

# *Moral Applicability of Agrippa's Trilemma*

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*According to Agrippa's trilemma, an attempt to justify something leads to either infinite regress, circularity, or dogmatism. This essay examines whether and to what extent the trilemma applies to ethics. There are various responses to the trilemma, such as foundationalism, coherentism, contextualism, infinitism, and German idealism. Examining those responses, the essay shows that the trilemma applies at least to rational justification of contentful moral beliefs. This means that rationalist ethics based on any contentful moral belief are rationally unjustifiable.*

**Keywords:** Agrippa's trilemma, regress argument, ethics, foundationalism, coherentism, contextualism, infinitism, German idealism

## 1. *Introduction*

According to Agrippa's trilemma, an attempt to justify something leads to either infinite regress, circularity, or dogmatism. This essay examines whether and to what extent the trilemma applies to ethics. There are various responses to the trilemma, such as foundationalism, coherentism, contextualism, infinitism, and German idealism. Examining those responses, I show that the trilemma applies at least to rational justification of contentful moral beliefs.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I point out that rationalist ethics based on any contentful moral belief are rationally unjustifiable.

<sup>1</sup> Contentful moral beliefs are moral beliefs which have content. In contrast, empty moral beliefs are moral beliefs which have no content. For example, the belief "it is always moral to act morally" is an empty moral belief.

## 2. Agrippa's Trilemma

According to Agrippa's trilemma (also called the *Münchhausen trilemma*), an attempt to justify something leads to one of the following three alternatives: (1) infinite regress—tracing grounds endlessly, which is practically impossible; (2) circularity—repeating a ground given earlier, which is logically unconvincing; or (3) dogmatism—abandoning the attempt and accepting a ground at some point, which is arbitrary.<sup>2</sup> In the following sections, I will examine various responses to the trilemma, and show that it applies at least to rational justification of morality.

## 3. Foundationalism

According to Michael Williams, foundational theories of knowledge and justification “identify beliefs that are justifiably held without requiring further back-up.” He calls those beliefs “basic beliefs.”<sup>3</sup> As basic beliefs, let us examine Apel's transcendental pragmatics of language, mathematics, logic, the Erlangen School, and immediate experience.

### 3.1 *Apel's Transcendental Pragmatics of Language*

Apel transforms Kant's transcendental philosophy, shifting the focus from consciousness to language. Kant holds that acquiring knowledge is an individual matter. Yet according to Apel, “the *evidence for consciousness* in Descartes', Kant's and even Husserl's sense is insufficient to ground the *validity* of knowledge.” For valid knowledge, it is necessary to elevate “personal evidence for consciousness to a paradigm of the language-game.”<sup>4</sup> Since the language-game takes place only within a communication community, Apel thinks that this community is the condition of the possibility of valid knowledge. Since the pragmatic dimension (sign interpretation) of language is crucial for the validity of knowledge, Apel calls his position “transcendental pragmatics of language.”<sup>5</sup>

Apel holds that anyone who argues seriously is simultaneously a member of a “*real community of communication*” and of a counterfactual “*unlimited, ideal community of communication.*” Apel writes,

<sup>2</sup> The trilemma originates from the Five Modes of Agrippa in ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism. See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, ed. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), bk. 1, secs. 164–77; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), bk. 9, secs. 88–89. Hans Albert calls the trilemma the *Münchhausen trilemma*. Hans Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason*, trans. Mary Varney Rorty (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Williams, *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.

<sup>4</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Fisby (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998), 137.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 265.

First, in serious argumentation, indeed, already in posing the question, we have in principle acknowledged both the *solidary responsibility for solving problems* and the *equality of rights in problem-solving* shared by all members of a *real* community of communication—a community that consists precisely of humanity as it presently exists. Second, however, with the necessary, contrafactual anticipation of an *unlimited, ideal* community of communication, we have also recognized in principle that all *valid* solutions to problems—including especially the ethically relevant solutions—would have to be *capable of being assented to* by all members of the unlimited, ideal community of communication, if they were able to take part in the discussion.<sup>6</sup>

While the “real community of communication” consists of “persons who are alive today and capable of discourse,” the “unlimited community of communication” consists of “persons who it may be presumed will exist someday.”<sup>7</sup> Human knowledge is fallible, so that agreement within the real communication community is also fallible. Apel thinks that the unlimited ideal community is a solution to the human fallibility.

Apel tries to provide ultimate foundations non-deductively. He says, “If ‘grounding’ is the same as derivation of something from something else, i.e. in a strict sense: deduction, then no ultimate foundation is possible.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, an ultimate foundation is possible “by *transcendental-reflection on those presuppositions of actual thought* [argumentation] that cannot be denied without committing a *performative self-contradiction*.”<sup>9</sup> A performative self-contradiction is a contradiction between what one says and what his saying it implies or intends. Arguing against the presuppositions of argumentation already accepts the presuppositions, and therefore is self-contradictory. Apel says, “If, on the one hand, a presupposition cannot be challenged in argumentation without actual performative self-contradiction, and if, on the other hand, it cannot be deductively grounded without formal-logical *petitio principii*, then it belongs to those transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation that one must always (already) have accepted, if the language game of argumentation is to be meaningful.”<sup>10</sup> Apel holds that those presuppositions are ultimate foundations.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, “Macroethics, Responsibility for the Future, and the Crisis of Technological Society: Reflections on Hans Jonas,” in *Karl-Otto Apel: Selected Essays*, vol. 2, *Ethics and the Theory of Rationality*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 235.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

<sup>8</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, *The Response of Discourse Ethics to the Moral Challenge of the Human Situation as Such and Especially Today* (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2001), 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Karl-Otto Apel, “The Problem of Philosophical Foundations in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language,” in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 277.

