

15 Global Evolutionary Arguments

Self-Defeat, Circularity, and Skepticism about Reason

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15.1 Introduction

Evolutionary arguments have primarily been used either to debunk or to vindicate our beliefs in specific domains. For example, some authors have employed them to debunk our beliefs in objective moral facts or properties.¹ Others have employed them to vindicate our commonsense beliefs² or our logical beliefs.³ But evolutionary arguments could in principle also be used to debunk or to vindicate the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming processes or mechanisms as a whole and, hence, the epistemic credentials of our beliefs in general.⁴

In this chapter, written in an exploratory mode, I would like to focus on those wide-ranging evolutionary arguments. My interest in them lies in what they *might* tell us about the *possibly* aporetic nature of reason. Whereas the evolutionary debunking arguments (EDAs) that call into question the belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties seem to fall prey to crippling self-defeat, the evolutionary vindicating arguments (EVAs) that seek to support that belief seem to fall prey to vicious circularity. If we take both kinds of arguments to consist of true or plausible premises and valid inferences at which we arrive through a meticulous use of reason, then their falling victim to either crippling self-defeat or vicious circularity *might* be regarded as a sign that, when we push rational reflection on the reliability, or lack thereof, of our belief-forming capacities to the limit, we end up in a situation of *aporia* from which there seems to be no escape.⁵ I hasten to emphasize that I do not assert that human reason is of such a nature that it inexorably gives rise to *aporiai*. Rather, I limit myself to observing that this is a possibility that cannot be dismissed out of hand but only, if at all, after careful consideration. For this reason, the skepticism adopted in this chapter is of a Pyrrhonian stripe.⁶

The layout of the chapter is as follows. In Section 15.2, I focus on an EDA that targets the justification of the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming capacities and on the charge that such an argument is self-defeating. In so doing, I look at Alvin Plantinga's self-defeat argument

against metaphysical naturalism. In Section 15.3, I focus on an EVA that purports to establish that the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming capacities is justified and on the charge that such an argument is viciously circular. In so doing, I consider what kind of circularity is at issue and examine the notion of begging the question. Henceforth, whenever I talk about “the EDA” and “the EVA,” I refer specifically to the global evolutionary arguments to be discussed in Sections 15.2 and 15.3. In Section 15.4, I first examine whether the self-defeat charge is a fatal objection to the skeptic who makes use of the EDA and whether certain circular arguments are virtuous or benign. I then argue that the fact that the EDA and the EVA are, respectively, self-defeating and circular might be taken, first, to reveal the aporetic nature of reason and, second, to indicate that they are epistemically on a par and, hence, that suspension of judgment about the reliability of our cognitive capacities is the only rational response. In Section 15.5, I offer some concluding remarks.

15.2 The EDA and Self-Defeat

Consider the following EDA that targets the justification of the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming processes as a whole:

1. Our belief-forming processes have been shaped by evolution through natural selection.
2. Evolution through natural selection only cares about survival and reproduction.
3. Forming false beliefs can be as advantageous for survival and reproduction as forming true beliefs.
4. Therefore, the belief that our belief-forming processes are reliable is unjustified.

This argument intends to provide an undercutting rather than a rebutting defeater for the belief that our evolved belief-forming processes are reliable inasmuch as it does not conclude that the belief is false but rather unjustified. It thus intends to establish that we should be agnostic about the reliability of our evolved belief-forming processes: we cannot rule out either the possibility that they are, in fact, reliable—most of our beliefs may, in fact, be true—or the possibility that those processes are, in fact, unreliable—most of our beliefs may, in fact, be false.

The EDA can be rejected by attacking one or more of its premises. The preferred target will be premise 3: one may argue that, at least in certain domains, only beliefs that are mostly true can give us an evolutionary advantage. But I want to focus here on a charge that is typically leveled against skeptical arguments that target the reliability of our belief-producing capacities as a whole or the justification of all our beliefs or the probative strength of all epistemic reasons. According to the charge in

question, the skeptic who puts forward the EDA falls prey to self-defeat inasmuch as both the evolutionary theory on which the premises of the argument are (allegedly) based and the inference that enables him to derive the conclusion from the premises are the product of his belief-producing capacities. If so, then, according to the EDA itself, both the belief in evolutionary theory and the belief in the validity of the argument are unjustified: if the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming capacities is unjustified, then we have no compelling epistemic reason to think that any one of the beliefs generated by those capacities is true. As a result, the EDA undermines itself: it concludes that we should be agnostic about the reliability of the very same belief-generating capacities used to produce the argument. Self-defeat results from sweeping skepticism: it is because the conclusion of the EDA affects all beliefs generated by our cognitive faculties that it ends up affecting the EDA itself. Given that the evolutionary debunker intends to establish that our belief in the reliability of our belief-generating capacities is unjustified by relying on these very capacities, it seems that he is unjustified in his belief in the conclusion of the argument.

One can take the EDA to be self-defeating in the sense of being self-refuting. In the literature, we do not find an agreed-upon account of self-refutation. One possible account is proposed by Richard Fumerton (1995: 43–53), who distinguishes two ways in which an argument can be charged with self-refutation. An argument is *formally self-refuting* when its conclusion is “inconsistent with the premises that are used to reach that conclusion” or when “the very intelligibility of the skeptical conclusion requires that it be rejected” (1995: 43). And an argument is *epistemically self-refuting* “if the truth of its conclusion implies that one has no justification for accepting its premises” (1995: 44). On this taxonomy, the EDA is epistemically self-refuting.

Stephen Stich (1990) seems to propound *in propria persona* an argument similar to the EDA.⁷ But propounding an argument of this sort *in propria persona* is the exception rather than the rule in the literature on evolutionary arguments. That said, the EDA is an argument that others could well put forward, that may be philosophically intriguing, and that is, in fact, criticized as self-defeating by certain authors. For example, a similar argument and a similar accusation of self-defeat are found in Alvin Plantinga’s (1993) well-known attack on metaphysical naturalism.⁸ He advances two arguments against that position: one that seeks to establish its probable falsehood (“the preliminary argument”) and one that seeks to establish the irrationality of accepting it (“the main argument”). I will focus on the second argument because it is the one that is relevant to the issue that concerns us.

Plantinga considers the following probability: $P(R/(N \& E \& C))$. R is the claim that our cognitive capacities are reliable, N is metaphysical naturalism, E is the claim that our cognitive capacities are the product of

evolution through natural selection, and C is the claim that describes the cognitive faculties we have and the sorts of beliefs they produce. The main argument concludes that we should be agnostic about that probability. The reason is that, according to evolutionary theory, the ultimate purpose or function of our cognitive faculties is survival rather than the production of true beliefs, in which case, even if our beliefs were after all mostly true, we would have no reason to think that they are. If so, then the proponent of N&E has an undercutting defeater for any one of his beliefs, including his belief in N&E itself, thereby being rationally required, given his acceptance of N&E, to be agnostic about N&E itself (1993: 229–231). Plantinga remarks that, even if we came to the conclusion that evolution would likely select for reliable belief-forming mechanisms, this would apply to mechanisms that are relevant to survival and reproduction—such as perception and memory—and not to those that produce logical, mathematical, or scientific beliefs, such as the beliefs in N and E (1993: 232–233). Consequently, even if N&E were true, it would be irrational for its proponent to believe that it is.

