

On Peter Klein's Concept of Arbitrariness

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Abstract

According to Peter Klein, foundationalism fails because it allows a vicious form of arbitrariness. In this paper, I critically discuss his concept of arbitrariness. I argue that the condition Klein takes to be necessary and sufficient for an epistemic item to be arbitrary is neither necessary nor sufficient. I also argue that Klein's concept of arbitrariness is not a concept of something that is necessarily vicious. Even if Klein succeeds in establishing that foundationalism allows what he regards as arbitrariness, this does not yet mean that he confronts it with a sound objection.

Keywords

Arbitrariness, Foundationalism, Justification, Peter Klein, Reasons

1. Introduction: Klein's objection to foundationalism

In several recent papers, Peter Klein argues that foundationalism fails because it allows justificatory arbitrariness. Says Klein:

foundationalism is unacceptable because it advocates accepting an arbitrary reason at the base, that is, a reason for which there are no further reasons making it even slightly better

to accept than any of its contraries. (Klein 1999, 297; see also Klein 2000; Klein 2007; and Klein 2012.)

Klein's objection has been criticized by several foundationalists. Assuming (what they think is) Klein's concept of arbitrariness, they argue that foundationalism does *not* allow arbitrariness. (See Bergmann 2004; Howard-Snyder 2005; Howard-Snyder and Coffman 2006; and Huemer 2003.) In the present paper my approach will be different. Instead of assuming Klein's concept of arbitrariness and employing it in evaluating his objection, I restrict myself to a critical examination of his very concept: what conditions does Klein take to be necessary and sufficient for epistemic arbitrariness? Are those conditions really necessary and sufficient? And is Klein's concept of arbitrariness a concept of something that is vicious?

I shall argue, first, that the condition Klein cites as a necessary and sufficient condition for arbitrariness is in fact *neither* necessary *nor* sufficient; and, second, that even if it were (at least) sufficient, the arbitrariness it would involve need not be vicious. In Section 2, I explain the condition Klein takes to be both necessary and sufficient for some epistemic item to be arbitrary. In Section 3 I argue that this condition is neither necessary nor sufficient and that, when its satisfaction *does* give rise to arbitrariness, this arbitrariness may take very different forms. In Section 4, I discuss whether Klein's concept of arbitrariness is a concept of something *vicious*. I argue that even if foundationalism is shown to allow arbitrariness in Klein's sense, this need not imply that it allows something unacceptable.

2. Klein's concept of arbitrariness

What does Klein mean by 'arbitrariness'? And what items does he think foundationalism allows to be arbitrary? As to the second question, Klein is not very clear. Sometimes he speaks of arbitrary *reasons* (Klein 1999, 297, 299, 303); sometimes of arbitrary *beliefs* (299, 304); sometimes of arbitrary *assertions* (303); sometimes of arbitrary *propositions* (304; Klein 2000,

12); and sometimes of arbitrary *suppositions* (Klein 2000, 8).¹ Henceforth I only discuss arbitrary *beliefs*, but most of what I say will apply to other epistemic items just as well.

When does Klein think a belief is arbitrary? In order to answer this question, let us consider his so-called ‘Principle of Avoiding Arbitrariness’:

For all x , if a person, S , has a justification for x , then there is some reason, r_1 , available to S for x ; and there is some reason, r_2 , available to S for r_1 ; etc. (Klein 1999, 299)

According to Klein, this principle entails that “the chain of reasons cannot end with an arbitrary reason—one for which there is no further reason.” (299) Thus if a belief is not to be arbitrary, there has to be a reason available for it. However, Klein argues, there just being *a* reason available does not suffice, for it appears that for *any* belief there is a reason available. For instance, consider S ’s belief that *all fish have fins*. In a sense, *a* reason for this belief is the proposition (or possible fact) that *all fish wear army boots and anything wearing army boots has fins*. However, according to Klein, the availability of this reason hardly suffices for S ’s belief not being arbitrary (Klein 1999, 300). Thus, in order to rule out the possibility of ad-hoc reasons, Klein introduces the requirement that a reason be *objectively available*. By this he means that a reason, r , must satisfy certain quality requirements. For instance, r could be regarded objectively available as a reason for p if r has some sufficiently high probability and the conditional probability of p given r is sufficiently high; or if an impartial, informed observer would accept r as a reason for p .²

