derived from other beliefs. For any derived belief, the prior chain of argument can be analysed until the justification terminates by referring to basic beliefs (dogmatism) or beliefs already in the system (circularity), or does not terminate (infinite regress). These cases are not mutually exclusive. Theoretic debates between supporters of the three prongs of AT have defended Foundationalism, Coherentism and Infinitism respectively. None of these approaches appear to have fully escaped the criticisms AT levels against them. Accepting AT's assumptions creates a formal system abstracted from the real world, in which the logic is inescapable.

This essay first discusses the value of justification; proposing that it is the degree of justification which is practically important, not whether knowledge claims are legitimate. As justification is a matter of degree (rather than an absolute concept) and the value of justifying a belief is not infinite, it is possible to seek the level of justification required for a particular purpose. The regress terminates at epistemic norms, 'animal knowledge' or experiences. Though the regress has terminated, there is nothing to stop these apparently 'basic' beliefs from being interrogated (becoming 'derived' beliefs).

A premise here is that justified beliefs have instrumental value: they can help make decisions, determine how to act and react, individually or collectively. There is an inductive basis for this: examples of this are commonplace; counterexamples are occurrent but rarer. It is hard to see how someone decides how to act in the world without knowledge of the situation with anything better than luck. Knowledge might also have innate knowledge, as Plato and Aristotle have attested (Pritchard, 2014; Williams, 2001), but this essay focuses on instrumental value for practical purposes.

Furthermore, the instrumental value of justified belief is proportional to the purposes (or potential purposes) it serves. Defining instrumental value as the value that a justified belief has as means to another end, the value of the belief is inherited from these ends, which may be multiple.

AT is a challenge to the justification element of knowledge, not truth or belief. Justification is held as a necessary condition for knowledge by many writers, despite Gettier's (1963) argument that "justified truth belief" is insufficient to define knowledge.

Justification is replaced by 'reliable methods' in reliabilism, which maintains that knowledge is true belief acquired through a method likely to lead to the truth. Reliabilism is externalist, as it relies on factors outside the subject's mind, rather than solely on internal justification. This extends to 'animal knowledge' whereby the subject does not understand the basis of their knowledge (Sosa, 2007). In one sense, reliabilism escapes AT, as the regress ends with a reliable method and its application. Nevertheless, sceptics can still question the justification for proposing that 'reliable methods' render knowledge. Moving from animal knowledge into 'reflective knowledge' where one is aware of the basis of one's knowledge, and holds a 'defensibly apt' belief, it appears that the challenge of AT must be grappled with.

Anti-realism challenges the importance of truth to the definition of knowledge, maintaining that truth cannot outstrip best opinion (Pritchard, 2014), implying the 'most justified' belief on a matter at the 'end of enquiry' is true. Whether truth is a necessary condition for knowledge or not is irrelevant for AT: it challenges whether beliefs can be justified. Therefore, this essay will not ask about 'knowledge' vis-a-vis AT, but about 'justified belief'.

This switch in focus enables a switch from the absolute concept of knowledge to the non-absolute concept of justification. Dretske (1981) argues that propositional knowledge is an absolute concept, rather than a matter of degree: one either knows something or not. One cannot know a proposition more than another. Justification is a matter of degree, however, as one can be more-justified in holding a belief than another. Dretske bridges the gap between the two by arguing all knowledge must be sufficiently justified, and no knowledge is more 'sufficiently justified' than any other.

Justifying a belief is important in two ways: Firstly, justified belief is more stable than unjustified belief: as Plato (2013) argues, there is less risk of being overturned by falsely justified belief. Secondly, justification enables us to develop more beliefs.

Considering the instrumental value of a justified belief, both value and justification are matters of degree, rather than absolute concepts. A certain level of justification provides a certain value. Given the cost of increasing the degree of a belief's justification is not zero (thinking or seeking out justification consumes time, at least), it is the degree of justification which is practically important, not whether knowledge claims are valid.

Accepting the need for a certain degree of justification for a particular situation, does not, in itself, escape the regress problem posed by AT. To explore how the regress of justification ceases in practical cases, this essay initially steps away from AT's formal logic, instead taking a 'particularist' approach (Chisholm, 1982) by assuming knowledge of instances of justification and then extrapolating principles.

Propositions such as 'There is a tree in front of me' are often taken to be justified by perception ('I see a tree') and may be initially considered to be a basic belief. Since there is a possibility of being

deceived, for example by an artist's projection of a tree, the proposition does not strictly follow from the perception. Further justification could be requested, and another premise such as 'spontaneous beliefs about immediate sensory experience are likely to be true' may be offered as an additional basic belief.

