

WHY WORRY ABOUT EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY?

MICHAEL P. LYNCH

UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT

PAUL SILVA, JR.

MONASH UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT: Although Alston believed epistemically circular arguments were able to justify their conclusions, he was also disquieted by them. We will argue that Alston was right to be disquieted. We explain Alston's view of epistemic circularity, the considerations that led him to accept it, and the purposes he thought epistemically circular arguments could serve. We then build on some of Alston's remarks and introduce further limits to the usefulness of such arguments and introduce a new problem that stems from those limits. The upshot is that adopting Alston's view that epistemically circular arguments can be used to justify their conclusions is more costly than even he thought.

I. INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING with his seminal 1986 paper, William P. Alston sparked a renewal of interest in what he rightly called one of the most fundamental epistemological problems: whether we can be justified in accepting that our most basic sources of belief are reliable. The crux of the problem, as he saw it, is that any attempt to justify our belief in the reliability of such sources was subject to what he called "epistemic circularity." While his considered views on these matters changed somewhat over the course of the next few decades, Alston's over-all position on epistemic circularity and basic sources of belief remained surprisingly divided. On the one hand, he famously argued that we can be justified in believing a proposition by an epistemically circular argument. Yet on the other, he continued to think that there was a kind of desirable epistemic status that our beliefs about the reliability of basic sources of belief could not obtain via epistemic circularly arguments—and perhaps not obtain at all.

In this paper, we will argue that Alston was right to be disquieted by the problem of epistemic circularity. In sections II and III, we explain Alston's account of epistemic circularity, the considerations that led him to adopt it, and the purposes that he thought epistemically circular arguments could serve. In sections IV and V, we build on some of Alston's remarks and introduce further limits to the usefulness of such arguments, together with a new problem that stems from those limits. The upshot is that adopting Alston's view that epistemically circular arguments can be used to justify their conclusions is more costly than even he thought.

II. REID'S QUESTION AND EPISTEMIC CIRCULARITY

Alston's investigation of epistemic circularity stemmed from his attempt to answer

Reid's Question. Are we justified in believing that our basic belief sources are reliable?¹

We have various *ways* of forming beliefs in certain circumstances. We can call these ways, somewhat figuratively, our *belief sources*. Our basic belief sources include perception, introspection, memory, rational intuition, and the various forms of inference we employ.² Alston explored this question extensively with regard to one of our belief sources, namely, our way of using our perceptual experiences to arrive at beliefs about our immediate environment.

For simplicity we'll treat *perceptual experience* as a belief source, though, strictly speaking, it is our *way of using* our perceptual experiences to arrive at beliefs that is a belief source. Beliefs that result from perceptual experiences will be called *perceptual beliefs*. Thus, Reid's question inspires us to consider whether the following principle is correct:

(PEAR) Our perceptual experiences are reliable indicators of our immediate physical environment such that the perceptual beliefs we form on the basis of our perceptual experiences are typically true.

Since (PEAR) connects the reliability of a source with its ability to produce true beliefs, we can say that (PEAR) is an *epistemic* principle.³ But how might we go about showing that (PEAR) is true? Well, one straightforward way to establish the reliability of something, as Alston noted, is to examine its track record: if our perceptual experiences have been accurate enough in the past we can go on to make an inductive generalization to their general reliability.

Here's what such an argument would look like: let 'P1 ... Pn' denote a sufficiently large and diverse collection of propositions about my immediate physical environment that I came to believe on the basis of my perceptual experiences on various past occasions,⁴

TRACK RECORD ARGUMENT (TRA)

- (1) My perceptual experiences indicated that P1 ... Pn.
- (2) P1 ... Pn are true.

- (3) So, my perceptual experiences indicated that $P_1 \dots P_n$ AND $P_1 \dots P_n$ are true.
- (4) So, my perceptual experiences were accurate concerning the truth of $P_1 \dots P_n$.
- (5) So, my perceptual experiences are reliable indicators of my immediate physical environment such that the perceptual beliefs I've formed on the basis of my perceptual experiences are typically true. That is, (PEAR) is true in my case.

(TRA) has many virtues. Notice that each transition that occurs after premise (2) appears just fine: (3) follows from (1) and (2) by and-introduction; (4) is a semantic consequence of (3); and (5) follows from (4) by induction.⁵ Provided each of these transitions after premise (2) is an acceptable logical transition—and few critics of track record arguments have questioned this—there is nothing necessarily problematic about this argument *qua argument*.⁶

But if (TRA) is to *justify* me in believing (PEAR), my belief in (TRA)'s premises must be justified. But where might that justification come from? Well, justification for believing (1) is easy enough to come by given my introspective awareness of and remembrance of my past perceptual experiences. How might we come by justification for believing (2)? Well, note that ' $P_1 \dots P_n$ ' denote a collection of propositions that I came to believe on the basis of my perceptual experiences on various past occasions. So provided our perceptual experiences afford us justification, my past perceptual experiences are my source of justification for believing (2). And here's the rub: if my belief sources for (2) are my past perceptual experiences, then I'm in a position where I am *relying on*, or *taking for granted*, or *presupposing* that my perceptual experiences are reliable in my attempt to show that they are reliable. Hence we witness a troubling form of circularity in the use of (TRA) to justify (PEAR). Alston calls this epistemic circularity.

But what, exactly, is epistemic circularity? Alston takes it to be a species of a more general kind of circularity that attaches to arguments:

The most general notion could be stated this way. An argument is circular when the conclusion is being assumed in the attempt to prove the conclusion. (1989, 326)

An argument is logically circular, for example, when one employs the conclusion as a premise. Epistemically circular arguments, like (TRA), however, do not employ the conclusion as a premise; rather they presuppose a *commitment* to the conclusion. Alston (1989, 327) describes the type of commitment he has in mind by characterizing its distinctive signs:

- [a] If I were to ask myself why I should suppose that my premises are true, or why I should consider myself entitled to assert them, I would have to reply that it is because of the reliability of sense perception.
- [b] In confidently forming perceptual beliefs in accordance with [(PEAR)], I proceed as if [(PEAR)] is true. I manifest an acceptance of it in practice.