15.3 The EVA and Circularity

As noted in the preceding section, those who oppose the EDA will probably argue that the premise to be rejected is premise 3. They could propose the following EVA for the justification of the belief in the reliability of our cognitive capacities, replacing that premise while keeping premises 1 and 2:

1. Our belief-forming processes have been shaped by evolution through natural selection.
2. Evolution through natural selection only cares about survival and reproduction.
- 3*. Forming beliefs that for the most part track the truth is more advantageous for survival and reproduction than forming beliefs that do not.
- 4*. Therefore, the belief that our belief-forming processes are reliable is justified.

The idea that evolution tends to select for reliable cognitive capacities has been defended by a considerable number of authors.⁹ I will not say anything about this idea, for what interests me here is the fact that the EVA faces the problem that it appears to be viciously circular or to beg the question. For the person who proposes the EVA to establish the justification of the belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties constructs the argument by means of the use of these very faculties: both our knowledge of the evolutionary theory on which the premises are (supposedly) based

and our knowledge of the valid inference form of the argument are gained by using some of our own cognitive faculties.

I have said that the EVA appears to be viciously circular or question-begging. So, we need to answer two questions: (a) in what sense is the EVA circular? and (b) what do we mean when we say that the EVA is question-begging?

With respect to the first question, circularity, as it applies to arguments, can be defined thus: “An argument is circular when the conclusion is being assumed in the attempt to prove the conclusion” (Alston 1989: 326). A common distinction between two types of circularity is that between logical and epistemic circularity. Logical circularity occurs when the conclusion figures among the premises. The EVA is evidently not circular in this sense. The other kind of circularity occurs when one assumes, implicitly or explicitly, the truth of the conclusion “practically” or “in practice”; that is, one proceeds as if the conclusion is true (Alston 1989: 327). To establish the conclusion, the argument presupposes its truth; a presupposition that Alston describes not only as “pragmatic” but also as “epistemic” because it depends on our epistemic situation as human beings (1989: 328–329). Elsewhere, he offers a better explanation of why this kind of circularity is epistemic: it is so because it “involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be *justified* in holding the premises” (1993: 15). I prefer to say that this kind of circularity is epistemic because, in order to come to justifiably believe that the premises are true and the inference is valid, the proponent of the argument must, at least to all appearances, already justifiably believe (implicitly or explicitly) that the conclusion is true. Clearly, the EVA is epistemically circular: the vindicator already assumes the reliability of his cognitive capacities when constructing the argument. First, he formulates the premises and forms the belief that they are true or at least plausible by using the belief-forming processes whose reliability he intends to establish. Second, he draws the inference and forms the belief that it is valid by using those belief-forming processes.¹⁰ Thus, the vindicator relies on certain deliverances of those processes to justify the belief that they are reliable. Note that both the debunker and the vindicator make use, in formulating the premises of their arguments and drawing the inferences, of the belief-forming mechanisms whose reliability they seek to debunk or vindicate, respectively. In one case, this makes the argument self-defeating; in the other, epistemically circular. Thus, the person who accepts evolution appears to face an aporetic dilemma: he is pressured either into self-defeat or into epistemic circularity.

Now, is it a problem for an argument to be epistemically circular? I address this question in more detail in the next section. For now, let me first remark that being circular, whether logically or epistemically, does not render an argument invalid. For example, “*p*, therefore *p*” is logically circular and perfectly valid. Second, there seems to be something fishy in

propounding an argument the truth of whose conclusion one already implicitly or explicitly accepts. For what is the point of propounding an argument *in propria persona* if not to establish its conclusion? If one already assumes the truth of the conclusion in putting the premises together and drawing an inference from those premises, it seems that there is nothing new one will establish by means of the argument. If one implicitly takes oneself to know or justifiably believe that *p* is true, then the argument itself will not enable one to establish that one knows or justifiably believes that *p* is true. At most, the argument will help one realize that one knew or justifiably believed that *p* is true all along. But consider the following counterexample.¹¹ Suppose that Ivonne does not know that Clark Kent is Superman and so she believes that Clark Kent cannot fly. I can prove to her that he can by arguing thus:

- P1. Superman can fly.
- P2. Clark Kent is Superman.
- C. Therefore, Clark Kent can fly.

Extensionally, “Superman can fly” and “Clark Kent can fly” are equivalent but, intensionally, they are not, so one may argue that one can come to know something new on the basis of an argument that is circular. Note, first, that the argument is logically rather than epistemically circular. And second, the argument is logically circular if and only if ‘Clark Kent’ and ‘Superman’ are understood extensionally, whereas new knowledge is acquired if and only if they are understood intensionally.

The second question mentioned above was: what do we mean when we say that the EVA is question-begging? Sometimes circularity is taken to be coextensive with begging the question or *petitio principii* (e.g., Sorensen 1999, Hazlett 2006, Sgaravatti 2013), but sometimes begging the question is considered a type of circularity that occurs in a given context or situation (e.g., Walton 1994) or as different from circularity (Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, McCain and Rowley 2014). In the literature, we find distinct accounts of the nature of *petitio principii*. Some think that it is a logical fallacy (Iacona and Marconi 2005). Others maintain that it is a dialectical or a pragmatic defect of an argument inasmuch as it occurs when one of the rules of conversation or debate is violated or when the argument does not contribute to reaching one of the goals of dialogue, and hence that whether an argument begs the question depends on the argumentative or conversational context (Palmer 1981, Walton 1994, Sorensen 1999, Hazlett 2006, Copp 2019). And still others contend that it is an epistemic defect of an argument in that it prevents acquiring justification or knowledge (Biro 1977, Smith 1987, Sinnott-Armstrong 1999, Sgaravatti 2013). At present, the great majority of authors agree that begging the question is not a logical fallacy.

To my ear, when one says that a person S is begging the question or that an argument A is question-begging, one is (i) saying that S or the proponent of A is just assuming as true a claim or a view that is being discussed or challenged or called into question, and (ii) criticizing them for so doing. For instance, if a theist and an atheist are discussing whether God exists, either can beg the question if, in their arguments for the existence or non-existence of God, they just take for granted that God exists or that God does not exist, and in so doing, they are opening themselves to criticism. Thus, it seems that talk of begging the question occurs in a dialectical or conversational context and is normative in nature. Note that the fact that an argument is said to be question-begging only in a dialectical or conversational context does not by itself entail that the argument is not criticizable *per se*. The EVA may be regarded as question-begging because it takes for granted the truth of a claim that is disputed by a skeptic, but one may consider it defective even if it is not propounded as a rejoinder to the skeptic. Perhaps the EVA is epistemically defective (and not merely dialectically ineffective) because it is epistemically circular: in order to come to justifiably believe or know the conclusion on the basis of premises one claims to justifiably believe or know, one must already justifiably believe or know the conclusion inasmuch as it is only on the basis of the conclusion that one can come to justifiably believe or know the premises. The EVA may be dialectically ineffective because it is epistemically defective: it fails to persuade the skeptic because it fails to establish its conclusion.

