

Matthias Steup
A Defense of Epistemic Circularity

1. The Problem of Epistemic Circularity

My first car was a 1977 Plymouth Fury with a V8 engine. This car was fun in a number of ways, but on balance it disappointed because it broke down frequently. It was not a reliable car. My second car was a 1988 Honda Accord. I still have it. It never broke down. Except for regular maintenance, I never needed to bring it to a garage. Unlike my erstwhile Plymouth, it has been a reliable car. An argument in defense of this claim could be based on the following principle:

The Track Record Principle (TRP)

A good track record (over a sufficiently long run and involving a suitably wide variety of circumstances) is evidence of reliability.¹

I take TRP to be an *a priori* premise sufficiently obvious to make use of it without argument. Some clarification, however, is nevertheless indicated. A good track record is neither necessary nor sufficient for reliability.² First, it is not necessary because my Honda already was a reliable car when I took it home from the dealer, at which point it did not yet have any track record at all. And it would have remained a reliable car if it had continued to sit in my garage unused for years to come. Second, a good track record is not sufficient for reliability because my car's positive track record might have been no more than a fantastically long run of luck. TRP, however, neither asserts nor presupposes that reliability requires a good track record, or that a good track record is sufficient for reliability. Rather, what TRP asserts is that a good track record is a good reason for the attribution of reliability. Using TRP as a premise, I can defend the reliability of my car as follows:

Car I

(P1) TRP. (P2) My car has a good track record. Therefore: (C) It is reliable.³

I take it as my starting point that this is a good argument. If you asked me why I think that my car is reliable, and I responded by advancing Car I, you could hardly accuse me of irrationality. But suppose our interest shifts from the reliability of my car to the reliability of my faculties. You ask me why I think that, say, my memory is reliable, and I respond by employing the following argument, structurally analogous to Car I:

Memory I

(P1) TRP. (P2) My memory has a good track record. Therefore: (C) It is reliable.

I will refer to this as the *Memory Argument*. Is responding to your new query by advancing the Memory Argument just as satisfactory as responding to your earlier query with Car I?⁴ There is reason to think that it would not be, for unlike Car I, Memory I is arguably an example of circular reasoning. I will return to

the charge of circularity in due course. First, I will briefly elaborate on what I have in mind when I claim that my memory has a good track record.

Call an item that that presents itself when one uses one's memory a *memory datum*. Memory data can be correct or incorrect. One element that makes up a good memorial track record is a preponderance of correct memory data. As far as my own memory is concerned, I would mention items such as the following. On numerous occasions, I have to present my social security number. Typically I do not come up with an incorrect number. The same goes for my birth date, the birth dates of my wife and children, and various phone numbers. As far as locations go, I typically remember which of the various offices in my department is mine, and which building to enter if I wish to get to my office. It never happens that I walk into a colleague's office thinking it is mine. When, after a day of work on campus I attempt to drive home, I do not end up elsewhere in town. Nor do I mistakenly pull up in someone else's drive way. In short, the vast majority of my memory data is correct, just like the memory data of anyone whose memory is not impaired.

So upon initial inspection, it would appear that, in light of my memory's track record, I should conclude that my memory is reliable. There is, however, a problem: I cannot know that my memory has a good track record without relying on my memory. The Memory Argument, then, is inflicted with circularity. According to Richard Fumerton, I therefore cannot use it to justify the claim that my memory is reliable. Here is what he says on this matter:

You cannot use perception to justify the reliability of perception! You cannot use memory to justify the reliability of memory! You cannot use induction to justify the reliability of induction! Such attempts to respond to the skeptic's concerns involve blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity.⁵

Like Fumerton, William Alston thinks that track record arguments for the reliability of our faculties, because of inescapable circularity, are no good. Here is what he has to say about using track-record arguments to establish the reliability of sense perception:

If we try to assess the reliability of sense perception in this way . . . we immediately run into a roadblock. How do we determine whether the perceptual beliefs in our sample are true? If we do so by taking another look, listen, or whatever, we would seem to be presupposing reliability and so to fall into circularity . . . The basic point is that any way we have of determining perceivable fact in the physical world will depend, sooner or later, on what we learn from sense perception.⁶

A track record argument for the reliability of sense perception goes like this:

Sense Perception I

(P1) TRP. (P2) My sense perceptions have a good track record. Therefore: (C) They are reliable.