- [c] if one wholeheartedly denied or doubted [(PEAR)], he could not, rationally, be convinced by the argument, . . . Being disposed to not accept [(PEAR)] he would not accept the premises.

While in later work (1993, 14) Alston says:

- [d] this kind of circularity involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be justified in holding the premises.

It is not completely clear that we have a single characterization here. Nonetheless, there is clearly a cluster of points being highlighted. Epistemically circular arguments are *circular*, Alston maintains, because they involve a presupposition of the conclusion, where the presupposition involved is a *pragmatic* presupposition (1989, 329). It is a pragmatic presupposition because the presupposition is not necessitated by considerations of meaning or the formal structure of the argument, but by a disposition to act in a certain way, vis., to act as if (PEAR) were true and that one is rational in so acting. As Alston notes (1986, 327), this does not require that one consciously endorse that principle, indeed one may have never formulated it in thought. Such practical “commitments,” as Alston sometimes calls them, are largely tacit; only very rarely—often only in cases of disagreement—do we even notice they are there. Why, then, does Alston call this kind of pragmatic circularity exemplified in (TRA) “epistemic” and not “pragmatic” circularity? Arguably, because this circularity involved in the use of (TRA) to justify (PEAR) is limited to thinkers in a cognitive position like ours: we have no other way of *becoming justified* in accepting premise (2) other than relying on our perceptual experiences.⁷

Putting these thoughts together, and generalizing on this last thought—that (TRA) is an argument such that our use of it to justify (PEAR) relies on perceptual experiences—we can capture a restricted characterization of epistemic circularity as follows:

- (Def) An argument A for the reliability of a belief source, X, is *epistemically circular* for a thinker S just in case (i) A’s conclusion is that X is a reliable belief source, (ii) S’s belief in at least one of A’s premises is a result of S employing X, and (iii) S’s belief in these premises would not have been justified had S not employed X.⁸

There are a few things worth noting about (Def). First, clause (iii) will presumably hold wherever *basic* belief sources are involved. For a belief source is arguably basic whenever any argument given in support of its reliability would be epistemically circular in just the sense defined. Second, this definition of epistemic circularity only applies to arguments for the *reliability* of beliefs sources—basic or otherwise—where one depends on the very source in question to justify the premises.

While (Def) does not suffice as a general definition of epistemic circularity, for present purposes we needn’t fret about the question of how to describe the general phenomenon of which (TRA) is but an instance.⁹ We can fruitfully investigate a variety of questions (TRA) raises without a perfectly adequate general definition of epistemic circularity. Hence, in what follows we will take (Def) to specify the

meaning of “epistemic circularity.” Additionally, for convenience, we will also speak of *arguments* being epistemically circular, though, strictly speaking, an argument is epistemically circular *for a given thinker*.

III. WHAT MIGHT AN EPISTEMICALLY CIRCULAR ARGUMENT BE GOOD FOR?

The phenomenon of epistemically circular arguments gives rise to a variety of questions, and among them is:

Justificatory Question. Can an epistemically circular argument afford one justification to believe its conclusion?¹⁰

Alston nicely summarizes his (1989) view in response to this question, writing:

On my view, a belief is justified if and only if it is based on an adequate ground; that is, it is necessary only that the ground be adequate, not that the subject know or justifiably believe this, much less that the subject know or justifiably believe that all requirements for justification are satisfied. But then I can be justified in accepting the outputs of a certain doxastic practice without being justified in believing that the practice is reliable. . . . [Concerning (TRA)] I need not already be justified in holding the conclusion [(PEAR)] in order to be justified in holding the premises. The argument would still be *epistemically circular*, for I am still assuming *in practice* the reliability of [my perceptual experiences] in forming normal perceptual beliefs. Nevertheless, I don’t have to be justified in making that assumption, in order to be justified in the perceptual beliefs that give me my premises. Hence the epistemic circularity does not prevent justification from being transmitted from the premises to a conclusion that would have been unjustified except for this argument. (1993, 16–17)¹¹

Put concisely, Alston thought the answer to the Justificatory Question was determined *entirely* by whether or not the following claim was true:

Non-Skeptical Anti-Conservatism (NSAC). We can (i) have justified perceptual beliefs, and (ii) these beliefs do not (or need not) depend on our having prior justification for believing (PEAR).

Alston’s endorsement of (NSAC) followed from his more general epistemic commitments concerning justification, and perceptual justification in particular. Alston thought that we not only have justified perceptual beliefs but that all that was necessary for someone (in circumstances broadly like ours) to have a justified perceptual belief that P was that one form that belief on the basis of one’s perceptual experience as of P and that one lack any overriding reason to the contrary. If this is correct, then clearly (i) and (ii) must be true.

Why might one think that a positive answer to the Justificatory Question turns on one’s stance on (NSAC)? Condition (i) is trivially necessary for a positive answer to that question, for (TRA) could not afford us justification for its conclusion unless we had justification to believe premise (2), and for that we need justified perceptual beliefs. But what of condition (ii)? Interestingly, Alston thought that (ii) must be satisfied for the very same reason owing to the following:

Conservative Skepticism (CS). If having justified perceptual beliefs depended on already being justified in believing (PEAR), we couldn't have any justified perceptual beliefs.