15.4 Aporetic Reason

In this section, I consider whether the self-defeat that affects the EDA and the epistemic circularity that affects the EVA may give rise to a radical but cautious skepticism about reason.

15.4.1 Self-Undermining Reason

Our natural reaction to any stance that is self-defeating or self-refuting is to think that there is something seriously wrong with it. With respect to the self-defeat or self-refutation to which the EDA falls prey, I would like to suggest the possibility that, if there is indeed something wrong here, it lies in our rational faculty rather than in the stance of the skeptic who puts forward the argument.

The skeptic is well aware of the self-defeating character of the EDA and his intention is not to establish the conclusion of the argument by inferring it from the premises. Rather, he intends to make a point about the apparent limitations of our rational powers or about the *aporiai* with which we seem to be inexorably confronted when we rigorously apply certain rational requirements and procedures. In other words, the skeptic is not

advancing the EDA *in propria persona* but rather in a merely dialectical manner: he wants to see what follows from the commitments of those who believe in the epistemic value of reason or in the reliability of our cognitive capacities, thus engaging non-skeptics on their own ground. In his view, the EDA may be taken to reveal the possibly self-undermining nature of reason itself: it may be taken to show that, when one pushes the application of human rational tools (logical principles, justificatory criteria, conceptual analysis, scientific theories) to the limit, one inevitably ends up in a situation of *aporia*. Indeed, by strictly or meticulously employing our cognitive faculties, we come to the conclusion that our belief in their reliability is epistemically unjustified. More precisely, by justifiably believing that some outputs of our cognitive faculties—namely, the premises and inference used in the EDA—are correct, we come to the conclusion that we cannot justifiably believe that those faculties are reliable and, hence, that we cannot actually justifiably believe in the correctness of those outputs.¹²

It is worth considering here Plantinga's remarks about the loop in which the metaphysical naturalist is caught when he tries to escape from the self-defeat charge by offering the following rejoinder:

As soon as our devotee of N&E comes to doubt R, he should also come to doubt his *defeater* for R; for that defeater, after all, depends upon his beliefs, which are a product of his cognitive faculties. So his defeater for R (and N&E) is also a defeater for that defeater, that is, for itself. But then when he notes that, and *doubts* his defeater for R, he no longer *has* a defeater (undefeated or otherwise) for N&E; so how is it irrational for him to accept N&E?

(1993: 234)

This rejoinder is not a good way of resolving the problem of sweeping skepticism that leads to self-defeat because we end up in a loop. For, once the proponent of N&E no longer has the defeater for R and N&E,

his original condition of believing R and assuming N&E reasserts itself: at which point he again has a defeater for R and N&E. But then he notes that *that* defeater is also a defeater of the defeater of R and N&E; hence ... So goes the paralyzing dialectic. After a few trips around this loop, we may be excused for throwing up our hands in despair, or disgust, and joining Hume in a game of backgammon.

(1993: 235)

The problem faced by the metaphysical naturalist's rejoinder is therefore that, once he no longer has a defeater for the claim that his cognitive faculties are reliable and for his own position because the defeater defeats itself, he finds himself back in the original condition, that is, he again has a defeater for both. And so on and so forth.

This loop reminds me of the unstable position in which the proponent of the conciliationist stance on the epistemic significance of peer disagreement known as the Equal Weight View (EWV) finds himself when confronted with the self-defeat charge I call ‘the disagreeing about disagreement argument’. The EWV claims that, in the face of a peer disagreement, one should give equal weight to the belief of one’s peer and to one’s own belief when there is no reason to prefer one belief to the other that is independent of the disagreement itself. According to the self-defeat charge in question, if the proponent of the EWV finds out that an epistemic peer believes the EWV to be false, then he should give to this belief the same weight as he gives to his own belief in the truth of the EWV. He should therefore either suspend judgment about the truth of the EWV or split the difference in the degrees of confidence with which he and his opponent hold their respective beliefs. The EWV is therefore self-defeating because, in order to propose it as the rationally required response to peer disagreement, its proponent must be confident that it is true, in which case he is nonetheless required to significantly lower his confidence in its truth inasmuch as he knows that there is an epistemic peer who rejects it. The advocate of the EWV is thus rationally bound by the EWV itself to lose confidence in it. Now, note that, by significantly lowering his confidence in the truth of the EWV, he is no longer rationally required to give so much weight to the belief of those who reject it. His confidence in the truth of the EWV could then increase on the basis of the reasons that originally led him to adopt that view, but this means that he will again be rationally required to give considerable weight to the belief of those who reject it. And so on and so forth.

What I find interesting about the parallel situations in which the proponent of N&E and the proponent of the EWV find themselves is that those situations could be interpreted as revealing that the strict use of reason ultimately leads to *aporiai*, two of which consist in falling prey to self-defeat and getting caught in a loop. The skeptic may argue that, if one takes N&E, the EWV, or the EDA to be rationally grounded and if one also takes the self-defeat arguments against them to be equally rationally grounded, then perhaps we should conclude that reason tends to undermine itself at least in certain situations. We seem to be confronted with somewhat similar aporetic situations in the case of the logical paradoxes—which appear to indicate that there are some true contradictions—and in the case of the counterexamples to *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*.¹³ These situations may be interpreted as revealing conflicts between different rational norms: a norm that says that one should not have incoherent combinations of attitudes—one should not believe both that p and that $\neg p$, and one should not fail to believe that q if one believes that p and that $p \rightarrow q$ —and a norm that says that one should respect the evidence—the existence of some true contradictions and the existence of counterexamples to certain rules of inference.

15.4.2 *Virtuous Circularity?*

Just as with self-defeat, our spontaneous reaction to any argument that is circular is to think that there is something wrong with it. However, a crucial difference between self-defeat and circularity is that several authors have claimed that, on second thought, circularity is not vicious *per se*: there is a form of circularity that is virtuous or benign. Why is that? William Alston, for example, maintains that the epistemic circularity of the track-record argument that concludes that perception is reliable is benign

provided something like the following principle of justification for perceptual beliefs is acceptable.