Alston would say that a justified assertion of the second premise would have to presuppose the reliability of sense perception. From this he concludes that an argument like that cannot reasonably be used to argue for its conclusion.

So Alston and Fumerton are representatives of a certain form of skepticism: skepticism about the rationality of using track record arguments for defending the reliability of our faculties. Such skepticism is based on the charge of circularity, a kind of circularity that, according to Alston, . . .

. . . is not the most direct kind of logical circularity. We are not using the proposition that sense perception is reliable as one of our premises. Nevertheless, we are assuming the reliability of sense perception in using it, or some source(s) dependent on it, to generate our premises. If one were to challenge our premises and continue the challenge long enough, we would eventually be driven to appeal to the reliability of sense perception in defending our right to those premises. And if I were to ask myself why I should accept the premises, I would, if I pushed the reflection far enough, have to make the claim that sense perception is reliable.⁷

Alston refers to such circularity as *epistemic* circularity, since, as he puts it, it “involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be *justified* in holding the premises.”⁸ Let us define epistemic circularity accordingly:

Epistemic Circularity

An argument, A, is epistemically circular iff it has at least one premise that can be justified only by using a further argument, B, that uses A’s conclusion as a premise.

According to Alston, track-record arguments for the reliability of sense perception are infected with such circularity: they are bound to have a premise that cannot be justified without appealing to the reliability of sense perception. The Memory Argument invites the same charge. To justify the claim that my memory has a good track record, I would have to argue that I remember that it has a good track record, and that my memory is a reliable source of information. Thus Memory I leads to:

Memory II

(P1) I remember that my memory has a good track record. (P2) My memory is reliable. Therefore:
(C) It has a good track record.

If Memory II is indeed the only way of defending the second premise of Memory I, then the Memory Argument satisfies our definition of epistemic circularity. Suppose Memory I is indeed epistemically circular. How damaging would that be? According to Alston, it would rob Memory I of its rational force. Here is what he says on that matter:

Epistemically circular arguments would seem to be of no force. If we have to assume the reliability of [sense perception] in order to suppose ourselves to be entitled to the premises [of an argument for the reliability of sense perception], how can an argument from those premises, however impeccable its logical credentials, provide support for [the conclusion that sense perception is reliable]?

The question at the end of this passage is rhetorical; its intended answer is that such an argument cannot provide support for its conclusion. Let us call an argument that provides not only logical, but also epistemic support for its conclusion, a *cogent* argument. According to Alston, epistemic circularity is vicious: incompatible with cogency. Alston’s position, then, adds up to skepticism about the cogency of

track-record arguments for the reliability of our faculties. Such skepticism is puzzling. Appealing to my memory's good track record certainly seems to be the easiest and most straightforward way of defending my memory's reliability. It would be rather odd, I think, if such an appeal would be irrational. Moreover, assuming I cannot use track-record evidence to mount a rational defense of my memory's reliability, why is it that I *can* rationally use track-record evidence to defend the reliability of my car? What explains the difference? At first sight, it appears that it is easily explained: whereas the Memory Argument is epistemically circular, the Car Argument is not. It will turn out, however, that the Car Argument is no less circular than the Memory Argument. We will, therefore, be confronted with a dilemma: either we endorse the Car Argument, and are thus led to endorse the Memory Argument as well, or we reject the Memory Argument, and then face the unwelcome consequence of having to reject the Car Argument as well.

My goal in this paper is to support the former of these alternatives. In the next section, I will argue that, when it comes to defending the reliability of memory, we are indeed confronted with the problem of epistemic circularity; there is no escape from it. In the third section, I will argue that the problem is worse than it initially seems: not only is the Memory Argument epistemically circular, but so is the Car Argument. In the fourth section, I will present what I take to be a good reason for denying that epistemic circularity is vicious. In the last section, I will discuss an alternative way of undermining the Memory Argument's cogency.