<sup>11</sup> While Apel does not specify those ultimate foundations in detail, Robert Alexy specifies the rules and forms of practical discourse in detail. See Robert Alexy, “A Theory of Practical Discourse,” in *The Communicative Ethics Controversy*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Fred Dallmayr (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 163–76. However,

Similarly to Apel, Jürgen Habermas thinks that the trilemma does not apply to everything. He claims that the trilemma applies only to deductive logic on a semantic level.

[The trilemma] arises only if one presupposes a *semantic concept of justification* that is oriented to a deductive relationship between statements and based solely on the concept of logical inference. This deductive concept of justification is obviously too narrow for the exposition of the pragmatic relations between argumentative speech acts. Principles of induction and universalization are introduced as rules of argumentation for the sole purpose of bridging the logical gap in *nondeductive* relations. Accordingly, these bridging principles are not susceptible to deductive justification, which is the only form of justification allowed by the Münchhausen trilemma.<sup>12</sup>

Habermas is wrong in this claim. Albert points out that the trilemma applies not only to deductive logic, but also to other inferential procedures such as induction and transcendental deduction.

[T]he situation is not essentially altered if inferential processes other than those of deductive logic are introduced in order to bring about the foundation regress. Neither the use of inductive procedures of any kind nor recourse to some transcendental deduction can help to remedy the situation; nor is it basically altered if one shifts the problem from the horizontal plane—that is, from the analysis of contexts of statements on the same linguistic level—to the vertical, on which one seeks adequate justification of one's criteria for workable inferential procedures and for ultimate linguistic or extralinguistic authorities which may be used as a basis for inference. Here, too, the trilemma must necessarily arise.<sup>13</sup>

Let us examine Apel's response to the trilemma. Gerard Radnitzky refutes Apel's attempt to provide ultimate foundations. Radnitzky summarizes and criticizes Apel's argument as follows:

(1) If you wish to argue, you must accept the Criticist Frame (argumentative dialogue); (2) you have entered a dialogue—conclusion: you have implicitly (by your action) accepted the Criticist Frame.

If (1) is construed as a definition of 'arguing' (or of 'dialogue'), it is empty. If it is construed as a synthetic sentence, it is fallible. (2) is a synthetic sentence, hence fallible. Apel's attempt to produce an "ultimate justifier" has failed.<sup>14</sup>

not all of them can serve as an ultimate foundation. It is possible to criticize and reject some of them without committing a performative self-contradiction. Like Apel, Habermas thinks that the transcendental-pragmatic justification is possible. But unlike Apel, he holds that it "cannot have the status of an ultimate justification and... there is no need to claim this status for it." Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 82.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason*, 20–21.

<sup>14</sup> Gerard Radnitzky, "Reply to Hoppe—on apriorism in Austrian Economics," in *Values and the Social Order*, vol. 1, *Values and society*, ed. Gerard Radnitzky and Hardy Bouillon (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 1995), 191–92. See also Hans Albert, *Transzendente Träumereien: Karl-Otto Apels Sprachspiele und sein hermeneutischer Gott* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1975); Gerard Radnitzky,

Radnitzky claims that since any attempt to justify synthetic statements leads to the trilemma, Apel's ultimate justification is subject to the trilemma.

Radnitzky also says as follows: "neither truth claims with respect to a descriptive statement nor validity claims with respect to a norm can be justified by *action*. Even if everybody were engaged in argumentative dialogue all the time, the Criticist Frame would still not be justified by this fact." "Although it is an inconsistent position if verbalized by arguments, it is psychologically possible to revolt against the Criticist Frame, to reject it." One can do this, for example, "by 'metaphysical suicide' (from Kierkegaard to Camus), or in psychosis or pseudo-psychosis (as Pirandello's *Enrico IV*), and perhaps he can stop the inner dialogue (as it is attempted in some yoga exercises)."<sup>15</sup> There is no need to adopt the Criticist Frame.

Although Radnitzky is right in a strictly philosophical sense, it is inappropriate in an ethical sense. In ethics, we take for granted certain matters, such as the existence of self, others, and some other non-moral facts. If we reject those assumptions, ethics does not make sense in the first place. Therefore, taking his claim in full is inappropriate in ethics. I admit that we accept the Criticist Frame when we argue. I do not question this fact.

The same applies to extreme skepticism about morality. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong presents an extremely skeptical scenario where a demon deceives us into believing in morality when nothing is moral or immoral. As Sinnott-Armstrong says, strictly speaking, we cannot rule out this possibility.<sup>16</sup> He holds that "justification is relative to a contrast class,"<sup>17</sup> a set of alternative possibilities to a belief. In his view, a belief is justified only when one is able to rule out all the alternative possibilities in the contrast class. But it is inappropriate to include the extremely skeptical scenario in a morally relevant contrast class. Regardless of whether Sinnott-Armstrong's view of justification is right, taking the extremely skeptical scenario is inappropriate in ethics.