(V) If one believes that *p* on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that *p*, and one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that *p*.¹⁴

(1989: 330–331)

Thus, in order to be justified in a perceptual belief, one is not required to be justified in believing (V) or in believing the reliability principle according to which sense experience is a reliable source of perceptual beliefs. If that is so, then one need not be justified in believing that reliability principle in order to be justified in believing the premises of the track-record argument for the conclusion that sense experience is reliable. As a result, the circularity of the track-record argument is not an obstacle to one's being justified in believing its perceptual premises: these premises are based on perceptual appearances, not on the belief that sense experience is reliable. Hence, one's belief in the reliability of sense experience can acquire justification from the track-record argument (cf. Alston 1993: chap. 2, sect. ii).¹⁵ Alston correctly remarks that the view "that one can be justified in a perceptual belief only if one is justified in accepting the correlated reliability claim" leads to an infinite regress (1989: 332; see also Alston 1993: 16 n. 2).¹⁶ He points out that such a view "escapes an infinite regress only at the price of arbitrariness," for if

the mere holding of condition C cannot justify one in believing that *p* unless one is also justified in accepting the general principle that beliefs like *p*, in conditions C, are generally true, would it not be sheerly arbitrary to refuse to take the same attitude to this new enriched condition, consisting of C and a justified acceptance of the reliability principle?

(1989: 332)

Alston then observes that, to halt the regress, "[a]t some point we must rest content with the mere holding of a condition, and not also require that S be justified in believing *that* that condition confer[s] reliability. But

if at some point, why not at the outset?" (1989: 332). Several remarks are in order in reply to Alston's line of argument.

To begin with, Alston thinks that embracing epistemic circularity enables us to justifiably believe that our cognitive faculties are reliable, something we cannot do if we fall into an infinite regress. But why think that circularity is preferable to infinite regress? Infitinists, after all, hold that a belief is justified provided it is supported by an infinite chain of non-repeating reasons, and so think that infinite regress is preferable to circularity (e.g., Klein 1998, 1999; Aikin 2011). The skeptic will remark, first, that the attempt to establish the reliability of our cognitive faculties leads us to alternatives—circularity and infinite regress—that are *prima facie* rationally unacceptable and whose *ultima facie* rational acceptability is a matter of controversy; and second, that at least he himself is unable to rationally resolve this disagreement about acceptable justificatory maneuvers. In his view, we find ourselves in an impasse: by proceeding rationally in our attempt to construct an argument for the view that our belief-forming processes are reliable, we cannot find an argument we can uncontroversially deem to be rationally appropriate.

Second, the skeptic can argue that, in order to avoid an infinite regress, Alston makes an arbitrary assumption.¹⁷ What Alston presents as the price the proponent of the higher-order view of justification must pay if he wants to escape from the regress of justification is the price that Alston himself is willing to pay. Of course, *if* that price ensures us genuine justification for our beliefs, then it is a price well paid. But if for one's belief that *p* to be genuinely justified it is required that one be justified in believing that beliefs like *p*, in conditions C, are generally true, then it is a price one pays without getting anything in return. I suspect that someone will argue that Alston's assumption is not arbitrary because we do have justified beliefs and that assumption enables us to explain this fact by halting the regress of justification. The skeptic will retort, first, that one is here presupposing that it is an established fact that radical skepticism is false. Not only does such a presupposition beg the question against him, but it is far from clear—as we will see below—that the falsity of radical skepticism has been definitely established. The skeptic will also retort that, if Alston is entitled to his assumption, his rival seems to be equally entitled to the opposite assumption that, in order to be justified in believing that *p*, one must be antecedently justified in believing that the cognitive process that produced that belief is reliable. If it were argued that this assumption is arbitrary because it does not enable us to explain the fact that we have justified beliefs, the skeptic would remark that the infinitist thinks that an infinite regress is not incompatible with justification, and that we are therefore faced with a disagreement that, it seems, cannot be resolved in a non-question-begging way.

Third, even if it were granted that infinitism is an absurd epistemological position, this does not mean that the higher-order view of justification

rejected by Alston is incorrect or that a certain type of epistemic circularity is acceptable. If we take that view to rest on an epistemic principle we deem to be true or at least highly plausible, then we might have to accept (i) that such a principle, when strictly and consistently applied, throws us into a regress of justification, and (ii) that we cannot avoid vicious epistemic circularity when constructing an argument for the reliability of our cognitive capacities. Once again, we might have to accept that the rigorous use of our rational powers results in the realization that we are not justified in believing that they are reliable.

Fourth, the skeptic can grant that, *if* our cognitive capacities are reliable, then one need not (justifiably) believe that they are so in order to come up with the premises and inferences of arguments like the EVA, in which case one can reflectively come to justifiably believe, by means of such arguments, that they are reliable. But *are they in fact* reliable?¹⁸ This is the crucial question, which arises as soon as one realizes that one is relying on their reliability to construct the argument for the justification of the belief that they are reliable. What if they were *not* in fact reliable? Then the premises and inferences in question, which are deliverances of those faculties, will not actually provide grounds for believing that one's belief in their reliability is justified. Hence, it seems that one needs to have some sort of cognitive access to the fact that one's belief-forming processes are reliable before one can legitimately use those deliverances to support the conclusion of the EVA and similar arguments, in which case such arguments do seem to be viciously circular.

Last, as some authors have remarked when discussing the problem of easy knowledge acquired through epistemic bootstrapping, by accepting the kind of externalist move proposed by Alston, we end up granting that gaining knowledge is actually pretty easy after all.¹⁹

Alston is not alone in claiming that there is a type of epistemic circularity that is not vicious and, hence, that we can come to know or justifiably believe that our cognitive capacities are reliable or that certain rules of inference (such as induction) are correct by using those very capacities or rules of inference. Although in the 1970s and 1980s this was a minority view, since then, not only other epistemic externalists but also some epistemic internalists have defended it.²⁰ I do not know whether it is at present the majority view, but it is no doubt one that enjoys considerable support. To complement my objections to Alston's position, I will consider Michael Bergmann's (2006) reasons for claiming that epistemic circularity is sometimes rationally permissible.

Bergmann propounds two arguments for the existence of a benign form of epistemic circularity. According to the first, not only externalists but also almost all epistemologists are committed to approving of benign epistemic circularity inasmuch as they are committed to the foundationalist view that there can be non-inferentially justified beliefs. Since rejecting this view is more objectionable than approving of epistemic

circularity, we must conclude that epistemic circularity is not *per se* a bad thing (2006: 184–193). Bergmann remarks that denying that there can be non-inferentially justified beliefs leads to the radical skeptical view that no belief is justified, a view that is highly implausible (2006: 185). According to the second argument, given that the foundationalist view entails that epistemically circular beliefs may be justified and given that all alternatives to admitting that there are such beliefs are more unpalatable than admitting them, we have good reason to think that a position that is committed to admitting them is not defective (2006: 193–197). Bergmann also offers an account of why we think that epistemic circularity (EC) is *per se* a bad thing. He thinks that

there are two kinds of situation in which a person can form EC-infected beliefs about a source X or a belief B:

QD-situations: Situations where, prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject *is or should be* seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation.

Non-QD-Situations: Situations where, prior to the EC-belief's formation, the subject *neither is nor should be* seriously questioning or doubting the trustworthiness of X or the reliability of B's formation.

To *seriously* question or doubt the trustworthiness or reliability of something is to question or doubt it to the point where one withholds or disbelieves the claim that the thing is trustworthy or reliable.