However, while a reason’s being objectively available is necessary for a belief not to be arbitrary, in Klein’s view it is not sufficient. For if it were sufficient, then any belief for which there is an objectively available reason would not be arbitrary, even if judged from the perspective of the person holding the belief it is merely an unfounded guess or hunch. Thus, Klein argues, a reason also has to be *subjectively available*. By this he means that it must be “properly hooked up” with beliefs she already holds; it must be a reason that she would endorse

at least “in some appropriately restricted circumstances.” (Klein 1999, 300) In a later paper Klein says that a reason that p is subjectively available to S “just in case there is an epistemically credible way of S ’s coming to believe that p given S ’s current epistemic practices.” (Klein 2007, 13)

Klein holds that a belief can avoid being arbitrary by having a reason that is both objectively and subjectively available. Thus he regards *the absence of an objectively and subjectively available reason* as at least a *necessary* condition for a belief’s being arbitrary. For if *having* a reason that is objectively and subjectively available suffices for *avoiding* arbitrariness, then certainly *not* having such a reason is necessary for *being* arbitrary. Presumably Klein also thinks the absence of an objectively and subjectively available reason is *sufficient* for being arbitrary. This can be inferred from the way he presents his arbitrariness objection: since foundationalism allows (basic) beliefs for which there is no such reason, it allows arbitrariness (Klein 1999, 303; Klein 2000, 16-7; and Klein 2007, 14). (Henceforth I use ‘objective’ for ‘objectively available,’ ‘subjective’ for ‘subjectively available’ and ‘objective and subjective reason’ for ‘reason that is objectively and subjectively available’.)

3. Is Klein’s condition really necessary and sufficient?

According to Klein, a belief is arbitrary if and only if it does not have an objective and subjective reason. Is this condition *really* necessary and sufficient, though? This is highly questionable. However, that entails that any belief that *has* an objective and subjective reason is *not* arbitrary. Yet one can easily think of beliefs that have an objective and subjective reason but are nevertheless arbitrary.

First, consider beliefs which have an objective and subjective reason but which are not also *based* on that reason. Suppose S holds a belief, B , that *Helena is the capital of Montana*. Since the *World Almanac* says Helena is the capital of Montana, B has an objective reason. Moreover, since S can check this almanac with very little effort, this reason is also subjective to

S. Hence on Klein's concept *B* does not count as arbitrary. However, if S came to hold *B*, not after (and *based* on) checking the almanac, but as a result of mere guesswork, her belief still seems arbitrary.

Second, think of cases where S's belief has an objective and subjective reason, but where she believes there are equally good (or even better) reasons for believing the contrary. Suppose S asks her trustworthy German colleague what is the capital of Germany, and the colleague answers that it is Berlin. If another trustworthy colleague of S's tells her it is Bonn, then for both the belief that it is Berlin and the belief that it is Bonn there is an objective and subjective reason. So on Klein's concept, both beliefs would not be arbitrary. However, suppose that S believes her colleagues are equally trustworthy, and that she has no other reasons for favoring one belief over the other. If, in that case, S were nevertheless to believe that *Berlin is the capital* (or that *Bonn is the capital*), her belief would still be arbitrary: she could have believed the contrary for a reason that, judged from her point of view, is just as good.³

As these counterexamples show, Klein is mistaken in holding that every belief that has an objective and subjective reason is not arbitrary. Hence it is not the case that the absence of an objective and subjective reason is a necessary condition for a belief's arbitrariness.

Is Klein's condition a *sufficient* condition for arbitrary beliefs, then? This suggestion seems more promising. However, here it is important to realize that Klein's condition describes the absence of a reason having *two* properties. Since Klein's condition describes the absence of a reason that is *both* objective *and* subjective, its not being met can be realized in more than one way. If Klein's condition is sufficient for arbitrariness, then a belief, *B*, is arbitrary in all of the following cases:

- (1) *B* has no reason at all;
- (2) *B* has no reason that is either objective or subjective;
- (3) *B* has no subjective reason;
- (4) *B* has no objective reason.