Nevertheless, justification for this too could be asked for, and a response given based on many previous similar observations which seldom turn out to be incorrect. For Coherentism, this could be seen as a fact which coheres with all other similar perceptual beliefs, and are mutually-supporting. For Infitism, this is another step in the inevitably-unending regress. For Alston's (1976) 'Minimal Foundationalism', which does not require basic beliefs to be incorrigible, this is a revision to what was considered a basic belief before (it was a 'mistake' to initially think that 'There is a tree in front of me' could be a basic belief).

There is a requirement for a belief such as (A) 'clear and distinct perceptions tend to be reliable sources of knowledge' to get from 'I clearly and distinctly perceive an x in front of me' to 'there is (likely to be) an x in front of me'. Whether (A) is considered basic or not could be the subject of further discussion.

There are two things here: an experience of perceiving a tree, and a supporting belief about the relationship of perceptions and truth (A). The experience itself can be distinguished from knowledge, as alluded to by Wittgenstein (1963) and Putnam (1981), though Putnam argues that it is possible to have knowledge about one's experiences, for example to move from the experience of seeing a tree to thinking the words "I am seeing a tree" and knowing that it is correct. Such experiences are also included in BonJour defence of Coherentism whereby 'spontaneous beliefs' about immediate sensory experience provide valid justification (the 'Observation Requirement'). Similarly, Haack's Foundherentism requires knowledge to be partially justified by experiences (perceptual, memorial or introspective). These belief systems, therefore, must include a belief akin to (A) that perceptions have some epistemic merit.

It is hard to justify (A) entirely: one might appeal to a multitude of occurrences in the past in which perception has appeared to yield reliable truth, in the sense that subsequent perceptions did not conflict with the initial belief (compared to the relatively small number of contrary experiences), assuming the reliability of memory. Sceptics could still contend that all of these perceptions are misperceptions. This challenge, however, does not seem to be an articulation of AT, but of the Cartesian sceptical argument. In reality, there is a limited number of perceptions which anyone has ever had, so in one way, these perceptual beliefs are basic. After a person's first ever perception – assuming this was possible, and that the person was somehow an adult with linguistic capacity and not a baby – it would not be possible to justify (A) on previous experiences. But it is possible to justify that first experience retrospectively based on (A) after a very large number of experiences. So arises something of the Coherentism's circularity; though it would be possible to model the same thing foundationally with an initial layer of beliefs of the form 'I believe I perceive an x'

culminating is (A), then leading to a further layer of beliefs of the form 'there is (like to be) an x'.

Memorial and testimonial knowledge similarly seem to require some sort of 'supporting' belief to justify their epistemic merit. A draft of such beliefs could be (B) 'memories which are clear and distinct and coherent with other knowledge are likely to be true' and (C) 'testimonies issued by agents who have no incentive to lie nor are judged potentially unreliable, and do not have incredible content are likely to be true'. Such a supporting belief is required since there is no immediate reason why memory/testimony should be taken as justified, and cases of each being fallible are not infrequent. In both cases, one justification seems to be that they are coherent with other memories/testimonies, which appears to be circular reasoning. Although some perceptual 'triangulation' of testimony/memory is possible – particularly for things close in time and space – it is impossible to go back in time to check the state of affairs at the time when the memory was created (or the testimony learnt). Hume (1886) may contest that this provides adequate justification for knowledge; this does not mean there is no justification for a belief, or that further scrutiny of matters cannot increase the degree of justification.

There may also be logical justifications of (C) such as the argument (Coady, 1973) that the vast majority of testimonies must correlate with observable reality in order for languages to be meaningful.

Introspective knowledge is often taken to be incorrigible to the individual, based on an understanding of reality involving individuals alone having direct access to their minds, with thoughts/feelings being exactly that which the individual experiences. This understanding of reality can in turn be supported by various arguments, such as the Argument from Analogy (Pritchard, 2014), which usually have some empirical content (relying on perception and memory). The incorrigibility of introspection, however, is contestable. It seems that another supporting belief is required to justify introspective experiences, something like (D) 'Individuals have direct, infallible knowledge about their mental states'

To generalise, all the above 'sources' of knowledge, seems to require something like (E) 'perceptions/testimonies/memories/introspective experiences can be considered likely to be true in the absence of adverse factors'. This list of 'sources' might not be exhaustive, but covers much of the justification practically required for beliefs. Regardless of the methodological approach taken, the proposition (E) then operates on an experience to generate a justified belief.

Reason can be seen as a 'source' of knowledge in the sense that it can create new knowledge, but nevertheless appears to rely on known premises as inputs, so cannot be a source of 'basic' beliefs. Nevertheless, it seems there needs to be a 'supporting' belief which justifies the use of reasoning, both for deduction (where the conclusion follows certainly from the premises) and non-deductive reasoning (particularly induction, but for other forms which this essay will overlook for brevity).