(2006: 198)

Epistemic circularity is malignant in the first kind of situation but benign in the second. People think that epistemic circularity is in itself malignant because they tend to think about it only in the first kind of situation. An example of this first kind of situation that Bergmann gives is that of someone (Tom) who has serious doubts about the reliability of sense perception because he has been persuaded by a skeptical argument that targets that belief source. An epistemically circular argument for the reliability of sense perception will be useless in helping him regain his lost confidence in its reliability; only some verification of its reliability that is independent of that belief source would help him regain that confidence.

An example of the second kind of situation is that of someone (Becky) who does not have doubts about the reliability of sense perception, who comes to believe that it is reliable, and who is curious about how she came to hold that belief. Since she is not looking for some independent verification of the reliability of sense perception—since she does not doubt its reliability—discovering that she formed the belief in its reliability in a way that is epistemically circular does not give rise to doubts about its reliability. Bergmann then adds: “If it's not the case that this discovery *should* make Becky have serious questions or doubts about its

reliability, then this is a non-QD-situation—a situation in which EC-infection *doesn't* seem to be a bad thing” (2006: 199). Bergmann remarks that one might think that one should have serious doubts because one regards the following ‘should’ claim as true: “It is necessarily the case that a person with an EC-infected belief *should* seriously question or doubt the trustworthiness of its source” (2006: 202). One reason to reject this claim is that it can be taken to be entailed by the following ‘should’ claim: “It is necessarily the case that, for every belief a person has, she *should* seriously question or doubt its source” (2006: 203). The problem is that this claim entails extreme skepticism, which is highly implausible (2006: 203, 206). Thus, the reason for both accepting the claim that there are non-inferentially justified beliefs and for rejecting the ‘should’ claim in question is the high implausibility of radical skepticism. Three remarks are in order in reply to Bergmann’s line of argument.

First, it is reasonable to think that at least some people who find themselves in Becky’s situation do start having doubts about the reliability of sense perception upon discovering that they came to believe in its reliability in an epistemically circular manner. It is of course an empirical matter whether people do react that way in such a situation, and although I have not conducted an experiment to investigate this issue, in my experience it is a common spontaneous reaction. At the very least, philosophy students tend to think that there is something fishy in any piece of reasoning that is circular, and even some epistemologists who claim to approve of certain epistemically circular arguments confess to feel discomfort when using those arguments.²¹

As some authors have remarked, an argument can be used for different purposes: to explain, to justify, to refute, etc. (e.g., Sinnott-Armstrong 1999). One may then argue that Becky is looking to explain how she came to believe that sense perception is reliable rather than to justify that belief—which she already believes is justified—and that it is for this reason that awareness of the epistemic circularity of the argument does not give rise to doubts about the reliability of sense perception.²² Note, first, that even if Becky’s aim is to come up with an explanation of her belief rather than to provide justification for it, it might well occur that, upon discovering that the only argument that explains her belief is circular, she starts wondering whether her belief is justified after all. Second, the maneuver in question is not what authors who approve of a certain kind of epistemic circularity are after: they claim that an epistemically circular argument can *produce justified* beliefs in the reliability or trustworthiness of our cognitive capacities (e.g., Bergmann 2006: 202).

Second, whether or not Becky *does* start having doubts about the reliability of her sense perception, the key question is whether she *should*. Note that, if she should not, then neither should Tom. For the reason why Becky should not start having doubts is that radical skepticism is highly implausible, in which case Tom should not be persuaded by the skeptical

argument even though he in fact is. If that is so, then an argument like the EVA would be dialectically ineffective against Tom, but not epistemically defective. It is often observed in the literature that a benign epistemically circular argument will not, of course, persuade a radical skeptic or that a sound argument may beg the question against a radical skeptic (Alston 1989; Sosa 1994; Pryor 2000, 2004; Boghossian 2001; Markie 2005).²³ At one point, Bergmann seems to think that malignant circularity is a dialectical defect of an argument (2006: 202). If this were the only problem, then one could effortlessly solve it by simply ignoring the skeptic: one cannot expect to convince or persuade every person. The key question is, of course, whether the skeptic is confused or stubborn or whether his doubts about the conclusion of the epistemically circular argument are legitimate and strong, and hence whether he is right to remain unconvinced by the argument. If he is, then the fact that the argument is dialectically ineffective is an indication that it is epistemically defective, and so we might have to accept that we cannot evade radical skepticism. Bergmann actually limits himself, like most epistemologists, to remark that radical skepticism is highly implausible, the reason clearly being that he takes it to be an undeniable fact that we do have knowledge or justified beliefs.

In this regard, it is worth noting that, relying on Bergmann's treatment of epistemic circularity, Andrew Moon claims "that, intuitively, we justifiedly believe that our cognitive faculties as a whole are generally reliable. Yet, we *used* our cognitive faculties to come to this belief. So, this would be a case of benign circularity" (2021: 792). If I interpret Moon correctly, what he is saying is that we can come to realize, by means of intuition, that our belief in the reliability of our belief-forming processes is justified. If we can indeed rely on intuition in this way, then there is no need to produce an argument like the EVA. By appealing to the epistemic power of intuition, we can easily and immediately dispel any doubt we may have had about their general reliability. Hence, epistemologists need not examine whether our belief-forming processes are reliable in general, but merely whether they are reliable in certain situations or in certain environments. I personally regard this kind of appeal to intuition as a magic card one plays to avoid dealing with a problem or to avoid recognizing that one does not know how to deal with it. For it is far from clear what exactly intuition is and whether and when it is reliable. Every time I read about appeals to intuition, I remember Philip Kitcher's remark that in ethics and mathematics "the appeal to intuition is an epistemology of desperation" (2006: 176). By appealing to intuition to ground the claim that radical skepticism is highly implausible or the claim that we do have justified belief in the reliability of our cognitive faculties, one is begging the question against the skeptic. Note, in addition, that the skeptic could remark that, "intuitively, we justifiedly suspend judgment about whether our cognitive faculties as a whole are generally reliable."²⁴ It seems that we here reach a stalemate due to a clash of intuitions.

Third, if two views are rationally objectionable but one is more so than the other, we are not epistemically required, at least by my lights, to choose one over the other, but may simply refrain from endorsing either—unless we are practically constrained to choose one. For the fact that one of the views strikes one as more objectionable does not by itself eliminate the objection(s) one may have against the other. Hence, if approving of certain instances of epistemic circularity is objectionable but less so than rejecting the view that there can be non-inferentially justified beliefs, we might well regard this as an aporetic situation in which any path we follow leads to a result that strikes us as rationally unacceptable. We might then suspend judgment both about whether there can be non-inferentially justified beliefs and about whether certain instances of epistemic circularity are benign. The same applies to Bergmann's second argument, according to which our intuitions against the implications of the view that there cannot be justified epistemically circular beliefs are stronger than those against the opposite view.