Alston's endorsement of (CS) follows from his endorsement of certain other points. *First*, he argued against the idea that we have justification for believing (PEAR) that does not derive from an argument (1989, 323). *Second*, he argued that the only arguments available for (PEAR) are epistemically circular arguments.¹² Together, these two considerations seem to imply (CS). For suppose one is justified in believing (PEAR). By the first consideration, one's source of justification for believing (PEAR) must be an argument. Let A be any argument whose conclusion is (PEAR). By the second consideration, A must be an epistemically circular argument. Since A is epistemically circular, A must be such that at least one of its premises is justified by one's perceptual experiences. But if one's perceptual experiences are able to justify one in believing some premise of A, one cannot have *already* possessed justification for believing (PEAR). Since to be justified in believing (PEAR) *in virtue of* A, one must *first* have justification for A's premises. So it seems to follow that if having justified perceptual beliefs depended on already being justified in believing (PEAR), we couldn't have any justified perceptual beliefs. Thus (CS) appears to follow from the two aforementioned considerations.¹³

So, provided the two considerations that lead to (CS) are sound, Alston was right to regard (NSAC) as necessary for a positive answer to the Justificatory Question. But is (NSAC) *sufficient* as Alston seemed to think? Notice that the Justificatory Question is, primarily, a question about *inferential* justification, i.e., it is a view about whether or not epistemically circular arguments can be a source of justification for their conclusions. Thus, providing an adequate answer to this question is, at least partly, a matter of defending the idea that epistemically circular arguments can (cannot) satisfy all the conditions necessary for the acquisition of inferential justification. So, even if (NSAC) is true, it does not all by itself have any implications for inferential justification. Of course, Alston (1986, 329–330) seems to hold that justifiably believing the premises of a non-logically circular deductively valid (or inductively cogent) argument are sufficient for an argument to justify one in believing its conclusion. And, if correct, then it seems plausible that if (NSAC) is true, then the Justificatory Question deserves a positive answer.

We will not attempt to articulate or resolve all the issues raised by Alston's positive answer to the Justificatory Question.¹⁴ We are interested here in what follows from that position, and the price one must ultimately pay to take it.

IV. ALSTON AND THE LIMITS OF EPISTEMICALLY CIRCULAR ARGUMENTS

On Alston's view, even though epistemically circular arguments could make one justified in believing their conclusions, the fact that they were epistemically circular prevented them from being useful in other ways.

In his initial discussion of the matter, Alston maintained that the primary epistemic limitation concerned the possibility of what he called "full reflective justification." One has *reflective justification* for P when one has given, or is in a

position to give, an argument, A, that justifies one in believing P. The idea is that, upon reflection on whether one has justification for P, if one can marshal an argument that affords one justification to believe P, one can assure oneself that P is true and hence believing P would be correct. Now, to have *full* reflective justification for P is for one to not only have an argument that justifies one in believing P but for one to also have other arguments that justify one in believing each of A's premises AND to have a yet other arguments that justify one in believing the premises of those arguments AND so on. Thus, Alston maintained that:

the impossibility of FRJ [fully reflective justification] is the only significant implication epistemic circularity has for the epistemic status of principles of reliability [e.g., (PEAR)] and of our beliefs generally. (1989, 346)

One might wonder how significant a result this is, since, as Alston himself was at pains to point out, it is fairly clear that fully reflective justification is impossible on independent grounds: it entails an infinite regress of beliefs. Even so, Alston thought that the fact that arguments for basic beliefs sources were invariably epistemically circular did show that certain traditional philosophical aspirations were doomed. In particular, "not every thing can be subjected to the test of critical examination, or else we shall be bereft of all belief. We can establish some conclusions only by assuming other propositions, not all of which can themselves be established" (Alston 1986, 27). We must always take something for granted.

In later work, however, Alston emphasized other limitations of epistemically circular arguments. It is these further consequences that we take to be more interesting.

When we ask whether various ways of forming beliefs are reliable, we are interested in discriminating those that are reliable from those that are not. . . . Epistemically circular arguments will not make that discrimination. (2006, 204)

This point raises a number of issues. First, there is:

Discrimination. Given the variety of belief sources we *in fact* employ, can epistemically circular arguments be of any use in sorting out the reliable ones from the unreliable ones?

If Alston is correct in his response to the Justificatory Question, then the answer to this question must be "yes," at least if "sorting out" is a matter of arriving at justified beliefs about the reliability of a given belief source. That's because, as he says: "So long as [(PEAR)] is true, an argument for it that is epistemically circular by virtue of assuming [(PEAR)] in practice can still be used to show that [(PEAR)] is true" (2006, 203). In earlier work Alston was prone to put the point more strongly:

Suppose that, while continuing to rely on (PEAR) in practice [that is, by being committed to it by believing premise (2) on the basis of one's perceptual experiences], I cannot see any adequate reasons for accepting [(PEAR)] and am in a state of perplexity about whether I am rational in accepting it. . . . I can quite legitimately use [(TRA)] to assure myself that I do have adequate reasons for supposing [(PEAR)] to be correct. (1989, 334)

This seems to suggest that if we are practically committed to the reliability of sense perception, we can use it to show to others, or “assure ourselves,” that it is reliable, and hence discriminate it from sources we think unreliable.

One might well wonder what sense of “assurance” is in play here. For as Alston later emphasizes himself, we can show that sense perception is reliable *only if (and indeed, if and only if) sense perception really is reliable—that is, if and only if, (PEAR) is actually true* (Alston, 2006, 203). But

that is not going to help anyone who is unsure about the matter and wants to find out *whether* [(PEAR)] is true. Assuring this person that *if* [(PEAR)] is true, then an epistemically circular argument can show it to be true will not settle the question. (2006, 203)

In short, as this later passage concedes, the fact that an epistemically circular argument can be used to justify (PEAR) can’t be used to assure anyone who rejects it that (PEAR) is true when the issue of whether it is true is explicitly and openly on the table. That’s because in such a situation, *you* may well have justification to believe (PEAR)—indeed, you may even know (PEAR)—but you can’t *demonstrate* that you do to someone who refuses to accept your premises because they recognize that your argument for believing that sense perception is reliable presupposes that it is.

This takes us to the most important limit imposed by epistemically circular arguments: they impose limits on what we might call *rational persuasion*. To persuade S with regard to P is to change her doxastic state with regard to P. You can do this in lots of different ways; brainwashing and advertising are effective methods, for example. But, rational persuasion is different. To rationally persuade S is to do so on the basis of reasons that one has given to S. The sense in which, in the process of engaging in rational persuasion, we “give” reasons can be defined (following Lynch, 2012 and 2013) as follows:

(GIVE) A gives a reason R to B to believe that p just when, were B to reason consistently from her epistemic and logical principles, B would recognize that R is a reason for her to believe that p.