2. Is the Memory Argument Epistemically Circular?

Not everybody will readily agree that the Memory Argument is indeed epistemically circular. So let us examine a challenge to the claim that the Memory Argument is epistemically circular. Alston tells us that a track-record argument for the reliability of sense perception is epistemically circular because to ascribe a good track record to our sense perceptions, we need to rely on sense perception, and relying on sense perception is rational only if we assume its reliability to begin with.⁹ The same point holds with equal plausibility for other faculties. Track-record arguments for the reliability of memory, introspection, and rational intuition must include a premise that ascribes a good track record to the faculty whose reliability is to be established. This premise can be known only by exercising the faculty in question, and thus can be defended only by appeal to the reliability of the faculty in question. So it would appear that it is difficult, if not impossible, to argue for the reliability of a faculty without presupposing its reliability to begin with. This line of reasoning rests on the following principle:

The Reliability Principle

To defend a claim that has its source in a faculty F, I must give reasons for the reliability of faculty F.

This principle strikes me as rather plausible. Reliabilists, certainly, should be sympathetic to it. Nevertheless, it can be questioned. For example, an objector could argue that to defend the second premise of Memory I, I need not make any appeal to the reliability of my memory. What I need is merely a good reason for this premise, such as an undefeated memorial seeming. So let's consider:

Memory Iib

I have an undefeated memorial seeming that my memory has a good track-record. Therefore: It has a good track-record.

The objector, let us assume, justifies the transition from the premise to the conclusion by appealing to a the following epistemic principle:

P1 An undefeated memorial seeming that p is a good reason for accepting p.

Obviously, if the second premise of Memory I is defended with Memory Iib, no appeal to the reliability of memory is involved, and epistemic circularity is seemingly avoided.

Like the circularity-avoidance strategy considered above, this maneuver suffers from the flaw that it does not eliminate epistemic circularity but merely shifts it to a later point. Obviously, pursuing this avenue leads immediately to the question: "What is your reason for the epistemic principle you are appealing to?" Suppose the objector replies that she knows it through a priori intuition. Thus we are led to:

Intuition I

I have an undefeated a priori intuition that P1 is true. Therefore: P1 is true.

But what justifies the transition from the premise to the conclusion? Here, a second epistemic principle is needed:

P2 An undefeated a priori intuition that p is a good reason for accepting p.

Defending P2 will lead to yet another argument:

Intuition II

I have an undefeated a priori intuition that P2 is true. Therefore: P2 is true.

Unfortunately, what is supposed to license the transition from the premise to the conclusion is the very principle this argument is intended to justify. This kind of circularity is hardly less troubling than the circularity exemplified by the Memory I—II sequence. It is not easy to see, therefore, how the present strategy can help us to escape the problem of epistemic circularity. All that is accomplished is the emergence of circularity in a different guise. The Memory I—II sequence is circular because Memory I attempts to establish the reliability of my memory by appeal to its good track record, and Memory II attempts to establish my memory's good track record by appeal to my memory's reliability. In contrast, the Memory I—IIb—Intuition—I—II sequence concludes with an argument whose cogency rests on the

very epistemic principle the truth of which it is intended to defend. Either way, the attempt to defend my memory's reliability does not escape the clutches of epistemic circularity.

There might be other strategies to avoid epistemic circularity. I think it is fair to say, however, that there is *prima facie* reason to be doubtful about their prospects for success. The problem of epistemic circularity has been with us since the ancient Greeks, and thus far no generally accepted way of avoiding it has been emerged. I will, therefore, take it as established that the Memory Argument is epistemically circular, and proceed to discuss the Car Argument.

3. Is the Car Argument Epistemically Circular?

Upon initial inspection, it would appear that the Car Argument does not succumb to epistemic circularity. The Memory Argument is circular because to defend the ascription of a good track record to my memory, I need to appeal to the reliability of my memory. But to defend the ascription of a good track record to me car, I need not appeal to the reliability of car. Rather, once again, I would have to appeal to my memory's reliability. So defending the second premise of the Car Argument does not require using its conclusion. Hence it looks as though the Car Argument is not an example of epistemic circularity. Upon closer inspection, however, this appearance dissipates. The problem is that, if I wish to defend the ascription of a good track record to my car, I must argue that my memory is reliable. And as we have seen, there is no non-circular way of doing that. The problem with the Car Argument, then, is that it has a premise that cannot be defended without using an epistemic circular argument. Hence, if epistemic circularity is indeed vicious, the Car Argument has a premise that is impossible to defend

Let us distinguish between two ways in which a sequence of arguments can exemplify circularity. First, there is the by now familiar sequence exemplified by the arguments Memory I and Memory II:

The I-II Sequence

Argument I

A, B, therefore C.