The acceptance of certain instances of epistemic circularity has always struck me as an attempt to turn a negative epistemic situation into a positive one by waving a magic wand. Let me explain. It seems to me that the ultimate reason for claiming that certain epistemically circular arguments are permissible is not that it has been shown that there is nothing rationally objectionable about them, but rather that we are forced to accept them if we want to avoid radical skepticism at all costs. Since we cannot get rid of epistemic circularity when producing an argument intended to establish the justification of our belief in the reliability of our cognitive capacities (or of certain rules of inference), and since embracing radical skepticism is out of the question, we simply decide that a certain type of epistemic circularity is actually a permissible form of reasoning or argument. Let me give some examples to illustrate my point about the avoidance of radical skepticism being the ultimate reason for accepting certain cases of epistemic circularity as the lesser evil.

In responding to the objection that externalists, by endorsing bootstrapping, make the acquisition of knowledge too easy, James van Cleve remarks that “the only alternative to such externalism may be skepticism,” which, if correct, “is a significant result, for those who object to the circularity sanctioned by externalism do not generally wish to embrace skepticism” (2003: 45). Given that there is no “third alternative to the easy knowledge of the externalist and the unattainable knowledge of the skeptic” (2003: 45), we must accept the former.

Frederick Schmitt (2004) considers two second-order requirements on justification²⁵ to which one might appeal to show that a legitimate doubt about whether sense perception is reliable leads to the skeptical view that none of our perceptual beliefs is justified, given the epistemic circularity of any argument for the claim that sense perception is reliable. He argues that those requirements do not present “a serious case against begging

the question in epistemically circular arguments” because they “should be rejected for a reason independent of their bearing on epistemic circularity: they lead to global skepticism quite apart from whether any source is epistemically circular” (2004: 391). Given that accepting global skepticism is out of the question,²⁶ the justificatory requirements that lead to it are to be rejected, with the result that we may approve of epistemically circular arguments that purport to establish the justification of our belief-forming mechanisms.

David Alexander (2011) argues that the rejection of epistemic circularity is based on the “No Self-Support” principle, according to which no source of belief is self-supporting. He maintains that this principle is false because it “has the unacceptable skeptical consequence that reflective individuals [i.e., those who are capable of forming justified beliefs about the reliability of their sources of justified belief] like you and I are not justified in trusting *any* of our sources of belief” (2011: 224–225). Alexander claims that “we are justified in rejecting such skepticism” (2011: 226), the reason being that “we cannot coherently believe that we should not believe anything” (2011: 238). What he means is, of course, that no one can, without defeating himself, justifiably believe that none of his beliefs is justified.²⁷

Let me provide two more examples of the rejection of radical skepticism being the ultimate reason for approving of some instances of epistemic circularity. Brian Weatherson observes that he and other epistemologists who accept circularity agree “that otherwise plausible anti-circularity principles lead to intolerably skeptical conclusions” (2019: 154). And Moon makes the following quite eloquent confession:

Despite what I’ve said about the possibility of benign epistemic circularity, an objector might report still feeling uncomfortable about the fact that Hannah used her Christian belief in a premise to argue that her Christian belief was formed reliably. I will report that I too feel uncomfortable. But I also feel uncomfortable about the fact that I use my memory to believe that my memory is reliable and that I use my cognitive faculties to believe that my cognitive faculties are reliable. Suppose I cannot justifiedly believe that these faculties are reliable and must instead withhold belief that they are reliable. Then I have a defeater for any belief produced by these faculties, and so skepticism follows. But I am assuming in this paper that skepticism is false. So, I must live with the discomfort that accompanies the benign epistemic circularity that is required for rejecting skepticism. (Living with the discomfort that accompanies skepticism would probably be a whole lot worse for me.)

(2021: 798–799)

Although Moon recognizes that he is not comfortable with epistemically circular arguments, he accepts them at least partly because embracing

skepticism would be a bitter pill to swallow. Let me add that Moon later remarks that he has argued “that there is nothing wrong with this type of circularity” (2021: 803) and that he has “shown that there is nothing wrong with reasoning in these ways, despite their being circular and question-begging” (2021: 806). If there is really nothing objectionable with certain cases of epistemic circularity, then providing support to one’s beliefs by means of certain epistemically circular arguments should not make one feel uncomfortable. And if one nevertheless feels that way, then one should perhaps say that one is being irrational inasmuch as there is no reason to have such a reaction.²⁸

Now, why is radical skepticism to be avoided? Two reasons are commonly adduced (see Machuca 2015, 2019). The first is that radical skepticism is obviously or intuitively false, absurd, untenable, or implausible, and so we do not really need to produce arguments against it or to explain why (almost) any alternative to it is preferable. Radical skepticism is conceived of that way because we take it to be a fact that we have knowledge or justified beliefs about a great number of issues. The authors mentioned earlier endorse this conception of skepticism, a conception that is widespread among philosophers. The second reason is that radical skepticism has appalling moral or prudential effects: by threatening our most cherished beliefs—such as our commonsense, moral, political, or religious beliefs—it undermines what gives meaning, emotional security, and a sense of purpose to our lives.

I limit myself here to pointing out, first, that if radical skepticism is obviously or intuitively false, absurd, untenable, or implausible, it is difficult to account for the fact that, since antiquity, philosophers have been concerned with skeptical arguments and have had a hard time pinpointing where exactly they go wrong. The grip such arguments have on us cannot be fully explained by the methodological use that some authors make of them: our interest in them cannot be reduced to our interest in what they might teach us about the concepts of knowledge, justification, or evidence. Skeptical arguments are at least often taken to pose legitimate and serious challenges to the epistemic credentials of our beliefs that we feel the need to meet. Second, whether radical skepticism has appalling effects seems to depend on each person’s psychological constitution—that is, their temperament and personality. But even if we grant that it necessarily has such effects, this provides us with pragmatic reasons to attempt to dodge the skeptical bullet at all costs, but not with a refutation of skepticism—unless, of course, one believes that certain pragmatic reasons are somehow enough to refute the skeptic.

15.4.3 Skepticism about Reason

The reflective acceptance of evolution through natural selection seems to push one to endorsing either the EDA or the EVA and, hence, to accepting

either self-defeat or vicious circularity. The reflective believer in evolution thus seems to be trapped in an aporetic dilemma. We can think of the following argument:

- (P1). The reflective believer in evolution will believe either 3 or 3*.
- (P2). If he believes 3, then he will fall prey to self-defeat.
- (P3). If he believes 3*, then he will fall prey to vicious circularity.
- (C). Therefore, the reflective believer in evolution will fall prey to either self-defeat or vicious circularity.²⁹

If the EDA is inescapably self-defeating and the EVA is inescapably circular, and both self-defeat and circularity are rationally objectionable, then the reflective believer in evolution might have to accept that skepticism about reason is, at least for the time being, the stance to be adopted.³⁰ What does this skepticism consist in? First, the skeptic about reason does not assert that reason is aporetic. Rather, he remarks that this is a possibility that, it seems, cannot be dismissed out of hand, and hence that the fact that the evolutionary arguments that seek to debunk or vindicate the belief in the reliability of our cognitive capacities fall victim to either self-defeat or vicious circularity may be an indication that we are faced with a much more serious epistemological problem. Second, the skeptic about reason observes that, since both the EDA and the EVA appear to be rationally unacceptable and hence to be epistemically on a par, those who claim to endorse the norms of rationality seem to be rationally required to suspend judgment about the truth, or the epistemic justification, of the beliefs that those arguments attempt to debunk or vindicate.