Roughly speaking, when we engage in the process of rational persuasion, we don’t just make our interlocutor believe differently—we do so by giving her reasons that she can recognize as reasons. Of course, as Alston himself would emphasize, one can have reasons for beliefs that one can’t explicitly “give,” in this sense of ‘give.’ And he would also emphasize that one can exchange reasons in weaker senses; for example in the sense in which I supply you a reason you fail to recognize as a reason. In the sense at hand, however, we rationally persuade only by appealing to common rational ground, i.e., to reasons we can—at least in principle—recognize as reasons given what we take to be true from our epistemic standpoint. And it is precisely this type of process for which epistemically circular arguments seem useless. As Alston noted above, if I am explicitly wondering whether a source is reliable, being told that if it is, then I have good grounds to believe that it is will be of little help.

Let us call any principle—like (PEAR)—that concerns the reliability of a basic source of belief a “fundamental epistemic principle.” If the above reasoning is correct, then the following argument seems to threaten.

CHALLENGE ARGUMENT

- (1) A can epistemically defend a fundamental epistemic principle to B when challenged only if A can give an epistemic reason for that principle to B.
- (2) A gives an epistemic reason to B only if A shows to B that P is true.
- (3) Fundamental epistemic principles can be shown to be true only via epistemically circular arguments.
- (4) Epistemically circular arguments can’t be used to give epistemic reasons under challenge.
- (5) Therefore: Fundamental epistemic principles cannot be epistemically defended when challenged.

This argument seems perfectly in line with Alston’s own distinctions and commitments. For example, Lynch (2010, 2012, and 2013) has argued that the Challenge Argument does not entail any interesting form of skepticism—a conclusion that Alston would presumably endorse (given his positive answer to the Justificatory Question). Nonetheless, it does seem to raise a troubling set of issues about our conception of ourselves as epistemic agents—that is, for the kind of inquirers we take ourselves to be.

Consider a parallel. We’ve long recognized the disquieting possibility that we might not be able to defend our basic moral principles with reasons. In an isolated case, this may not matter much. I don’t wish to defend my moral choices to every questioner that comes along, nor do I have time to do so even if I did. But it would be another stance all together to simply give up on ever answering challenges to my fundamental moral commitments no matter what the circumstance. Part of living in a civil society is being willing to negotiate such challenges when they arise in the course of our political and practical lives. That doesn’t mean we will or should defend our moral principles against all people all the time. But it does mean that we must think it is at least *possible* to defend our moral principles at least some of the time.

We think it is *prima facie* plausible that a consequence of the Challenge Argument—and thus of considerations involving epistemic circularity—is that a parallel issue arises with regard to our ability to rationally persuade others of our *epistemic* principles. Here too, our commitment to civility gives us a principled reason to be willing to defend our epistemic principles—at least in those cases where practical decision-making depends upon it. Again, that doesn’t mean giving answers in response to all actual challenges all the time; but it does presuppose that it is *possible* to give reasons for our epistemic principles. And that is precisely what is at issue: whether it is possible to give reasons for our fundamental epistemic principles. In

other words, we have reasons—good reasons—to want to be *reason-giving epistemic and moral agents* even if we don't or can't always give reasons.

Even if the Challenge Argument is correct, however, one might take its conclusion to raise a problem that is as much epistemic as it is practical. So in the next section we show that a positive answer to the Justificatory Question could have a more strictly epistemic consequence.

V. THE PROBLEM OF DEEP EPISTEMIC DISAGREEMENT

As we saw above, Alston's answer to the Justificatory Question is that epistemically circular arguments can, in certain circumstances, justify their conclusions. In what follows we want to consider a case where Alston seems committed to saying that one could use an epistemically circular argument to acquire justification, though such a commitment is inconsistent with other plausible epistemic principles. Accordingly, we will show that the cost of maintaining an Alstonian answer to the Justificatory Question might well be greater than anticipated.

The problem we envision arises from a peculiar kind of disagreement that can occur among agents, it's a disagreement that stems from thinkers' using different fundamental methods to arrive at beliefs. For example, consider the following, fictional case:¹⁵

THE STORY OF SUSAN AND SALLY

Susan and Sally form beliefs about their immediate physical environment in surprisingly different ways. Susan forms perceptual beliefs like we do: she takes her perceptual experiences as of P and proceeds to believe P (provided she has no relevant undefeated defeaters). Sally, by contrast, forms perceptual beliefs quite differently: she takes her perceptual experiences as of P and (provided she has no relevant undefeated defeaters) she proceeds to believe (not-P&MP) where MP is the proposition that I'm in the Matrix and I'm having an experience as of P. However, she always acts as if P, and thus is able to live quite successfully despite her many false perceptual beliefs.

One day Susan and Sally encounter each other, and, looking out upon a beautiful lake, Susan comments, "That's a beautiful lake"; Sally replies, "There is no lake. But our misleading experience as of a lake is beautiful." Susan and Sally continue to share their beliefs about their immediate environment, and both come to realize that they have extensively inconsistent views and that this difference is owed to their very different ways of responding to their perceptual experiences. It is immediately obvious to Susan and Sally that their ways of arriving at perceptual beliefs cannot both be reliable, i.e., at least one of their ways of arriving at perceptual beliefs is unreliable. Fortunately, Susan has studied and come to agree with the epistemological views expressed by William Alston in his paper "Epistemic Circularity." Accordingly, Susan employs a track record argument in an attempt to justify her belief that her way of forming perceptual beliefs is reliable, i.e., Susan uses an instance of (TRA)—i.e., (TRAs)—in order to justify (PEAR).