In any case, the Criticist Frame cannot provide ultimate foundations of morality. First, the Criticist Frame belongs to non-moral normative beliefs. Sinnott-Armstrong argues that non-moral normative beliefs cannot justify moral beliefs without a substantive moral bridge principle.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Criticist Frame cannot justify moral beliefs without a bridge principle like the following: moral norms are the ones reached by

"In Defense of Self-Applicable Critical Rationalism," in *Evolutionary Epistemology, Rationality, and the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Gerard Radnitzky and W. W. Bartley (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1987), 296–301.

<sup>15</sup> Radnitzky, "In Defense of Self-Applicable Critical Rationalism," 301.

<sup>16</sup> Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, "Moral Skepticism and Justification," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 15.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10–12.

the Criticist Frame. The bridge principle is a substantive moral belief and subject to Agrippa's trilemma. The Criticist Frame itself is just a tool and has no moral implications. It can be used for planning, doing, or justifying not only moral actions but amoral actions and so-called immoral actions, such as fraud, extortion, murder, and so on. Therefore, one cannot draw morality from the Criticist Frame alone. Second, there is no guarantee that the Criticist Frame will remain the same in the future. As a language changes, the Criticist Frame might also change.

### 3.2 *Mathematics and Logic*

Mathematics is *a priori* knowledge. Williams identifies it as basic beliefs. But he says, "Not even elementary mathematical judgments seem to be credible all by themselves: to grasp them at all, it seems, we need some understanding of a whole system of arithmetic."<sup>19</sup> In any case, mathematical principles themselves have no moral implications. They are just a tool. They can be used for planning, doing, or justifying not only moral actions but immoral actions and amoral actions. Therefore, it is impossible to draw morality from mathematical principles themselves.

Logic is also *a priori* knowledge. Yet logic is not free from criticism. William Warren Bartley, an advocate of pancritical rationalism, identifies paradoxes internal to logic, which can be grounds for distrusting logic.

[T]here are the logical paradoxes (the liar, Richard, Grelling, etc.). The paradoxes are reached in the course of rigorously logical argument. Therein lies their telling power: using logic, and presupposing logic, one reaches illogic. If the paradoxes could not be avoided, then one would have grounds for deeply distrusting logic and rational argumentation. Of course one might say that in rejecting logic because it led to illogic, one is presupposing logic and is hence inconsistent. But the irrationalist makes no claim to be consistent. And would it be *more* consistent to *accept* logic that led to illogic?

Apart from the paradoxes internal to logic, there are other grounds for distrusting logic. Bartley writes,

(1) Relativism, fideism, and scepticism contend, on the basis of arguments about the limits of rationality widely thought to be rational, logical, and indestructible, that serious argumentation is futile in the sense that, from a rational or logical viewpoint, one position is as good as another. Their basic contention is that there is a *rational excuse for irrationalism*.

(2) The upshot of determinism—another position reached by many on the basis of reason and logic—is that all argument is *illusory*.... If one's views are fully determined by natural laws and boundary conditions, then they do not depend on the force of argument or on the weighing of evidence.... If determinism is true, then the distinction between being *forced* to reject logic and being argued out of logic loses its meaning.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Michael Williams, "Skepticism," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1999), 42.

<sup>20</sup> William Warren Bartley, *The Retreat to Commitment*, 2nd ed. (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1984), 259.

Thus, Bartley claims that such people as irrationalists, relativists, fideists, skeptics, and determinists have grounds for distrusting logic. Since “the irrationalist makes no claim to be consistent,” self-contradiction does not matter to him. Bartley also distinguishes *use of* argument from *belief in* it. The irrationalist can use argument, “not because he himself takes argument seriously, but because he knows that the rationalist does. The irrationalist uses argument because he knows that argument is effective against rationalists.” Bartley says, “The irrationalist may, of course, also take argument seriously—and may even do so consistently—in any area which, in his opinion, does not run up against the alleged limits of reason. The irrationalist, with no need to be consistent, may invoke reason frequently or not at all.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike the rationalist, who both believes in and uses argument, the irrationalist partly believes in or does not believe in argument and uses or does not use it. The irrationalist has more freedom than the rationalist.

On one hand, one cannot refute some logical principles without a performative self-contradiction. On the other hand, one cannot strictly justify some logical principles because the justification needs to use those principles, which leads to circularity. Some might try to appeal to something other than logic (for example, God) to justify logic, but this also needs to use some logic to draw a conclusion (for example, God is such and such, *therefore...*). Any attempt to justify some logical principles leads to circularity. Therefore, some logical principles belong to what Apel calls transcendental-pragmatic presuppositions of argumentation. I regard those principles as basic beliefs.