Importantly, however, insofar as these cases involve arbitrariness, they may do so in ways that are significantly different. In order to show this, I first describe two factors, neglected by Klein, which were already implicit in the discussion above and which are very relevant for determining whether a belief is arbitrary. First, whether a belief is arbitrary and, if so, in what sense, also depends on whether it is *based* on a reason. As we saw above, when S's belief *B* has an objective and subjective reason, *R*, this will hardly make for *B*'s not being arbitrary if *B* is not also *based* on *R*. On the other hand, if *B* is based on a reason, this works in favor of *B*'s not being arbitrary.⁴ Second, whether S's belief *B* is arbitrary also depends on what *other beliefs* S holds. Suppose S holds *B* for what she believes is a good reason. However, suppose that S also believes that *Q* and *Q* implies that *B* is false. If S regards the reason for *B*'s falsity just as good as (or even better than) the reason for *B*'s truth, then *B* still seems arbitrary: although S holds *B* for what she thinks is a good reason, she could have held one of *B*'s contraries for a reason she considers to be equally good.

Now does Klein's allegedly sufficient condition render beliefs in cases (1) – (4) arbitrary? Is *B* arbitrary if (1) obtains, that is, when *B* has no reason at all? Presumably it is. For if *B* has no reason at all, then it has neither a good reason nor even a bad reason. In that case, nothing speaks in favor of holding *B*, and it appears as though one could equally well believe *B*'s opposite.

Cases (2) and (3) seem to be different from (1). I first discuss (3), then (2). When (3) obtains *B* appears to be arbitrary too, but not necessarily in the same sense as in (1). Consider S's belief, *B*, that *Helena is the capital of Montana*. Given (3), *B* has no subjective reason. Hence it is reasonable to say that *judged from S's perspective*, *B* is arbitrary. Since she has no clue whatsoever as to why *B* would be true, judged from her point of view one may wonder why she still holds *B* and not some contrary belief. However, since the *World Almanac* lists Helena as the capital of Montana, *B* has an *objective* reason. Now suppose that S once came to hold *B* by reading the Almanac, but that she does not remember this. And suppose that S does not

believe anything to the effect that *B* is false. In that case *S*'s belief appears far less arbitrary. Although *S* is incapable of *citing* a good reason for *B*, there *is* such a good reason, her belief is *based* on that reason, and she does *not* have any *opposing* beliefs. What induces one to regard *S*'s belief arbitrary is not so much there not *being* a good reason for *B*, but rather an existing reason's being *inaccessible* to *S*. So although (3) does involve arbitrariness, this arbitrariness need not be of the kind involved in (1).⁵

Similar things can be said about (2). Suppose *S* holds *B*. Given (2), *B* has no reason that is either objective or subjective. However, this does not mean that *B* has no reasons *at all*: there may still be (non-objective or) *bad* reasons for *B*. Yet, since these reasons are not subjective, *S* is unable to cite them as reasons for *B*.⁶ Hence judged from *S*'s perspective, *B* may be considered arbitrary. However, if *B* *does* have a reason, and is also *based* on this reason, and if *S* does *not* have any *opposing* beliefs, then *B*'s arbitrariness appears less pressing than the arbitrariness involved in (1).

Finally, consider (4), where *B* has no objective reason. It is doubtful whether (4) necessarily involves arbitrariness. Consider *S*'s belief, *B*, that *Nashville is the capital of Montana*. Given (4), *B* has no objective reason. Yet why would that render *B* arbitrary? The fact that *B* has no objective reason does not preclude *B* from having a *subjective* reason. Suppose that *S* has a subjective reason for holding *B*, viz. *Q*: *the fact that her little niece told her so*. Thus when asked why she holds *B*, *S* cites *Q* as her reason. Suppose, moreover, that *B* is also *based* on *Q*, and that *S* does not hold an opposing belief. Since the only reason *S* can cite (and *B* can be based on) is a *bad* reason, it may be that *B* is *unjustified*. However, given the central role played by *Q* as a *reason for B*, it is unwarranted to call *B* arbitrary. Crucially, though, if (4) allows beliefs that are not arbitrary, then Klein's condition is *not a sufficient condition*. After all, if it *were* a sufficient condition, then *B* would be arbitrary in *all* of the four cases mentioned above.