Argument II

D, C, therefore B.

Here we have circularity because Argument II defends the second premise of Argument I by using the conclusion of Argument I. But this is not the only way in which a sequence of arguments can be circular.

Consider the following sequence:

The I-II-II Sequence

Argument I

A, B, therefore C.

Argument II

D, E, therefore B.

Argument III

F, B, therefore E.

This sequence exemplifies circularity not because C, the conclusion of Argument I, recurs as a premise in a later argument. Rather, it exemplifies circularity because the conclusion of Argument II recurs as a premise in Argument III. We can capture the difference between the two argument sequences by distinguishing between *direct* and *indirect* epistemic circularity. Consider the I—II sequence. Assuming Argument II is necessary for defending premise B in Argument I, Argument I is an example of direct epistemic circularity because its conclusion recurs in the argument needed to justify its second premise. In contrast, in the I-II-III sequence, assuming Arguments II and III are necessary for defending premise B in Argument I, Argument I exemplifies indirect epistemic circularity because its second premise can be defended only by using an argument that is an example of direct epistemic circularity: Argument II. So the difference is this: when an argument is directly epistemically circular, it has a premise that cannot be defended without using its conclusion as a further premise; when an argument is indirectly epistemically circular, it has a premise that cannot be defended without using an argument that is directly epistemically circular. Here are the definitions:

Direct Epistemic Circularity

An argument, A, exemplifies direct epistemic circularity iff it has at least one premise that cannot be justified without using an argument, B, that has A's conclusion as a premise.

Indirect Epistemic Circularity

An argument A exemplifies indirect epistemic circularity iff it has at least one premise that cannot be defended without eventually having to use an argument that exemplifies direct epistemic circularity.

Next, let us turn our attention to the Car Argument. To defend the second premise of Car I, I must use the following argument:

Car II

(P1) I remember that my car has a good track record. (P2) My memory is reliable. Therefore: (C) My car has a good track record.

If the Reliability Principle is true, to defend the second premise of Car II, I must use the Memory Argument. So we get the following overall sequence: Car I—Car II—Memory I—Memory II. This sequence involves an argument that, if the Reliability Principle is true, exemplifies epistemic circularity: Memory I. So if we accept the Reliability Principle, we must accept that Car I turns out to be an example of indirect epistemic circularity.

This result can be generalized. If we accept the Reliability Principle, we are committed to the following view: Any belief whatever has its origin in some faculty or other. To justify it, we must defend the reliability of the faculty from which it originated. Suppose I perceive that there is a tree before me. If the Reliability Principle is true, a defense of my belief that there is a tree before me would have to take the following form:

Tree

(P1) I perceive with my senses that there is a tree over there. (P2) My sense perceptions are reliable. Therefore: (C) There is a tree over there.

This argument appeals to the premise that my sense perceptions are reliable. Defending this premise requires of me to defend the reliability of my sense perceptions, which calls for another track-record argument: Sense Perception I, which was already introduced.¹⁰ To defend its second premise, I must appeal to the reliability of my memory. So defending the second premise of Sense Perception I takes the following form:

Sense Perception II

(P1) I remember that my sense perceptions have a good track record. (P2) My memory is reliable. Therefore: (C) My sense perceptions have a good track record.

To defend the second premise of Sense Perception II, I need to employ the Memory Argument, which, if the Reliability Principle is true, is epistemically circular. So if the Reliability Principle is true, then the sequence of arguments needed to defend the belief in question—the belief that there is a tree over there—turns out to exemplify indirect epistemic circularity. Analogous reasoning applies to beliefs based on introspection and rational intuition. Thus, since all of our beliefs have their origin in some faculty or other, the Reliability Principle leads to the outcome that it is impossible to defend any of our beliefs with an argument that is not an example of indirect epistemic circularity. Consequently, if epistemic circularity is indeed vicious, commitment to the Reliability Principle yields the result that we cannot justify our beliefs because cogent arguments in their defense do not exist.