Let us refer to the kind of disagreement present in the above case as a *deep epistemic disagreement* and let us refer to situations where this sort of disagreement is present as *DED situations*. Accordingly, we've introduced the idea of a deep epistemic disagreement by way of an example, but despite this we can say with a bit more precision just what we take the salient elements of this kind of disagreement to be:

(DED) S1 is in a *deep epistemic disagreement* with S2 just in case: (i) S1 employs an epistemic principle, EP, to arrive at true beliefs in some domain of inquiry, (ii) S2 rejects that epistemic principle as a reliable guide to forming true beliefs in that domain, and (iii) S1 has no further epistemic principle, EP*, that does not rely on or presuppose the reliability of EP with which he can show that EP is in fact a reliable means of arriving at true beliefs.¹⁶

Thus understood, although every disagreement over the reliability of epistemic principles is symmetrical, *deep epistemic disagreements* may be asymmetrical. Thus, for example, in the case above although Susan has a deep epistemic disagreement with Sally, it may be that Sally does not have a deep epistemic disagreement with Susan, *provided* Sally has some way of justifying her way of arriving at perceptual beliefs that does not rely on her very way of arriving at such beliefs. If Sally lacks such a way, then Sally also finds herself in a deep epistemic disagreement. Furthermore, according to this definition, it does not follow that S1 can justify EP by way of an epistemically circular argument. Thus, we have not built a positive answer to the Justificatory Question into our definition of deep epistemic disagreements.

There are several questions we might ask about this possible scenario, but let us focus on this one: does Susan's use of (TRAs) justify her belief in (PEAR) despite the fact that she is in a deep epistemic disagreement with Sally? Or more generally:

Can a thinker use an epistemically circular argument to justify its conclusion while in a DED situation?

On Alston's view, as we saw above, all Susan needs for (TRAs) to justify (PEAR) is justification for believing (TRAs)'s premises and the fact that (TRAs) actually makes (PEAR) more likely to be true. So far as we can tell there is nothing about Susan's being in the deep epistemic disagreement that she is in that compromises either condition. Thus, if Alston's views are correct, we have following:

(D1) If epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions, then they can justify their conclusions in some DED situations.

(D1) is limited to *some* DED situations for there are doubtless ways of adding to the details of some DED situations such that one would be unable to use an epistemically circular argument to acquire justification. For example, we could just build into a DED situation that some necessary condition for an argument to justify its conclusion has not been met. We mean to set such altered cases aside. Below we'll return to (D1), but for now it will serve us to note that Alston's views seem to commit him to it.

So with (D1) and Alston's answer to the Justificatory Question—(D2) below—we can mount the following argument:

- (D1) If epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions, then they can justify their conclusions in some DED situations.
- (D2) Epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions.
- (D3) Therefore, epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions even in (some) DED situations.

Given Susan's self-conscious recognition that she has used an epistemically circular argument to justify (PEAR), and her philosophical grounds for thinking that such arguments are able to justify beliefs, we may assume:

- (D4) Susan justifiably believes that she has justification to believe (PEAR).

The problem with (D3), to be shown below, will stem from its inconsistency with certain other plausible epistemic principles. But before we introduce those further epistemic principles that generate the problem, it will help us to first consider a way in which Susan might have responded to her DED situation:

THE STORY OF SUSAN AND SALLY CONTINUED . . .

Susan realizes, despite her adept use of a track record argument to justify her belief in (PEAR), that Sally could just as easily deploy a track record argument in support of her belief in the reliability of her way of forming perceptual beliefs. Indeed, Susan realizes that if she were in Sally's position she would have mounted a track record argument for her odd way of forming beliefs, and she would have regarded her belief in the reliability of that way of forming beliefs to be justified on that basis. This troubles Susan. So Susan (self-consciously) decreases her degree of confidence in (PEAR) to the point of suspending belief in (PEAR).¹⁷

The question we wish to ask of this continued story is whether or not Susan's doxastic response to finding herself in her DED situation is a *blameworthy* response. Following Alston (1989, chapter 4) we make a distinction between *justification* and *blamelessness*. The principal difference being that justification has a strong connection to the truth, whereas blamelessness does not. Although individual explications of the idea here will differ, we take the core concept to be that blameless beliefs have to do with what one can be properly held responsible for given one's overall epistemic situation. However, we should note that the problem to follow will remain if one were to, *pace* Alston, identify justification and blamelessness. But for our purposes we will treat them as distinct kinds of positive epistemic statuses.

We share a very strong intuition that Susan is not blameworthy for decreasing her degree of confidence in (PEAR) in response to finding herself in a DED situation. More generally we think something along the following lines is correct:

- (Blameless Suspension) If one is in a DED situation and an epistemically circular argument is one's source of justification to believe P, then one is

blameless in decreasing one's degree of confidence in P below the degree they are justified in taking towards it, even if they decrease it to the point of suspending belief in P.

Notice that endorsing (Blameless Suspension) doesn't entail that, say, Susan *ought* to decrease her confidence in (PEAR) nor does it entail that her epistemically circular argument has failed to give her *justification to believe* (PEAR). Indeed, the only threat to acquiring justification to believe (PEAR) via a track record argument is if she were not only to suspend belief in (PEAR) but also all of her (former) perceptual beliefs. For then, on Alston's view, she would no longer justifiably believe the premises needed to mount an epistemically effective track record argument.¹⁸ Moreover, (Blameless Suspension) expresses a limited commitment to when one is blameless in believing P to a degree less than one has justification to believe P. For (Blameless Suspension) concerns only those sources of justification that are epistemically circular. Thus it remains open that when a source of justification to believe P is not epistemically circular then one is not blameless in believing P to a degree that is less than the degree one has justification for.

One might worry about the blamelessness of suspending belief in P on grounds of a uniqueness principle—i.e., there is exactly one doxastic state one is justified in taking toward a given proposition. But, again, (Blameless Suspension) is not about justification but blamelessness, and it is not clear that the arguments which support uniqueness in the case of justification also support the same view of blamelessness. It's also worth noting the extent to which the uniqueness thesis for justification has itself come under scrutiny.¹⁹ One might also worry that although taking a weaker degree of belief than one has justification to take is sometimes blameless, one is never blameless in suspending belief in P when one has justification to believe P to some degree or other. But this strikes us as arbitrary and in need of further defense. In any case, the problem to follow does not essentially depend on this point, for it is enough that one can blamelessly believe P to a weaker degree than one has justification to believe it.²⁰

Now for the further principles that make for inconsistency. The first is a principle connecting the justification of higher-order states and blamelessly being in those states:

(J-B Entailment) One justifiably believes that one has justification to believe P only if one blamelessly believes that one has justification to believe P.