Let me sum up the argument of this section. According to Klein, a belief is arbitrary *if and only if* it does not have an objective and subjective reason. Yet, upon closer inspection the

absence of such a reason proves to be neither necessary nor sufficient for a belief's arbitrariness. Moreover, insofar as beliefs *are* rendered arbitrary on Klein's concept, their arbitrariness may take very different forms.

4. Is Klein's arbitrariness necessarily vicious?

Klein's condition for beliefs being arbitrary is neither necessary nor sufficient. However, let us, for the sake of the argument, assume that this conclusion is false and that Klein's condition is at least *sufficient* for arbitrariness. That is, let us assume that it does not allow counterexamples like the one adduced in the discussion of case (4). If some epistemic theory allows beliefs lacking an objective and subjective reason, does it thereby allow something *unacceptable* or *vicious*? It is clear that Klein considers arbitrariness to involve something deeply problematic. If a belief is arbitrary, he says, it is a belief "for which there are no further reasons making it even slightly better to accept than any of its contraries" (Klein 1999, 297).⁷ Is arbitrariness, as it may be involved by a belief lacking an objective and subjective reason, necessarily vicious in this strong sense?

Consider (1) again. S's belief, *B*, has no reason at all: neither a good reason nor a bad reason. Since there *is* no reason for *B*, neither is there a reason that S can *adduce* in favor of *B*. In fact, nothing favors S's holding *B* instead of any other belief. In that case, it is clear that Klein's characterization of arbitrariness applies to *B*: there is no reason whatsoever to make it 'even slightly better to hold *B* rather than any of its contraries.' So if a theory allows arbitrariness by allowing beliefs of sort (1), this arbitrariness is indeed vicious in the way Klein considers it to be.

However, it is doubtful whether the arbitrariness of beliefs in (2), (3) and (4) must be vicious in this strong sense as well. Due to considerations of space, I restrict myself to case (3). Again consider S's belief, *B*, that *Helena is the capital of Montana*. Given (3), *B* has no subjective reason. However, since the *World Almanac* lists Helena as the capital of Montana, *B*

has an *objective* reason, say *R*. Is *B*'s arbitrariness vicious? Crucially, here Klein's characterization of the vicious nature of arbitrariness does *not* apply: it is not the case that *B* is a belief without 'reasons making it even slightly better to accept *B* rather than any of its contraries.' After all, since there is a good reason *for B*, there also is a good reason for *accepting B*. Hence cases of sort (3) allow beliefs whose arbitrariness is clearly not as vicious as Klein assumes it must be.

However, since the arbitrariness involved by beliefs in (3) does not derive from the *absence* of good reasons, but from their *unavailability*, is not the arbitrariness of such beliefs vicious in a different sense? For instance, does not their arbitrariness entail that these beliefs are *unjustified*? I think that one's answer to this question is going to depend on the position one takes in the ongoing debate between internalists and externalists.

Again consider S's belief *B*, for which *R* is an objective reason. Suppose, just as in the discussion of Section 3, that *B* is also *based* on *R*, and that S not also holds opposing beliefs. Now it may strike internalists as intuitively obvious that S's incapability to cite *R* as a reason renders *B* arbitrary in such a way that *B* cannot count as justified. However, externalists do *not* have this intuition. There just *being* a good reason for *B*, and *B*'s being *based* on this reason, perhaps together with S's not having an opposing belief, strikes them as sufficient for *B* to be justified. According to externalists, the fact that judged from S's perspective *B* may appear arbitrary need not at all deprive *B* of its justification. Hence in their view *B*'s being arbitrary in this sense is not vicious at all.

Who is right? This question has been long debated, and a resolution is not to be expected soon. Internalists emphasize their intuitions about the importance of *reasons being available*, whereas externalists keep adducing intuitions about the value of beliefs *being based on good reasons*. Or, in William Alston's terms, internalists and externalists press different *epistemic desiderata* (Alston 2005). Both parties agree that a belief's *being based on adequate reasons* and a subject *having access to these reasons* are valuable from an epistemic point of view. However, when *B* is based on an adequate reason, but this reason is not accessible to S, one's

judgment about the epistemic status of *B* depends on which desideratum one prefers. Internalists press the access desideratum: when *B* has a good reason, but *S* is unable to cite that reason, *B* cannot be justified. Externalists, on the other hand, emphasize the evidence desideratum: as long as *B* is based on an adequate reason, that may suffice for *S* to be justified in holding *B* (even if, e.g., *S* has forgotten that reason).