It could be objected that this result will not stand because, whereas direct epistemic circularity is vicious, indirect epistemic circularity is not. This objection fails because it is based on the concession that argument fails to be cogent if it exemplifies direct epistemic circularity. The problem is that I cannot defend the second premise of the Car Argument without using a non-cogent argument. Thus it is hard to see how could be cogent if direct epistemic circularity is indeed vicious. Let us put this point in general terms. Suppose argument A exemplifies direct epistemic circularity. If direct epistemic circularity is vicious, argument A fails to be cogent. But surely, if argument A fails to be cogent, then no argument whose cogency depends on argument A can be cogent. So if direct epistemic circularity is an obstacle to cogency, so is indirect epistemic circularity. Either both are vicious, or neither is.

I have argued that, if epistemic circularity is indeed vicious, what is threatened are not merely track-record arguments for the reliability of our faculties, but our ability to defend any of our beliefs with a cogent argument. The dialectical situation can be represented in terms of an inconsistent triad:

Inconsistent Triad

- (A) The Reliability Principle
- (B) Cogent arguments in defense of our beliefs are possible.
- (C) Epistemic circularity is vicious.

Though each of these propositions enjoys a good deal of plausibility, one of them must be false. The question is: Which one?

Some might view rejecting the Reliability Principle a tempting response to the problem at hand. It does not seem to me, however, that this would be a good idea. As already mentioned, advocates of reliabilism should be sympathetic to it. Alston, for example, appeals to it when he argues that any attempt to argue for the reliability of sense perception suffers from epistemic circularity. More importantly, abandoning the Reliability Principle is unlikely to allow us to escape from the dilemma of having to choose between (B) and (C). To escape from this dilemma, we need, as an alternative to the appeal to our faculties' reliability, a way of defending our beliefs that will not in turn be susceptible to the charge of epistemic circularity. As I argued earlier, we might attempt to justify our beliefs by appealing to epistemic principles that make no mention of reliability. This approach raises the question of what justifies our acceptance of such principles. To answer this question, eventually we need to appeal to an epistemic principle that certifies the acceptance of itself. The same fate befalls the approach that is called "inference to the best explanation." Here the idea is that it is rational of us to trust our experiences because they are best explained by assuming that what we experience is true. But what justifies our trust in this principle? To answer this question, the principle would have to be invoked again. Other approaches are likely to run into analogous problems. Thus, whether or not we accept the Reliability Principle, we will have to choose between (B) and (C).¹¹ In the next section, I will argue that we should choose (B) and reject (C).

4. Is Epistemic Circularity Vicious?

If we accept (C)—the claim that epistemic circularity is vicious—we get stuck with a bad outcome: giving philosophically satisfactory arguments in defense of our beliefs is not possible. One way of avoiding this outcome would be to argue as follows: Surely the skeptical outcome is absurd; it simply cannot be true that we are utterly unable to defend any of our beliefs with a cogent argument. We must conclude, therefore, that epistemic circularity is benign. According to this argument, the absurdity of denying (B) is a sufficient reason for rejecting (C).

This argument invites the charge of dogmatism. Yes, skepticism about cogent reasoning doesn't look appealing. We don't like it. But surely our dislike of it is not a good reason for rejecting it. The argument, therefore, is a mere reflex of our preferences, an example of wishful thinking, rather than the expression of a principled stand on the issue. Though this objection is not without merit, I do not think it should be overrated. I would agree that the kind of skepticism in question should not be rejected merely because we do not like it. But we do not need to base our rejection of it on an emotional response because the view

that epistemic circularity is vicious suffers from a crippling defect: if the view is true, there cannot be any cogent argument in its defense. How could we possibly know that epistemic circularity is vicious? Obviously, we would have to employ some faculty or other. Presumably, it would have to be the faculty of rational intuition. The Reliability Principle tells us that, if we are to trust this faculty, we have to have reason to consider it reliable. But if epistemic circularity is vicious, there cannot be a cogent argument in support of the reliability of rational intuition. Consequently, there cannot be a cogent argument in support of the claim that epistemic circularity is vicious. On the basis of this argument, we can advance the following reductio argument:

Reductio

(1) Assumption: Epistemic circularity is vicious.

Therefore:

(2) Cogent arguments in defense of our beliefs are impossible.

Therefore:

(3) There cannot be a cogent argument in defense of our assumption.

(4) For any proposition, p , if there cannot be no cogent argument for p , then it is epistemically permissible for me to refrain from accepting p .