Agrippa's trilemma is a logical principle and basic belief. The trilemma suggests that justification is impossible. Yet Williams says, “isn't it obviously self-defeating to *argue* that nothing can ever be justified?”<sup>22</sup> According to Albert, the trilemma arises “if one demands a justification for *everything*.”<sup>23</sup> But the “*everything*” includes the trilemma itself. Therefore, if one demands justification for the trilemma, it leads to the trilemma. Victor Kraft claims that, by showing the trilemma through logical reasoning, Albert himself establishes his thesis of the impossibility of justification.<sup>24</sup> In other words, by the trilemma, Albert justifies the knowledge that it is impossible to justify knowledge. Considering the paradox, the scope to which the trilemma applies does not include the trilemma itself. The scope also does not include what the trilemma presupposes (such as some logical principles and some linguistic rules) and what logically follows from it. Applying the trilemma to them is self-refuting.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 260n25.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Viktor Kraft, *Die Grundformen der wissenschaftlichen Methoden*, 2nd ed. (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1973), 12. Many philosophers criticize Albert. For Albert's responses, see Hans Albert, *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*, 5th ed. (Tübingen, Germany: J.C.B. Mohr, 1991), Anhang.

In any case, logic itself cannot provide an ultimate foundation of morality. Logic itself is just a tool and has no moral implications. It can be used for planning, doing, or justifying not only moral actions but immoral actions and amoral actions. Therefore, one cannot draw morality from logic itself.

### 3.3 *The Erlangen School*

According to Radnitzky, the Erlangen School “proposes *actions* as the ultimate stopping point.” He explains it by the following example: “Assume that *A* claims that he can stand on his head and then performs this feat. In this event, it is said, *A* has justified the truth claim that he implicitly made by uttering the statement. Thus what is claimed is that *A* has—by his action—proved the truth of his assertion. (If he asserted that he is unable to *X*, it would be claimed that his act of performing *X* falsifies his assertion.)” Radnitzky remarks, “Such an attempt to justify an ultimate stopping point is, however, epistemologically naive. That we, having witnessed the performance, are *convinced* is irrelevant to the epistemological issue.” He says, “our experience does not provide any infallible method for ascertaining the truth-value of this particular statement, or any truth guarantee.”<sup>25</sup>

From a strictly philosophical standpoint, Radnitzky is right because any attempt to justify our experience (such as the existence of an action) leads to the trilemma. Yet, as said before, since ethics takes for granted the existence of some non-moral facts, taking Radnitzky’s claim in full is inappropriate in ethics.

In any case, an action itself cannot provide an ultimate foundation of morality. Since there are not only moral actions but immoral actions and amoral actions, an action itself has no moral implications. Therefore, one cannot draw morality from an action itself.

Radnitzky also writes,

The “Erlangen School” operates consistently with a consensus theory of truth. It offers a “definition” of “truth” which runs as follows: A statement is true if and only if it is such that in an ideal discourse situation (“symmetrical”, with all partners having good intentions and being well-informed) all *would in the long run* assent to it. But, this does not provide a definition of the concept of truth; it merely indicates a particular method for ascertaining truth-value—incidentally, a method which cannot be used in any concrete case. Moreover, it would not matter in this counter-factual “method” for the predication of ‘truth’ whether or not the statement under consideration is true or not.<sup>26</sup>

The consensus theory of truth is problematic because agreement has nothing to do with truth and moral rightness. I discuss this issue elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Radnitzky, “In Defense of Self-Applicable Critical Rationalism,” 299.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See Noriaki Iwasa, “Reason Alone Cannot Identify Moral Laws,” *Journal of Value Inquiry* 47, nos. 1–2 (2013).



### 3.4 Immediate Experience

As basic beliefs, Williams mentions immediate experience like pain. He says, "If you are in pain, you *just know* it. The question 'How do you know?' has no clear application here."<sup>28</sup> As immediate experience, let us think about sense experience in general. John Pollock writes,

The person would be justified in believing that all of his senses mislead him in a systematic way. Notice that this is not simply a matter of his rejecting all of the evidence of his senses and adopting a skeptical stance. He has positive beliefs concerning precisely how his senses mislead him. But I submit that it is impossible for him to be justified in holding such a set of beliefs. A person may well be justified in believing that some particular sense misleads him in some systematic way. For example, a color-blind person can know that he is color-blind. But he can know that only by relying upon other evidence of his senses. It is impossible for a person to be justified in believing that *all* of his senses systematically mislead him *all* of the time....All justification must eventually terminate with some epistemologically basic beliefs that do not require independent justification. And at least some of these beliefs must have *something* to do with the evidence of our senses.<sup>29</sup>

If our senses supplied only false information, we could not find this out in the first place, because a sense which supplies correct information is necessary to find it out. Even if our senses are sometimes illusory or misleading, we cannot distrust them all. It would be reasonable to regard immediate experience as basic beliefs.

Then does immediate experience provide rational justification of morality? Williams says, "As for immediate experience, it cannot be the sensations themselves that constitute the foundations of knowledge. Lacking propositional content, sensations cannot stand in logical relations to beliefs and so can neither support nor falsify beliefs."<sup>30</sup> But some immediate experience can support or falsify some non-moral beliefs. For example, some immediate experience can support beliefs in the existence of self, others, and some other non-moral facts. Those beliefs themselves have no moral implications. They can be used for planning, doing, or justifying not only moral actions but immoral actions and amoral actions. Therefore, they cannot justify morality. On the other hand, some immediate experience may support moral beliefs. According to moral sense theory, moral judgments rest on inner sensations. If moral sense theory is right, some inner sensations justify moral beliefs. In other words, some immediate experience is the ground for moral beliefs. However, this ground is not rational. Moral sense theory provides non-rational justification of morality. In any case, immediate experience does not disprove that the trilemma applies to rational justification of morality.

<sup>28</sup> Williams, "Skepticism," 41.