This follows straightforwardly from the idea that blamelessness is a necessary condition for having a justified belief, i.e.,

One justifiably believes P only if one blamelessly believes P.

This principle is a plausible one given the basing demand on having a justified belief.²¹ For according to this demand, if one's belief in P is justified then one not only has (all things considered) *justification to believe* P but one's *reason for* believing P is an epistemically appropriate one.²² And if one believes P for an epistemically appropriate reason and has all things considered justification to believe P, one is surely not blameworthy for believing as they do. The point here is a perfectly gen-

eral one: it's incorrect to blame someone for performing an action (or holding an attitude) A when (i) A is all things considered *right*, and (ii) they perform (hold) A for those reasons that make it right.²³

Here's the second principle:

(BAN) One cannot blamelessly (suspend belief in P and believe that one has justification to believe P).

(BAN) criticizes certain combinations of doxastic attitudes; it is an injunction against what we might think of as epistemic hypocrisy. Put differently, (BAN) tells us that one is always blameworthy for being an epistemic hypocrite. In support of (BAN) it helps to consider what justification is and why having beliefs about it might prohibit us from blamelessly forming certain further doxastic attitudes. What makes epistemic justification *epistemic* is supposed to be its truth connection—having justification is supposed to be the kind of thing that minimizes, to a sufficient extent, the likelihood or risk of error. Thus in judging that one has justification to believe P, one is judging that one is not as likely to err in believing P as they would be if they were to take some other attitude towards P. But surely if one judges that one has justification to believe P, one not only ought to believe it²⁴ but one would also be blameworthy for not believing it.

To see that (D3), (D4), (Blameless Suspension), (J-B Entailment), and (BAN) form an inconsistent set, consider Susan once again. By (D3), Susan has justification to believe (PEAR). By (D4), Susan also justifiably believes that she has justification to believe (PEAR). Given (J-B Entailment), Susan not only justifiably believes (PEAR), but also blamelessly believes that she has justification to believe (PEAR). Now, Susan's response to being in a DED situation was to suspend belief in (PEAR), and by (Blameless Suspension) she is blameless in so doing. Thus, it follows that Susan blamelessly (believes that she has justification to believe (PEAR) and suspends belief in (PEAR)). But this is inconsistent with (BAN). Let us call this *the Disagreement Problem*.

So (D3), (D4), (Blameless Suspension), (J-B Entailment), and (BAN) cannot all be true. We have already provided reasons for thinking that (D4)–(BAN) are true, and if correct this gives us reason to reject (D3). Now there are two ways to go about rejecting (D3), for it followed from (D1) and (D2). To reject (D2) is to reject the Alstonian answer to the Justificatory Question. So let us further examine the possibility of rejecting (D1), i.e.,

If epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions, then they can justify their conclusions even in (some) DED situations, e.g., situations like the one in which Susan found herself.

Now one might think that (D1) is false owing to the inability of epistemically circular arguments to properly function in what Bergmann (2006, 197) has called "QD-situations," which are, roughly, situations where one either *is or should be* questioning or doubting the reliability of a source to the point where one either suspends judgment about the reliability of the source or believes that it is not reliable. Bergmann's claim is that epistemically circular arguments can only justify

their conclusions in non-QD-situations. And, if correct, (D1) cannot be right, at least not in the case of Susan, for she has suspended belief in (PEAR).

There are a few things to note about this kind of response to the Disagreement Problem. First, it's not clear that Alston would have accepted the idea that (all) QD-situations are ones in which epistemically circular arguments fail to function.²⁵ Second, even if Bergmann is correct, it is not clear that that alone resolves the Disagreement Problem instead of only preventing the case of Susan from being an instance of it. For recall, we built into our DED situation that Susan ended up suspending belief in (PEAR). But, as noted above, we could have run the problem just as easily if, instead of suspending belief in (PEAR), she simply decreased her degree of belief in (PEAR) below what she (correctly) took herself to have justification to believe. So if Bergmann's considerations are to give us a reason to reject (D1) it must be the case that:

(SOS1) Susan *ought* to suspend belief (PEAR).

and

(SOS2) Suspension of belief in (PEAR) would prevent Susan's use of (TRA) from justifying (PEAR).

We find it difficult to isolate any reason in support of (SOS1). For notice that the present DED situation is one in which Sally cannot give Susan any reason to think her method is reliable (this follows from premise 4 of the Challenge Argument). The only other plausible explanation for (SOS1) we can think of is that (SOS1) stems from the fact that Susan realizes that her way of arriving at perceptual beliefs and Sally's cannot both be reliable. But notice that this, or something near enough, is something Susan had good reason to think true independently of discovering herself to be in a DED situation. For, provided Susan was sufficiently reflective, she would easily have been able to grasp the fact that her way of arriving at perceptual beliefs could not be reliable if some other way which frequently leads (or would lead) to inconsistent perceptual beliefs is reliable. So if (SOS1) is true, it seems like it's truth has nothing to do with Susan being in a DED situations *and that (SOS1) was true even before she found herself in a DED situation*. There are two problems with this way of motivating (SOS1). First, it, together with (SOS2), would create extensive limitations on the usefulness of epistemically circular arguments. For anyone sophisticated enough to deploy at tack record argument for (PEAR) is in a position to know that (PEAR) cannot be true if some other method that produces many inconsistent beliefs is also reliable. Thus making Alston's answer to the Justificatory Question, even if strictly speaking correct, useless for most of us who worry about such issues. Second, it's hard to see how one could endorse this motivation for (SOS1) and in a principled way avoid classical Cartesian arguments for skepticism. For those are arguments which get rolling just on the *possibility* that (PEAR) is false. So if such a possibility is no barrier to knowledge and justified belief (as is typically assumed), how could it make it the case that (SOS1) is true?