As Alston shows, if internalists and externalists both stick to their *intuitions*, it is hard (if not impossible) to find a neutral way to resolve their dispute: internalists keep attacking externalists with intuitions not shared by the latter, and vice versa. (Alston 2005, 53-57.) For Alston this stand-off in debates about epistemic justification is a reason for dispensing with justification-oriented epistemology altogether and, instead, for focusing on the nature and importance of the various epistemic desiderata. However, for the purposes of this paper it suffices to note that whether an arbitrary belief is *viciously* arbitrary in the sense that it is thereby *unjustified*, depends on one's position in the highly complicated debate between internalists and externalists. Since resolving this debate in neutral terms appears hard or even impossible, we should not claim that the arbitrariness of beliefs that satisfy Klein's concept is necessarily vicious.

In sum, then, even if we assume that all beliefs lacking an objective and subjective reason are thereby arbitrary, this does not yet imply that such beliefs are problematic or unacceptable. If a belief is arbitrary in virtue of not having any reason *at all*, it is warranted to regard its arbitrariness vicious in the way Klein holds it must be, viz. such that it thereby is a 'belief without any reason making it even slightly better to accept it rather than any of its contraries.' However, not *all* beliefs lacking an objective and subjective reason are arbitrary in this strong sense. Neither is it clear that their arbitrariness must be vicious in the weaker sense that it renders them unjustified. The complex status of the debate between internalists and externalists rules out such a strong conclusion.

5. Conclusion

Let me sum up the points I have made in this paper. According to Klein, foundationalism is unacceptable because it allows a vicious form of arbitrariness. As a necessary and sufficient condition for a belief being arbitrary Klein cites the absence of a reason that is both objective and subjective. Upon inspection, though, this condition turns out to be *neither necessary nor sufficient*. Moreover, even if Klein's condition is *assumed* to be sufficient, this need not imply that all beliefs satisfying it are arbitrary in a vicious way. The arbitrariness of beliefs lacking an objective and subjective reason need not be vicious in the strong sense that Klein has in mind, but neither need it be vicious in a weaker sense. Even if Klein succeeds in establishing that foundationalism allows beliefs lacking an objective and subjective reason, this does not yet mean that he has confronted foundationalism with a sound objection.⁸

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Notes

¹ Elsewhere Klein also speaks of *treating a proposition as foundational* (Klein 1998, 924), of *accepting some propositions* (Klein 1999, 301), and of *stopping to give reasons for propositions* (Klein 2000, 21) as being arbitrary.

² After having cited seven possible accounts of objective availability, Klein adds that it need not be the case that any of them proves to be ultimately acceptable, but that also another, unmentioned account could turn out to be the best one. (Klein 1999, 300.)

³ Here, as well as later on, I assume that it is psychologically possible that S holds *B* instead of one of *B*'s contraries even if S believes the reasons for one of *B*'s contraries to be just as good as the reasons for *B*. My assumption is similar to Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser's assumption that there can be genuine *picking situations*: situations where one believes there to be no (significant) difference between two alternatives, and where one can (and does) nevertheless select one alternative instead of another. (Ullmann-Margalit and Morgenbesser 1977, 757-65.)

⁴ For some plausible accounts of the basing relation, see Alston 1989, 227-229; and Turri 2011.

⁵ My talk of beliefs being 'less arbitrary' than others indicates that I think of arbitrariness as a gradual concept. Although much more could be said on this issue, I will not do that in the present paper.

⁶ One may doubt whether 'reasons' that are neither objective nor subjective still deserve to be called *reasons*. I follow Klein in assuming that they may still qualify as reasons. (Klein 1999, 300.) However, one can also maintain that such 'reasons' are *not* properly called reasons. In that case, beliefs of sort (2) would be beliefs of the same sort as those in (1), viz. beliefs that have no reason at all and hence are clearly arbitrary.

⁷ Daniel Howard-Snyder, one of the foundationalists who defend foundationalism against Klein's objection, also holds that this is what is involved by a belief's being arbitrary. (Howard-Snyder 2005, 20.)

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