<sup>29</sup> John L. Pollock, "Perceptual Knowledge," *Philosophical Review* 80, no. 3 (1971): 291–92.

<sup>30</sup> Williams, "Skepticism," 42.

### 3.5 *There Is No Rational Ground for Morality*

I have discussed various basic beliefs. From a strictly philosophical standpoint, we cannot justify many of those beliefs. As Radnitzky points out, synthetic statements are fallible, so that any attempt to justify those beliefs leads to the trilemma. Yet in ethics, we take those beliefs for granted. If we reject them, ethics does not make sense in the first place. Therefore, raising skepticism about them is inappropriate in ethics.

Anyway, except for moral beliefs based on some immediate experience, those basic beliefs themselves have no moral implications. They are just a tool. They can be used for planning, doing, or justifying not only moral actions but immoral actions and amoral actions. Therefore, it is impossible to draw morality from those beliefs alone.

There is no self-evident *rational* ground for morality. Some might think that a belief like “killing humans is morally wrong” can be such a ground. But it is doubtful that this belief is a self-evident *rational* ground for morality. There are cases where killing humans is considered acceptable, as in self-defense. Therefore, rationalists can demand a *rational* ground for this belief, which eventually leads to the trilemma. Nobody can provide a self-evident *rational* ground for morality because whatever ground he provides, rationalists can reasonably challenge it without committing a performative self-contradiction. Those who object to this need to provide a self-evident *rational* ground for morality.

On knowledge, Roderick Chisholm points out the problem of the criterion. He distinguishes between the following two questions: A) “*What do we know? What is the extent of our knowledge?*” B) “*How are we to decide whether we know? What are the criteria of knowledge?*”<sup>31</sup> He writes,

if you don't know the answer to the first of these pairs of questions—if you don't know what things you know or how far your knowledge extends—it is difficult to see how you could possibly figure out an answer to the second.

On the other hand,...if you don't know the answer to the second of these pairs of questions—if you don't know how to go about deciding whether or not you know, if you don't know what the criteria of knowing are—it is difficult to see how you could possibly figure out an answer to the first.<sup>32</sup>

Skeptics will say: “You cannot answer question A until you have answered question B. And you cannot answer question B until you have answered question A. Therefore you cannot answer either question.” Apart from skepticism, Chisholm points out two other responses to the problem: methodism and particularism. Methodists are “those who think they have an answer to B, and who then, in terms of it, work out their answer to A.” He identifies empiricism as a form of methodism.

<sup>31</sup> Roderick M. Chisholm, *The Foundations of Knowing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 65.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 65–66.

Particularists are “those who have it the other way around.”<sup>33</sup> Chisholm claims that the methodist criterion “is very broad and far-reaching and at the same time completely arbitrary.”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, we do know many things that originate from the senses and memory. For these and other reasons, Chisholm thinks that, among the three responses, particularism is the most reasonable.

In any case, Chisholm's problem of the criterion shows that we cannot rationally justify morality. Methodism and particularism do not work either. Since there is no rational ground for morality, we cannot adopt particularism in the first place. This suggests that we cannot know the criterion of a rational ground for morality. Some might think that we can draw the criterion from the criteria of rational grounds for knowledge in general. But even if we can, there is no rational ground for morality which passes the criterion. Therefore, rational justification of morality is impossible. Those who object to this need to provide a *rational* ground for morality.

#### 4. *Coherentism*

According to Peter Klein, there are two forms of coherentism: a transference form and an emergent form. “The transference form...pictures justification as being a property of one proposition that can be transferred to another and then to another, etc., and eventually back again.” The emergent form “views justification as an emergent property such that when sets of propositions have a certain arrangement—a coherent structure—all members of the set of propositions are justified. *Sets* of propositions are the primary bearers of justification and individual propositions are justified only in virtue of being a member of the set.”<sup>35</sup> The transference form is not an epistemically responsible position because it is viciously circular. The emergent form cannot be an ultimate justification, especially when a set of beliefs is incomplete or includes an error. Although coherentists would think it unlikely, a set of beliefs can include false beliefs and still be consistent.

Geoffrey Sayre-McCord presents a coherence theory of justification. According to it, “a belief is justified if, and then to the extent that, it coheres well with the other things a person believes.”<sup>36</sup> Sayre-Mc-

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Klein, “Human knowledge and the infinite progress of reasoning,” *Philosophical Studies* 134, no. 1 (2007): 8. Klein owes the distinction to Laurence Bonjour. See Laurence Bonjour, “Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (1978): 3; Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 24–25.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, “Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory,” in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 177.