There are also problems concerning (SOS2). For in general it is not a requirement that one already believe the conclusion of an argument if one is to acquire

justification to believe that conclusion. For example, a cautious scientist might withhold judgment in the correctness of the results of his experiments, despite the excruciating meticulousness of his work, until his results are independently confirmed. In such a case our scientist has justification to believe the conclusions of his work though he does not yet believe them.²⁶ Perhaps the thought is that, in the case of epistemically circular arguments, one cannot retain justification for the premises (e.g., (TRAs)'s premise (2)) if one suspends judgment in (PEAR). But recall, if Alston is correct about (NSAC)—something Bergmann himself accepts—and thus one needn't believe (justifiably or not) (PEAR) in order to have perceptually justified beliefs, then it's hard to see why suspending belief in (PEAR) would prevent one from having justification to believe the premises. So we find (SOS2) wanting, provided (NSAC) is correct.

VI. CONCLUSION

Let's take stock of where we are. If Alston is right, the Justificatory Question merits a positive answer—epistemically circular arguments can be used to justify their conclusions. But such arguments do give rise to two distinct further issues.

The first is that epistemically circular arguments are useless for engaging in what we called rational epistemic persuasion on behalf of our fundamental epistemic principles. This is, in effect, the conclusion of the Challenge Argument.

The second concerns implications of deep epistemic disagreements. In particular, the Disagreement Problem gave us a reason to doubt (D3)—that epistemically circular arguments can be used to justify their conclusions in cases of deep epistemic disagreement. Since (D3) followed from (D1) and (D2) at least one of those claims has to be mistaken. If, as we suggest, (D1) should not be rejected, we must reject either (D2) or one of the plausible epistemic principles that generated the Disagreement Problem. As indicated above, each of those principles bears significant motivation. That does not entail that (D2)—Alston's answer to the Justificatory Question—is false. But it does show that the price of holding that epistemically circular arguments can justify their conclusions is more costly than has been previously appreciated.

Indeed, something like the Disagreement Problem might help explain the widespread opposition to the idea that an epistemically circular argument can justify its conclusion. For, in general, philosophers have opposed epistemically circular reasoning solely on the grounds that such reasoning is counterintuitive all on its own. Here we have show that it's not just counterintuitive, but inconsistent with other plausible epistemic principles.

ENDNOTES

1. Alston 1989, 319 and 321.
2. Further distinctions among belief sources can be made; e.g., basic sources will be discussed below; Cf. Alston 1989, 326 and 1993, 14.
3. Lynch 2012 and 2010.

4. The “size and diversity” qualification is needed for the crucial inductive step.
5. Alternatively, one could take the transition from (4) to (5) via a bit of abductive reasoning, arguing that the best explanation of the past accuracy of our perceptual experiences is their reliability.
6. However, for some push back on this inductive step see Wright 2007 and Pryor 2000. Note also that the logical legitimacy of the transitions should not be confused with their epistemic usefulness, e.g., a sound deductive inference does not necessarily justify belief in its conclusion. Most resistance to (TRA) has been directed toward its epistemic usefulness, which will be discussed further below.
7. Alston 1989, 329.
8. Condition (iii) is needed to account for the possibility of cases where one’s justification for believing A’s premises is over determined by some other belief source—e.g., suppose S’s belief in premise (2) was a result of two distinct beliefs sources, each of which yielded a justified belief in (2).
9. Although this characterization of epistemic circularity is sufficiently precise for our purposes, the following cases suggest problems with taking it to be an entirely general characterization:

Case#1: A thinker’s use of an inductive argument for the reliability of induction where the thinker does not rely on induction for his or her belief in any premise.

Case#2: A thinker’s taking testimony to be reliable on the basis of testimony.

Case#3: A thinker’s use of an argument for the claim that a given belief source X is a *source of justification* (as opposed to a *reliable* belief source) where that thinker’s belief in some premise is a result of his or her employment of X.

Case#4: A thinker’s use of an argument for the claim that a *given belief source X is more reliable than the thinker previously had reason to think* (as opposed to *reliable simpliciter*) where that thinker’s belief in some premise is a result of his or her employment of X.

Clearly, there is something common to such cases, something aptly thought of as “epistemic circularity” though (Def) fails to capture it.
10. Though later in his career Alston (2006, 201ff) came to reject the idea that ‘justification’ named any positive epistemic property he continued to think that there were significant positive epistemic properties (e.g., well-grounded belief) that epistemically circular argument could confer on one’s belief in (PEAR). For convenience we will continue to express the topics to follows in terms of justification, as Alston did originally.
11. See also Alston 1989, 330–331.
12. Alston 1989, 330; see also Alston 1993. Though Alston was always careful to temper this claim, suggesting that we may yet discover a non-epistemically circular argument for (PEAR).
13. Alston (1989, 330) gives roughly this argument, however, here we have tried to reproduce a version of it that makes explicit the considerations Alston endorsed that lead to (CS). For without explicit mention of the first consideration the argument falters.
14. Alston’s positive answer is obviously controversial. For a recent survey of attempts to explain why epistemically circular arguments fail to justify their conclusions, see

Weisberg 2012. Moreover, both of Alston's considerations that were used to support (CS) are, likewise, controversial. Contrary to Alston's first consideration, Cohen 1999 and White 2006 have argued that we have a standing default justification to believe (PEAR); Cohen 2002 has argued that coherence among our beliefs affords us justification for (PEAR); and Enoch and Schechter 2008 have argued, in the spirit of Wright 2004, that certain practical considerations concerning our cognitive goals affords us justification to endorse (PEAR)—among other things. If any of these are correct, Alston's first consideration in support of (CS) is threatened.

Contrary to Alston's second consideration, some have argued that there are certain arguments for (PEAR) that do not depend on any perceptual experience for the justification of any premise, for we can have premiseless arguments for (PEAR). For example, see Cohen 2010 and Wedgwood 2013.