Therefore:

(5) It is epistemically permissible to refrain from accepting our assumption.

The outcome of our reductio argument is that we need not accept option (C). This by itself is not yet, however, a reason to accept its negation. It might be that the attitude we should adopt is suspension of judgment. It seems to me, however, that I am in fact in possession of a reason in favor of option (B). Since (B) and (C) are incompatible, this reason is a reason in favor of rejecting (C), that is, a reason in favor of concluding that epistemic circularity is benign. The reason I have in mind is the following: it seems to me that the Car Argument is cogent. In fact, I've come across quite a number of arguments that seemed cogent to me. Such seemings are of course defeasible. If I had any reason to believe that epistemic circularity is indeed vicious, I would be a situation in which these seemings are defeated. But we just saw that there cannot be a cogent argument in defense of the viciousness of epistemic circularity. So I have no reason to believe that epistemic circularity is vicious. Consequently, the seeming to which I just appealed remains undefeated. Thus it gives me a reason to think that cogent arguments are possible, and hence a reason to think that epistemic circularity is benign.

Let us suppose, then, we go with option (B) and reject (C). Now, when we reject (C), surely we do not wish to endorse the view that every epistemically circular argument is cogent. Rather, what we reject is that an argument's being epistemically circular is sufficient to prevent it from being cogent. But then we are going to face another challenge to the Memory Argument. It could be argued that the Memory Argument fails to be cogent, not because it is epistemically circular, but rather because it suffers from a different defect.

5. The First Crystal Ball Problem

According to the argument I will discuss in this section, epistemic circularity becomes vicious only in a specific context: when we rely on a certain faculty, say memory, to establish the reliability of that faculty itself. The Memory I—II sequence is an example of that. This strategy comes with the advantage of avoiding skepticism about the possibility of cogent reasoning as such. But if it is to be successful, we need a good answer to the following question: Why is it that, when epistemic circularity is otherwise benign, it becomes vicious when we try to establish the reliability of our faculties? According to the line of reasoning I am going to discuss, arguing for the reliability of a faculty by relying on that same faculty is analogous to establishing the reliability of a crystal ball by relying on that crystal ball itself. Consider the following argument:

Crystal Ball

(P1) TRP. (P2) My Crystal Ball has a good track record. Therefore: (C) It is reliable.

It could be argued that, when we use the Memory Argument to establish the reliability of our memory, we are analogous to someone who uses the Crystal Ball Argument to argue for the reliability of his crystal ball. This argument would proceed as follows:

Analogy

The Memory Argument is analogous to the Crystal Ball Argument. The Crystal Ball Argument is not cogent. Therefore, the Memory Argument is not cogent either.¹²

The first premise could be justified by the thought that both arguments suffer from what we might call *source circularity*. To justify the second premise of the Memory Argument, I need to rely on my memory; to justify the second premise of the Crystal Ball Argument, I need to rely on my Crystal Ball. In each case, I am consulting the very source the reliability of which is at issue.

To assess the Analogy Argument, we need to consider two different cases:

- (i) The objector tries to establish analogy between the Memory Argument and the Crystal Ball argument by stipulating that in each case I remember that the source in question has a good track record.
- (ii) The objector tries to establish analogy by ensuring that in each case, the second premise exemplifies source circularity.

It does not seem to me, however, that the Analogy Argument is successful. In case (i), it will turn out that the second premise of the Analogy Argument is false. In case (ii), it will turn out that its first premise is false. For although in that case there is analogy between the two arguments with regard to source circularity, there is another aspect with regard to which there is significant disanalogy. Let's consider case (i) in detail:

Case (i). Suppose you give me a crystal ball for my birthday. Somewhat baffled to receive such a strange gift from a seemingly rational philosopher, I'll put it nevertheless on my desk to give it a chance. I keep a record of the truth values of my crystal ball's assertions. Soon it emerges that its

assertions are mostly true. Employing the Crystal Ball Argument, I conclude that my crystal ball is reliable.

Here we get the following analogy between the way I'm related to my crystal ball, and the way I am related to my memory: with regard to each, I remember that it has a good track record. But then there is no relevant difference between the Car Argument and the Crystal Ball Argument. If the former is cogent, so is the latter. Since the Car Argument is cogent, I conclude that the second premise of the Analogy Argument should be rejected.