Cord distinguishes between permissive and positive justification. He says, “a belief is (i) permissively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence available to the person does not, on balance, tell against the belief; and (ii) positively justified if and only if the weight of the evidence, again on balance, tells in favor of the belief (just how positively justified it is will be a matter of how strong the evidence, on balance, is).” Sayre-McCord also identifies three components of coherence: “*evidential consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness.*” In his view, “a set of beliefs counts as (minimally) coherent if and only if the set is evidentially consistent—that is, if and only if the weight of the evidence provided by the various beliefs in the set don’t tell, on balance, against any of the others.” Thus, evidential consistency (minimal coherence) rests on permissive justification. And “connectedness and comprehensiveness, serve...to increase the relative coherence of a set that is minimally coherent.”<sup>37</sup>

Sayre-McCord’s coherentism is different from most versions of coherentism. First, it “acknowledges that certain beliefs may serve as suitable regress-stoppers. Unlike foundationalism, however, it insists that these regress-stoppers—the beliefs that count as permissively, but not positively, justified—enjoy no special epistemic privilege and are themselves characterizable only in terms of the evidential connections they bear to other beliefs.” Second, “it treats coherence itself not as a justifying property of those beliefs but rather as a measure of the evidential support the beliefs enjoy. In every case, what evidence a person has for her beliefs is found not in their relative coherence, but in the contents of her other beliefs.”<sup>38</sup> As Sayre-McCord admits, these suggest that his coherentism embraces relativism about justification. Therefore, it cannot be an ultimate rational justification of morality.

Sayre-McCord recognizes three objections to coherentism. The first one is that “coherentism has got to be false because the mere fact that a set of beliefs is coherent is no reason to think they are true.” He replies to this objection as follows: “a belief is justified if and then to the extent that it coheres well with a person’s other beliefs, but it is not *justified* by the fact that it is a member of a coherent set of beliefs.”<sup>39</sup> According to Sayre-McCord, a person’s other beliefs are not members of a coherent set of beliefs. But there is no need to think in this way. It is possible to assume a type of coherentism in which a person’s other beliefs are members of a coherent set of beliefs. According to this coherentism, a belief is justified if it is a member of a coherent set of beliefs which includes a person’s other beliefs. Anyway, irrespective of whether a coherent set of beliefs include a person’s other beliefs, the following holds: even if a belief coheres with a person’s other beliefs, it does not follow that the belief is justified. This is because the person’s other beliefs

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 170.

may be false. If those beliefs are false, coherence with them does not justify the belief. Even if those beliefs are true, mere coherence with them does not necessarily justify the belief. A belief may cohere with other true beliefs from all conceivable perspectives. But there may be an unknown perspective from which the belief does not cohere with them.

The second objection to coherentism is that “coherentism is objectionably conservative and inappropriately privileges one’s actual beliefs.”<sup>40</sup> Sayre-McCord replies to this objection as follows: although a coherentist relies on what he happens to believe, “those beliefs themselves, especially in light of the new evidence experience and reflection regularly provide, won’t stand as fixed points but will instead shift in response to the new evidence (if they are to continue to count as justified).”<sup>41</sup> Sayre-McCord claims this because he recognizes human fallibility. But this suggests that coherence alone does not provide an ultimate justification.

The third objection to coherentism is that “coherentism fails to recognize sufficiently the importance of experience.”<sup>42</sup> In responding to this objection, Sayre-McCord first points out “the role cognitively spontaneous beliefs are able to play within coherentism.” Those beliefs suggest that some experiences have “a cognitive content (in which case it is the content of the experience that serves as evidence),” or that some experiences are “the content of an appropriate cognitive attitude (in which case it is the fact that such an experience occurred that serves as evidence).”<sup>43</sup> Second, he claims that “the status of our beliefs as justified depends on their being properly responsive to experience and not on their being coherent.”<sup>44</sup> Yet if we allow empiricism to enter moral coherentism, it follows that morality is not justified by reason alone.

In coherentism, we should question the scope of a coherent set of beliefs. Does the set include only physical (including psychological) beliefs? Or does it include metaphysical beliefs too? If the set includes only physical beliefs, it may not be enough for justifying a moral belief, because metaphysics may be a crucial basis for morality. If the set includes both physical and metaphysical beliefs, it may be able to justify a moral belief. Yet in this case, the justification is not completely rational because we cannot draw metaphysical beliefs from reason alone. Either way coherentism cannot be an ultimate rational justification of morality.

As we have seen, coherentism has at least one of the following problems: First, coherentism is viciously circular. Second, a coherent set of beliefs can be incomplete or include an error. Third, coherentism

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 173–74.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

embraces relativism about justification. Fourth, even if a belief coheres with a person's other beliefs, it does not follow that the belief is justified. Fifth, a coherent set of beliefs may not be enough for justifying a *moral* belief. Sixth, a coherent set of beliefs may not be completely rational. Therefore, coherentism cannot be an ultimate rational justification of morality.

## 5. *Contextualism*

Mark Timmons distinguishes between three types of contextualism. The first type is circumstantial contextualism, which is as follows: "Whether one has knowledge of, or indeed justifiedly believes, some proposition is partly dependent on certain facts about oneself and certain facts about one's environment."<sup>45</sup> The second type is normative contextualism, which is as follows: "A person *S* is justified at time *t* in believing some proposition *p* in context *C* just in case *S*'s holding *p* at *t* conforms to the relevant set of epistemic practices and norms operative in *C*." We should not confuse circumstantial contextualism with normative one. Circumstantial contextualism is analogous to circumstantial (situational, environmental) relativism in ethics, which holds that "the rightness and wrongness of particular actions, practices and so forth depend in part on facts about the agent's circumstances." By contrast, normative contextualism is analogous to ethical relativism, which holds that "the moral standards of a group (together with relevant factual information) determine which particular moral statements are true for members of that group."<sup>46</sup> The third type is structural contextualism, which is as follows: "Regresses of justification may legitimately terminate with beliefs, which, in the context in question, *are not in need of justification*. Call these latter beliefs, *contextually basic beliefs*."<sup>47</sup>