15. For discussion of this sort of disagreement with cases that are non-fictional see Hales 2004 and Lynch 2010.

16. This differs from Lynch's 2010 and 2012 characterization of deep epistemic disagreements. For according to that definition, enjoying such a disagreement is a symmetrical affair and it is possible to have an epistemically circular justification.

17. We add the self-conscious bit because we want to consider a case in which one is aware of one's own doxastic responses to a DED situation.

18. This last point is not entirely clear to us. For it seems sufficient for the purposes of acquiring inferential justification that one have *justification to believe* the premises of an argument, even if one fails to *justifiably believe* them.

19. For discussion see White 2005, Brueckner and Bundy 2012, and Schoenfield 2014.

20. Below we will discuss the possible epistemic effects of suspension of belief in (PEAR) in connection with a Bergmann-inspired response to the proposed problem.

21. The basing demand on justified belief is very widely endorsed. See Alston (1989) and Korcz (2000).

22. Usually, epistemically appropriate reasons for believing P are taken to be those factors that make it the case that one has justification to believe P. Even if one wishes a more inclusive account of what makes a reason epistemically appropriate, we think the general point here will still hold.

23. For further discussion on this see Arpaly (2002) and Markovitz (2010).

Arguably, even if one rejects blamelessness as a necessary condition on justified belief generally (J-B Entailment) remains defensible. When one justifiably believes that one has justification to believe P—that, for example, one's belief in P is based on adequate grounds, faces no defeat, etc.—one is in a complex epistemic state. If one's overall epistemic situation were to make it improper to have that belief—if by doing so, for example, you were to violate some intellectual duty—then *even if you were justified in believing P*, it seems plausible that you would not be justified in believing that you have such justification. This is completely consistent with holding that justification doesn't always presuppose blamelessness; nonetheless it may sometimes, and indeed a natural home for this constraint is precisely at the higher level—the very level at play in cases of mutual explicit disagreement.

24. I take the ‘ought’ here to have wide scope. That is, it ought to be the case that (if one believes one has justification to believe P, then one believes P). For discussion of the importance of this see Pryor’s (2004) discussion of rational commitments.

25. Recall what Alston (1989, 334) said:

“Suppose that, while continuing to rely on [(PEAR)] in practice [that is, by being committed to it by believing premise (2) on the basis of one’s perceptual experiences], I cannot see any adequate reasons for accepting [(PEAR)] and am in a state of perplexity about whether I am rational in accepting it. . . . I can quite legitimately use [(TRA)] to assure myself that I do have adequate reasons for supposing [(PEAR)] to be correct.”

26. We may suppose for the purposes of ruling out defeaters that his results contradict no existing body of evidence and that his methods are known to be reliable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alston, W. 1986. “Epistemic Circularity.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47: 1–30. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2107722>
- Alston, W. 1989. *Epistemic Justification*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Alston, W. 1993. *The Reliability of Sense Perception*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Alston, W. 2006. *Beyond “Justification.”* Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Arpaly, N. 2002. “Moral Worth.” *Journal of Philosophy* 99: 223–245.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3655647>
- Bergmann, M. 2006. “Epistemic Circularity and Common Sense: A Reply to Reed.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 73: 198–207.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2006.tb00611.x>
- Brueckner, A., and A. Bundy. 2012. “On ‘Epistemic Permissiveness.’” *Synthese* 188: 165–177. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11229-011-9921-9>
- Cohen, S. 1999. “Contextualism, Skepticism, and the Structure of Reasons.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13: 57–89. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.33.s13.3>
- Cohen, S. 2002. “Basic Knowledge and the Problem of Easy Knowledge.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65: 309–329.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2002.tb00204.x>
- Cohen, S. 2010. “Bootstrapping, Defeasible Reasoning, and A Priori Justification.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24: 141–159.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2010.00188.x>
- Enoch, D., and J. Schechter. 2008. “How Are Basic Belief-Forming Methods Justified?” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76: 547–579.
doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2008.00157.x>
- Hales, S. 2004. “Intuition, Revelation, and Relativism.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12: 271–295. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0967255042000243957>
- Korcz, K. 2000. “The Causal-Doxastic Theory of the Basing Relation.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 30: 525–550.
- Lynch, M. P. 2010. “Epistemic Disagreement and Epistemic Incommensurability.” In *Social Epistemology*, ed. A. Haddock, A. Millar, and D. Pritchard. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577477.003.0013>

- Lynch, M. P. 2012. *In Praise of Reason*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lynch, M. P. 2013. "Epistemic Commitments, Epistemic Agency and Practical Reasons." In *Epistemic Agency*, ed. Baron Reed and Ernest Sosa. Philosophical Issues, vol. 23. Boston: Blackwell.
- Markovitz, J. 2010. "Acting for the Right Reasons." *Philosophical Review* 119: 201–242. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2009-037>
- Pryor, J. 2000. "The Skeptic and the Liberal." *Nous* 34: 517–549. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/0029-4624.00277>
- Pryor, J. 2004. "What's Wrong With Moore's Argument?" *Philosophical Issues* 14: 349–378. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-6077.2004.00034.x>
- Schoenfield, M. 2014. "Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief." *Nous* 48: 193–218. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/nous.12006>
- Wedgwood, R. 2013. "A Priori Bootstrapping." In *The A Priori in Philosophy*, ed. Albert Casullo and Joshua C. Thurow, 226–246. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199695331.003.0011>
- Weisberg, J. 2012. "The Bootstrapping Problem." *Philosophy Compass* 7: 597–610. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2012.00504.x>
- White, R. 2005. "Epistemic Permissiveness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19: 445–459. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2005.00069.x>
- White, R. 2006. "Problems for Dogmatism." *Philosophical Studies* 131: 525–557. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11098-004-7487-9>
- Wright, C. 2004. "Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?" *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 78: 16–212. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-7013.2004.00121.x>
- Wright, C. 2007. "Perils of Dogmatism." In *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology*, ed. Susana Nuccetelli and Gary Seay. Oxford: Oxford University Press.