Arguably, case (i) does not capture what someone who advances the Analogy Argument has in mind. It could be argued that, if the Crystal Ball Argument is construed as in case (i), the analogy is not tight enough. Whereas the second premise of the Memory Argument exemplifies source circularity, the second premise of the Crystal Ball Argument does not. To make the two arguments truly analogous, it must be ensured that we have source circularity in both cases. So let us change the details accordingly.

Case (ii). Suppose that the crystal ball that you gave me for my birthday can respond to inquiries that I put to it. After the birthday party is over I take it to my office, put it on my desk and inquire about its track record. A message appears to the effect that it has a very good track record. Using the Crystal Ball Argument and relying on the crystal ball's testimony as evidence for the 2nd premise, I conclude that my crystal ball is reliable.

When construed in this way, my use of the Crystal Ball Argument is not cogent. The objector will now ask what the difference is between it and the Memory Argument. When I advance the Memory Argument, am I not in exactly the same position, epistemically speaking, as I am when I advance the Crystal Ball Argument under the circumstances we are now imagining? When I conclude that my crystal ball is reliable, I am--irrationally--relying on the crystal ball's self-certification. After all, when it comes to an assessment of my crystal ball's reliability, its own word is just not good enough. What I need is *independent* evidence. Likewise, when it comes to judging the reliability of my memory, relying on data supplied by my memory itself is not good enough either. Again, what I need is independent evidence. So shouldn't I conclude that, since the Crystal Ball Argument is not cogent, the Memory Argument is not cogent either?

I think I ought to resist this conclusion. Here is why. My memory's self-supplied track record involves independent confirmations, whereas the crystal ball's self-supplied track record does not. Let me mention some examples of what I have in mind. I call my wife from my office. She answers the phone. An auditory experience confirms that I remembered the right number. After I'm done teaching I drive home. When I arrive in my neighborhood, a visual experience confirms that I remembered how to get there. When I get in my house, further visual experiences confirm that I remembered which house was mine. Similar examples could easily be multiplied.

With regard to my crystal ball's assertions, I am *not* (as we are now imagining the case) in possession of any such independent confirmations. All I have is its own assertion that it has a good track record. If I had independent confirmations, what would they be like? Here is an example. Suppose, after returning to my office, the crystal ball tells me that my wife just tried to call me. I call my wife, and it turns out that what the crystal ball said was true. This would be an episode providing me with an independent confirmation of the crystal ball's assertion. But if I were to experience many such episodes, thus acquiring track record evidence for ascribing reliability to my crystal ball, we would move from case (ii) to case (i). What is essential to case (ii) is that I do *not* have the independent confirmations that I have in case (i). All I have is my crystal ball's claim to a good track record. Hence if the Crystal Ball Argument is set up as in case (ii), there is an important difference between it and the Memory Argument: with regard to my memory's past performance, I have independent confirmations; with regard to the crystal ball's past performance, I do not.¹³

6. The Second Crystal Ball Problem

The idea behind the crystal ball challenge is that epistemic circularity is vicious when it results from source circularity. Now I agree that it is irrational to argue for the reliability of my crystal ball on the sole ground that my crystal ball attests to his own reliability. But why would it be irrational? According to the argument in question, because of source circularity. I have identified, however, an alternative explanation, according to which my irrationality is due to the fact that I am not in possession of any memories of independent confirmations. Thus the crystal ball challenge does not provide us with a compelling reason to think that epistemic circularity is vicious when it arises from source circularity. In this section, I will consider a crystal ball scenario with a different twist. When we argue for the reliability of any one of our faculties, there is, with regard to the entire set of our faculties, no escape from source circularity. To assess the reliability of any single faculty, we must rely on the others. It could be argued that this makes it impossible for us to give cogent arguments for the reliability of any one of our faculties, because we are essentially in the same position as Walter, the subject of the following, embellished crystal ball case.

Case (iii). Walter receives as a birthday gift the following four input-devices (as we might call them): a crystal ball, a ouija-board, tarot cards, and a book on how to read the tea leaves. An open-minded guy, he decides to test these items. To ascertain the reliability of his crystal ball, he consults the ouija board, tarot cards, and tea leaves, all of which assure him that his crystal ball has an excellent track record. Proceeding in like fashion—to get information about a given device, he consults the other three—he acquires track record evidence for the ouija board, the tarot cards, and the methods of tea-leaf reading that's recommended in his book. Relying on the testimony he thus acquired, Walter uses track record arguments to conclude that each of his four input devices is reliable.