It could be argued that (P1) is false inasmuch as the reflective believer in evolution may suspend judgment on both 3 and 3*. In that case, he will avoid both self-defeat and circularity, and hence he will not be trapped in the aporetic dilemma.³¹ But note that, by suspending judgment on both 3 and 3*, he will also suspend judgment about whether his belief-forming processes are reliable.

At the outset of this section, I said that the skepticism I would consider is radical but cautious. It should now be clear why I characterized it as such: it is radical because it entertains the possibility that human reason itself is aporetic, but it is cautious because it does not go so far as to assert that human reason is of such a nature that its use inexorably gives rise to *aporiai*. This skepticism about reason could then be described as cautiously radical and, hence, as Pyrrhonian. The ancient Pyrrhonist, at least as I interpret his stance, adopts an extreme form of skepticism that targets most of our beliefs,³² but instead of making assertions, he suspends judgment and limits himself to reporting how he is appeared to or how he is affected.

15.5 Conclusion

The stance that has been considered in this chapter is skeptical, and quite radical at that. But I do not assert that reason is of such a nature as to necessarily lead to *aporiai* or that it contains the seeds of its own destruction or that it is helpless when it comes to vindicating our trust in our cognitive capacities. Rather, I have suggested that these are possibilities that, it seems, cannot be dismissed out of hand.

I have also suggested that, when confronted with the EDA and the EVA that appear to be self-defeating and viciously circular, respectively, the reflective believer in evolution is rationally required to suspend judgment about whether trust in the reliability of our belief-forming processes is epistemically justified. In saying this, I am proceeding dialectically: given the rational requirements that non-skeptics claim to be true, it appears that suspension is the only rational response. As for myself, I suspend judgment because that is the way I react, due perhaps to my philosophical training or my evolutionary hardwiring, after examining the EDA and the EVA and the problems they face. Whether suspending judgment is the objectively correct response, I cannot say.³³

Notes

- 1 The first main works in this area are Ruse (1986), Joyce (2001, 2006) and Street (2006), but over the past fifteen years there has been an explosion of publications on evolutionary debunking arguments in ethics. Machuca (2018) provides an annotated bibliography on this topic.
- 2 See especially Boulter (2007), Wilkins and Griffiths (2012), and Griffiths and Wilkins (2015), as well as Stewart-Williams (2005).
- 3 See especially Schechter (2013); see also Schechter (2010: 452–454; 2018: 339–343).
- 4 When it comes to vindicating our belief-producing processes as a whole, the beliefs produced by those processes that get vindicated may include common-sense, scientific, mathematical, logical, moral, and religious beliefs, or may exclude moral and/or religious beliefs while including the rest. In the latter case, I take the vindication to be widespread enough. The question of what the criterion is for determining which beliefs can be vindicated and which cannot concerns what Kyriacou (2019a, 2019b) calls “the demarcation problem.”
- 5 In Greek, *aporia* (ἀπορία) means the lack of a way through something. The person who is in *aporia* is perplexed, puzzled, or baffled because he cannot decide whether he should assent to *p* or rather deny that *p*. In the present context, being in *aporia* means being unable to decide whether the belief in the reliability of our belief-forming processes is justified on account of the difficulties faced by the arguments for and against the justification of that belief. The word *aporia* thus refers to the state of mind of the person who is perplexed, puzzled, or baffled, but it may also refer to the conundrum that gives rise to such a state of mind.
- 6 Andrew Moon remarks that my thesis is too weak because at the very least most philosophical views are such that they should be dismissed, if at all, only after careful consideration. What is then so special about the present view?

- What is special about it is that, as will be noted later, radical skepticism is commonly taken to be obviously false, implausible, or untenable, and hence as a view that *can* be dismissed out of hand.
- 7 Stich (1990: Chapter 3) claims that the thesis that natural selection prefers reliable cognitive processes to unreliable ones is false. However, he does not maintain that natural selection never favors such processes or that it is unlikely to do so, but rather that it does not guarantee that they are reliable. I take this to entail that our belief in the reliability of our belief-forming processes is unjustified absent other reasons to hold that belief. I should note that I do not agree with Boucher (2021) that Stich does not espouse any kind of EDA but limits himself to arguing against EVAs.
 - 8 Moon (2023) argues that global debunking arguments are self-defeating, though he also argues that an argument's being self-defeating does not entail that it no longer has defeating power, that is, that it cannot defeat the beliefs it targets. Kyriacou (2023) contends that any EDA that targets basic epistemic rationality is self-defeating because, in establishing its conclusion as justified, it presupposes the truth of certain norms of epistemic rationality. For accusations of self-defeat against certain genealogical debunking arguments, see also Vavova (2014), Kyriacou (2016), Woods (2018), and Bagwell (2021). To the best of my knowledge, Sidgwick (1876: 54–55) is the first to have leveled the self-defeat charge against evolutionary debunking.
 - 9 See, e.g., Lycan (1985) and the works quoted by Stich (1990: 55, 161–162 n. 4). See also the works mentioned in notes 2 and 3. Sober (1981) defends the more cautious view that evolution could have selected for reliable cognitive processes.
 - 10 Authors sometimes distinguish between two kinds of epistemically circular arguments (Bergmann 2006: 180 n. 3) or two kinds of question-begging arguments (Smith 1987: 209). In one kind, it is the belief in one or more of the premises that depends on a cognitive process: e.g., in a track-record argument that intends to establish the reliability of sense perception, belief in one or more of the premises depend on that cognitive process. In the other kind, it is the act of inferring the conclusion from the premises that depends on the cognitive process: e.g., in an inductive argument for the reliability of induction, it is the inference from the premises rather than belief in the premises that depends on inductive reasoning. In the EVA, we find both kinds of epistemic circularity or question-beggingness.
 - 11 Thanks to Mark Walker for the counterexample.
 - 12 This kind of dialectical procedure was common among both Academic and Pyrrhonian skeptics, and so specialists in ancient skepticism are familiar with it. Certain contemporary epistemologists are aware that the skeptic who raises doubts about the reliability of our cognitive faculties may be proceeding dialectically (see, e.g., Foley 2001: 7). Similarly, W. V. O. Quine remarks that, when he says that skepticism “is an offshoot of science” inasmuch as its basis “is the awareness of illusion, the discovery that we must now always believe our eyes” (1975: 67), he is “not accusing the sceptic of begging the question. He is quite within his rights in assuming science in order to refute science; this, if carried out, would be a straightforward argument by *reductio ad absurdum*. I am only making the point that sceptical doubts are scientific doubts” (1975: 68). It seems clear that, when talking about begging the question, Quine is thinking of self-defeat.
 - 13 On dialetheism, i.e., the view that there are some true contradictions, see Priest (2006a, 2006b). On the counterexamples to *modus ponens* and *modus tollens*, see McGee (1985), Lycan (2001: chap. 3), Cantwell (2008), Dreier