It has been argued that deduction relies on axioms which are self-evident in a Foundational manner. According to Chisholm (1982, pp.599) these axioms are 'necessary' and cannot be understood without knowing them to be true: for example, the Law of Noncontradiction (LNC; 'contrary propositions cannot simultaneously be true') and modus ponens (if p is true, and 'p implies q', then q is true). To some, these are 'self evident' as doubting them seems futile, and so are justified on that basis. Any argument is self-undermining. AT itself is subject to this: as a deductive argument concluding that all arguments have an unsatisfactory basis, it concludes that it itself has an unsatisfactory basis.

There is an argument that there is circularity in the justification of such axioms, for example, an justification of LNC rests on LNC as a premise. Once again, this is a complex question which is much debated but is outside the scope of this essay, save to say that it appears that, in order for an epistemology to justify the use of deductive logic, there must exist a belief (or set thereof), akin to (F) 'The axioms of deductive logic are true and their application to true premises yields true conclusions'.

The use of Induction has been infamously difficult to justify. Hume (1902) raised the problem of induction, showing that induction does not appear to be something one can perceive/introspect, nor is it derivable by deduction. The most obvious justification for induction is that it seems to have worked in the past, or that there is a uniformity of nature, either of which can only be justified by induction. For Foundationalism, this is problematic, though Coherentism accepts this circularity (though charged with arbitrariness). Much academic debate has been pursued in this area, including attempts to justify induction (Millican, 2010) on the basis of its reliability by Van Cleve, or probability by Blackburn. There are also attempts to avoid the issue entirely such as Strawson's claim that induction is part of what it is to be rational, or Popper's verificationism (Pritchard, 2014). Again, there appears a need for a belief like (G) 'Application of inductive reasoning on true premises is (somewhat) likely to yield true conclusions'.

One argument for the use of Induction of particular interest to this enquiry is Reichenbach's Pragmatic defence of the use of induction. Rather than arguing for the truth of a belief like (G), Reichenbach argues that it is rational to use (G) in the absence of any other guidance for knowing likely facts about as-yet-unobserved external phenomena: If (G) is not employed, there is no guide for decisions; if it is employed, there is some possibility it may work and our decisions benefit from it. This is not dissimilar to Hume's position, that we should use Induction despite not being able to justify it. There is a notable absence of philosophers arguing against the use of justification, even if there is respect for the problem and disagreement on how to tackle it.

This Pragmatic reasoning can also be applied to propositions (A)-(F): even if we do not have a full justification of each, it is better to use them with the possibility that they are beneficial rather than dismiss them and have no guide. These propositions are equivalent to reliabilism's 'epistemic norms' or Bonjour's global 'contextually basic beliefs'. These sometimes get questioned in

practical arguments, for example questioning the application of a logical deduction because of an ambiguous middle term; this is because (A)-(F) are imprecise: effort and skill are required to hone these rough principles. Perhaps, we step over a boundary into philosophy when we question these epistemic norms. Wittgenstein (1969) postulates that it is bizarre to debate whether or not one is seeing a tree, unless one explains that one is philosophising.

This essay has argued that there are a set of epistemic norms which have some degree of justification, which, combined with experience, can justify beliefs sufficiently for a given purpose. No claims are made about the precision of the norms, the completeness of the set, or that these have been sufficiently justified – just that they can be specified and justified sufficiently for a given purpose. Note that it is not necessary for the subject of the belief to be explicitly aware of these epistemic norms to apply them: a child could apply (A) and be justified in knowing that they can see a tree without an explicit belief in (A); or the rules of deduction can be applied without explicitly understanding them. The regression here then ends in ‘animal’ beliefs rather than explicit norms.

AT, therefore, does not seem to be a practical problem in the sense of being "a situation that is unsatisfactory and causes difficulties for people." (Collins, 2024), but could be thought of as a problem in the sense similar to "a puzzle that requires logical thought or mathematics to solve it." Yet there does not seem to be a good reason why AT needs *solving*. A rewording of it gives a reasonable statement about the bases for argument in the world we inhabit:

1. Some beliefs can be taken as basic and sufficiently justified for a particular purpose.
2. These beliefs can always be further integrated, regressing to a lower level.
3. Some degree of interreferentiality may exist between different propositions, which may buttress the reasons for believing in them. (This point has not been explored substantially in this essay, and so is presented as a hypothetical)

The importance of AT is not as a sceptical argument, but to help examine the nature of justification. Focusing on the degree and means of justification, rather than whether the absolute term 'knowledge' applies, could help resolve practical matters.

This approach does not leave practical justification without problem. There could be disagreements about, for example, the level of justification or specificity of the inductive conclusions, and disagreements over which testimony can be taken as true. The work of many philosophers has helped unpick the abstract assumptions of AT and this essay has hopefully sewn these together sufficiently to waylay concerns about AT undermining practical decisions.

(2983 words)

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