Timmons adopts structural contextualism. His contextualism has the following four central claims:

- C1: There are a number of irreducible moral generalizations that are defensible and that we acquire as a result of moral education...
- C2: However, they are contextually basic: they do not represent self-evident moral truths knowable a priori nor do they result from the deliverance of some faculty of moral intuition....
- C3: The contextually basic beliefs provide (along with relevant nonmoral factual beliefs) the justificatory basis for justified belief in other, non-basic moral propositions....
- C4: ...In many cases, two or more morally relevant considerations expressed by the basic moral generalizations will be present in a single case, and for these cases we need have no algorithm or ordering system

<sup>45</sup> Mark Timmons, "Outline of a Contextualist Moral Epistemology," in *Moral Knowledge? New Readings in Moral Epistemology*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Mark Timmons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 294.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

to which we can appeal to adjudicate the conflict. In these cases, moral *judgment* takes over.<sup>48</sup>

C2 is where structural contextualism differs from foundationalism. The former features the following two claims: "(1) In ordinary contexts of doxastic justification, epistemically basic beliefs *are not in need of justification*. (2) Beliefs that are basic in one context may, in a different context, require justification."<sup>49</sup> On C4, *judgment* means "the ability to evaluate a situation, assess evidence, and come to a reasonable decision without following rules."<sup>50</sup>

Charles Larmore also defends a contextualist view of justification. In his view, "not our beliefs but rather changes in them are the proper object of justification. In deciding whether to adopt a new belief, therefore, we are to ask not whether the belief set comprising our existing beliefs plus the new one is justified by its coherence, but instead whether adding the new belief is justified by what we already believe."<sup>51</sup> Larmore says, "We can reason only in a context of given belief, which as such does not call for justification, but on the contrary gives us the means for considering possible changes of belief, a context that is ours in virtue of our place in history."<sup>52</sup>

We cannot doubt everything at once. Ludwig Wittgenstein says as follows: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty" (OC 115).<sup>53</sup> "One doubts on specific grounds" (OC 458). Karl Popper says as follows: "though every one of our assumptions may be challenged, it is quite impracticable to challenge all of them at the same time. Thus all criticism must be piecemeal."<sup>54</sup> "While discussing a problem we always accept (if only temporarily) all kinds of things as *unproblematic*."<sup>55</sup> Although we cannot doubt everything at once, it is possible to doubt every moral belief at once. This is because doubting itself can be independent of morality.

Contextualism cannot be an ultimate rational justification of morality. First, since moral beliefs not in need of justification in one context

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 309.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 311.

<sup>50</sup> Harold I. Brown, *Rationality* (London: Routledge, 1988), 137. Timmons particularly defends ethical contextualism. For a defense of contextualism in general, see, for example, Keith DeRose, *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>51</sup> Charles E. Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>53</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1975). The "115" refers to paragraph 115.

<sup>54</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 322.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 323.

may need justification in a different context, contextualism is not an *ultimate* justification of morality. The fact that some moral beliefs are not in need of justification in one context does not mean that those beliefs are justified. As we saw, there is no self-evident *rational* ground for morality. Rationalists can reasonably challenge any moral belief without committing a performative self-contradiction. Second, Timmons's contextualism often needs moral judgment to reach a moral conclusion. But there is no guarantee that moral judgment enables us to identify appropriate morals. Even if it does, moral judgment is, by definition, *rationally* unjustifiable according to Agrippa's trilemma. Therefore, his contextualism cannot be an ultimate *rational* justification of morality. Third, we can challenge contextualism itself. Eventually one cannot rationally justify it because the justification leads to the trilemma.

## 6. *Infinitism*

Klein defends infinitism, which is as follows:

Infinitism is committed to an account of *propositional justification* such that a proposition, *p*, is justified for S *iff* there is an endless series of non-repeating propositions available to S such that beginning with *p*, each succeeding member is a reason for the immediately preceding one. It is committed to an account of *doxastic justification* such that a belief is doxastically justified for S *iff* S has engaged in tracing the reasons in virtue of which the proposition *p* is justified far forward enough to satisfy the contextually determined requirements.<sup>56</sup>

Infinitism is not valid at least for *rational* justification of morality, although it might be valid elsewhere. As we saw, there is no self-evident *rational* ground for morality in the first place. An endless series of invalid grounds does not rationally justify a moral proposition.

## 7. *German Idealism*

German idealists have different ways of escaping Agrippa's trilemma. According to Paul Franks, Kant holds that "an escape from the Agrippan trilemma is possible only if all series of grounds terminate in an absolute ground, and God is that absolute ground."<sup>57</sup>

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi also tries to escape the trilemma. He thinks that all standard philosophical responses to it are problematic since "[e]very appeal to some new kind of intrinsic justification succeeds only in raising the demand for justification about something else that was hitherto taken for granted." Franks writes,

The only genuine escape from Agrippan skepticism, according to Jacobi, would be to reject the initial demand for justification or, better yet, to stop

<sup>56</sup> Klein, "Human knowledge and the infinite progress of reasoning," 11.