- (2009), Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010), Yalcin (2012), and Mandelkern (2020).
- 14 This principle of perceptual justification is identical with, or at least very similar to, the “dogmatism” defended by James Pryor. See Pryor (2000: 519, 532, 536–538; 2004: 356, 358).
 - 15 Although Alston focuses on sense perception, he takes his line of argument to apply to all belief-producing mechanisms, which also include introspection, memory, testimony, and reasoning.
 - 16 This view is explicitly defended by Laurence Bonjour (1978). Brian Weatherson calls it “conservatism” and defines it as the view according to which, for any method *M*, “*S* gets a justified belief in *p* only if she antecedently has a justified belief that *M works*” (2019: 150). Applied to knowledge, this view is similar to what Stewart Cohen calls “The KR principle,” according to which “[a] potential knowledge source *K* can yield knowledge for *S*, only if *S* knows *K* is reliable” (2002: 309).
 - 17 Alston thus falls prey to the ancient Pyrrhonist’s mode of hypothesis, which is one of the modes that constitute what in contemporary philosophy is known as “Agrippa’s trilemma.”
 - 18 Cf. Alston’s own remarks: “even if ... it is possible to establish the reliability of sense perception and other basic sources of belief by simple track record arguments, these arguments still do not satisfy the usual aspirations of those seeking to determine whether a basic doxastic practice like SP is reliable. The reason is this. What I pointed out in the previous paragraph is that *if sense perception is reliable*, a track record argument will suffice to show that it is. Epistemic circularity does not in and of itself disqualify the argument. But even granting that point, the argument will not do its job unless we *are* justified in accepting its premises; and that is the case only if sense perception is in fact reliable. This is to offer a stone instead of bread. ... But when we ask whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in *discriminating* those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that *if* a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable, does nothing to indicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats. I have removed an allegedly crippling disability, but I have not given the argument a clean bill of health” (1993: 17).
 - 19 On bootstrapping and easy knowledge, see especially Fumerton (1995: Chapter 6), Vogel (2000, 2008), and Cohen (2002, 2005).
 - 20 These include van Cleve (1979, 1984, 2003), Papineau (1992), Brown (1994), Sosa (1994), Boghossian (2001), Lemos (2004), Bergmann (2006: Chapter 7), White (2006), Alexander (2011), Steup (2013, 2019), Barnett (2014), Weatherson (2019: chap. 9), and Moon (2021, 2023).
 - 21 In note 18, we saw that Alston expresses some discomfort with the view that it is possible to show that perception is reliable by means of an epistemically circular track-record argument, despite claiming that epistemic circularity does not by itself disqualify the argument. I give another example of this kind of discomfort later.
 - 22 Cf. Quine (1975: 70): “I am not appealing to Darwinian biology to justify induction. That would be circular, since biological knowledge depends on induction. Rather I am granting the efficacy of induction, and then observing that Darwinian biology, if true, helps explain why induction is as efficacious as it is.” Cf. also Derksen (2001: 257–261), who distinguishes between “the explanation version” and “the guarantee version” of the evolutionary argument, and claims that while the former is not affected by circularity, the latter cannot escape the accusation of being viciously circular.

- 23 Helen Beebe (2001), too, remarks that certain arguments beg the question against the radical skeptic, but it is unclear to me whether she thinks that those arguments are benignly circular or sound.
- 24 As I remark in note 27, a Pyrrhonian skeptic does not claim that his suspension is epistemically justified, but I am here considering a possible dialectical rejoinder to the non-skeptic's appeal to intuition.
- 25 The requirements in question are (i) the Basing Second-Order Justification Requirement, according to which "My SP [sense perception] belief is justified (at a time t) only if I am doxastically justified (at t) in believing that SP is reliable," and (ii) the Basing Second-Order Requirement, according to which "My SP belief is justified (if at all) at least partially on the basis of my reliability belief [i.e., the belief that sense perception is reliable]" (2004: 391).
- 26 Schmitt does not say what the problem of global skepticism is, and so he must believe that its untenability, absurdity, or falsity is obvious enough.
- 27 The skeptic about reason will be unmoved by this objection. First, he could remark that it is not his fault if, by strictly applying certain rational principles that non-skeptics claim to endorse, he lands in self-defeat. Second, he could point out that he does not believe that none of his beliefs is justified but rather suspends judgment on the matter, and that he does not even hold the second-order belief that his suspension is rationally grounded or required: suspending judgment is the way in which, as a matter of psychological fact, he reacts when faced with certain situations. I cannot explore this issue further here, but see Machuca (2022: Chapter 5, Section 6, and Chapter 9, Sections 4–5).
- 28 The attempt to avoid radical skepticism sometimes plays an important role in discussions of the nature of *petitio principii*. For example, one reason why Alan Hazlett (2006: 347) prefers his pragmatic account of begging the question is that the epistemic account leads to skepticism: if a question-begging argument is one that is epistemically vicious, then, since many of our beliefs are based on beliefs whose contents would not serve as premises in non-question-begging arguments for the propositions believed, all those beliefs will have to be considered epistemically vicious. Although in the literature the question of whether there is a kind of benign or virtuous circularity and the question of what begging the question is are discussed separately, it is clear that the dialectical and the pragmatic conceptions of *petitio principii* are in line with the view that epistemic circularity is not in all cases malignant or vicious: even if, for example, one cannot convince a radical skeptic of the conclusion of a circular argument, the argument may be sound. And sometimes those who claim that not all circular arguments are question-begging seem to be saying the same thing as those who claim that not all epistemically circular arguments are malignant or vicious.
- 29 I am grateful to Andrew Moon for suggesting an argument along these lines.
- 30 When referring to the different solutions to the regress problem, Bonjour remarks: "The presumption against a skeptical outcome is strong, but I think it is a mistake to treat it as absolute. If no non-skeptical theory can be found which is at least reasonably plausible in its own right, skepticism might become the only rational alternative" (1978: 4 n. 12). And he closes his article by saying that "the possibility still threatens that the epistemic regress problem may in the end be of aid and comfort only to the skeptic" (1978: 13). The skepticism in question is to be understood as the view that no belief is epistemically justified, which is different from the skepticism of a Pyrrhonian stripe that I am considering in this chapter. But my interest in Bonjour's remarks lies in the fact that, even though the skeptical alternative is not something he finds at all

- appealing, he is open-minded enough not to dismiss it out of hand and to regard it as a stance we might in the end be forced to embrace.
- 31 Thanks to Andrew Moon for helpful discussion.
- 32 The exception are beliefs about how one is appeared to. But one can conceive of a form of neo-Pyrrhonism that targets those beliefs as well (see Machuca 2022: appendix 8).
- 33 I am grateful to Christos Kyriacou, Andrew Moon, and Mark Walker for insightful comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

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