<sup>57</sup> Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 114.



raising it in the first place. To make our escape, we need to see that adequate justification is not *mediation* by some absolute or unconditioned ground, as the philosophical tradition would have it, but the *immediacy* of ordinary life and perception. Ordinary things and persons just *are*—immediately—except for their dependence on God, which is known with as much immediacy as the existence of ourselves and others. Reason is not a faculty of *inference* but a faculty of *perception*.<sup>58</sup>

According to Franks, other German idealists “are all committed, in various ways, to the view that genuine justification can be achieved only within a system that meets two conditions: the *holistic condition* that every particular (object, fact, or judgment) be determined through its role within the whole and not through any intrinsic properties; and the *monistic condition* that the whole be grounded in an absolute principle that is immanent and not transcendent.”<sup>59</sup> Those German idealists develop a version of Spinozism which escapes Agrippa’s trilemma. They differ from Kant since Kant does not aim at “achieving a Spinozist system that meets the holistic and monistic requirements.”<sup>60</sup>

Although German idealists may escape Agrippa’s trilemma, their solutions cannot be an ultimate *rational* justification of morality. First, in Kant’s view, the absolute ground is God, which we cannot understand by reason alone. Second, Jacobi defines reason not as “a faculty of *inference*” but as “a faculty of *perception*.”<sup>61</sup> Let us accept this definition of reason. From the fact that some perceptions are incorrect as in illusion, it follows that reason is sometimes incorrect. Therefore, reason is not enough to identify appropriate morals. Some might think that reason is a faculty of *correct* perception. Then we need to distinguish correct perceptions from incorrect ones. We cannot appeal to reason (correct perception) alone to distinguish between them, because otherwise correct perception alone identifies correct perceptions, which is circular. Therefore, we must appeal to something other than reason (correct perception) to distinguish between them. This means that reason alone cannot identify appropriate morals. Third, we should question the scope of the Spinozist system developed by other German idealists. Does the system include only physical (including psychological) beliefs? Or does it include metaphysical beliefs too? If the system includes only physical beliefs, it may not be enough for justifying morality, because metaphysics may be a crucial basis for morality. If the system includes both physical and metaphysical beliefs, it may be able to justify morality. Yet in this case, the justification is not completely rational, because we cannot draw metaphysical beliefs from reason alone. Thus, even if German idealists escape the trilemma, their solutions cannot be an ultimate *rational* justification of morality.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 9–10.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

## 8. Conclusion

We have seen various responses to Agrippa's trilemma, such as foundationalism, coherentism, contextualism, infinitism, and German idealism. While they may provide some justification of morality, they fail to provide an ultimate *rational* justification of morality. Therefore, the trilemma applies at least to *rational* justification of contentful moral beliefs. I say "contentful" moral beliefs because rational justification of empty moral beliefs (such as the belief "it is always moral to act morally") is easy. Agrippa's trilemma does not apply to *rational* justification of empty moral beliefs. I also say "*rational*" justification because there are non-rational justifications of morality, such as attempts to ground morality on a moral sense, moral sentiments, or the divine.<sup>62</sup> Since they are non-rational justifications, they do not need a rational ground. Although it is possible to apply the trilemma to those non-rational grounds, it only shows that one cannot *rationally* justify them. This is irrelevant to the non-rational justifications because they do not seek rational justification in the first place.

What does Agrippa's trilemma mean for rationalist ethics? Most of them rest on at least one of the following assumptions:

- (a) Reason alone can grasp X. Here X can be (1) moral Forms, (2) virtue, (3) the natural, and so on.<sup>63</sup>
- (b) X is good. Here X can be (1) human flourishing, (2) happiness, (3) pleasure, (4) self-preservation, (5) security, (6) freedom, (7) equality, and so on.<sup>64</sup>
- (c) We ought to X. Here X can be (1) base morality on practical reason alone, (2) maximize utility, (3) assert individuality, (4) exclude metaphysics from ethics, (5) achieve political neutrality, and so on.<sup>65</sup>

I do not claim that those assumptions are not morally right. Some assumptions may be morally right. Yet since the trilemma applies to all those assumptions, they are rationally unjustifiable. This means that

<sup>62</sup> Examining the moral sense theories of Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith, I show that the moral sense or moral sentiments in those theories alone cannot identify appropriate morals. See Noriaki Iwasa, "Sentimentalism and Metaphysical Beliefs," *Prolegomena* 9, no. 2 (2010); Noriaki Iwasa, "Sentimentalism and the Is-Ought Problem," *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 33 (2011); Noriaki Iwasa, "On Three Defenses of Sentimentalism," *Prolegomena* 12, no. 1 (2013). Regarding the divine, I develop standards for grading religions including various forms of spiritualism. See Noriaki Iwasa, "Grading Religions," *Sophia* 50, no. 1 (2011).

<sup>63</sup> These are assumptions in, for example, Plato's and Aristotle's ethics.

<sup>64</sup> These are assumptions in, for example, Aristotle's ethics, utilitarianism, Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, and John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*.

<sup>65</sup> These are assumptions in, for example, Kant's ethics, utilitarianism, Mill's *On Liberty*, and Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*.

rationalist ethics based on any one of them are rationally unjustifiable.

Some rationalist ethics try to provide only form, not content, to avoid dogmatic assumptions, although their success in this point is questionable. Kant's ethics and Habermas's and Apel's discourse ethics are typical such attempts. I discuss them elsewhere.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See Iwasa, "Reason Alone Cannot Identify Moral Laws."

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