Based on this case, the challenge to the Memory Argument can be put as follows: “Walter’s reasoning is clearly irrational. Even conceding that the analogy between Walter’s reasoning and my use of the Memory Argument is far from perfect, it unquestionably holds in the following respect: in acquiring the evidence I need for attributing a good track record to my memory, I rely on other faculties of mine: sense perception, rational intuition, and perhaps even introspection. Such reliance is rational only on the assumption that these faculties are reliable. But whatever evidence I could possibly have in support of the reliability of these faculties would have to come from these faculties themselves. In the end, then, I am essentially in the same epistemic position that Walter is in: I am in possession of a set of input devices—memory, sense perception, introspection, and rational intuition— and in order to determine whether any one of them has a good track record, I consult the other three. That’s exactly what Walter does. So if Walter’s reasoning is irrational, so is mine.”

I think there is in fact little plausibility to the claim that my epistemic situation is, on balance, like Walter’s. The first thing to note about Walter’s epistemic situations is this: it is one of painful incoherence, and in this regard significantly different from my epistemic situation relative to my faculties. Walter, let us suppose, has some scientific knowledge of how the world works. So he knows that, according to the laws of nature, crystal balls, ouija boards, tarots cards, and tea leaves cannot be reliable sources of information. He also knows, let us suppose, that he is not the victim of a practical joke. So Walter is in a situation in which he acquired data that massively conflict with his scientific understanding of the world. Either physics would have to undergo serious revision, or Walter would have to find some alternative explanation of the bizarre phenomenon he is confronted with. Certainly, until this conflict is resolved, it would be irrational of him to conclude that his devices are indeed reliable. Thus we have, once again, an alternative and plausible explanation of the irrationality in question. Since there is such an explanation, I see no reason to agree that Walter’s irrationality is due to source circularity.

Suppose we remove the incoherence of Walter’s epistemic situation by assuming that he presents his input devices to a team of eminent physicists. The team’s careful research results in a paradigm shift: the laws of nature are revised, and Walter’s input devices vindicated. In this new situation, would it still be irrational of Walter to conclude that his devices are reliable? I think there is then little reason left to accuse Walter of irrationality. Now let us stipulate that, with regard to epistemic circularity, nothing has changed in Walter’s situation. Having consulted the team of physicists, he is now in possession of a general theory that explains how in principle his devices work. But he still has not field-tested his devices, and thus has no evidence as to their reliability than their mutual confirmations. His evidence is not as good as it could be, but nevertheless, in light of the new and revised physical account of how the world works, it is good enough to make it reasonable of him to consider his devices reliable. So we find source circularity in both

the original and the modified Walter case, but irrationality only in the first. This supports my claim that, in the original case, Walter's irrationality is not due to source circularity.

Relative to our own faculties, we are all in a situation that is analogous to Walter's after he has consulted the team of physicists. At least to some extent, physics and neurophysiology explain how our faculties work. So trusting our faculties does not generate the same sort of conflict Walter experiences when his input devices confirm each other. Thus there is a decisive difference between me and Walter. When I rely on my other faculties to assess the reliability of my memory, I do so within an overall cognitive system that does not suffer from a lack, but instead enjoys a high degree, of coherence. This explains, I suggest, why Walter, in the original case, is irrational in attributing reliability to his crystal ball, whereas I am not irrational in attributing reliability to my memory.

Matthias Steup
Department of Philosophy
St. Cloud State University
Email: steup@stcloudstate.edu
<http://web.stcloudstate.edu/msteup/Epis.html>

Notes

¹ William Alston has addressed the issues I am going to discuss here in a number of penetrating studies; see chapter 12 in (1989), chapter 3 in (1991), and his (1993). His view is that although we can know that our faculties are reliable, we can not show that they are by way of argument, for any such argument would be inflicted with epistemic circularity. Yet he accepts TRP. He writes: "Though . . . we cannot identify reliability with a favorable track record, such a record in a suitably large and varied spread of cases is the best and most direct evidence for reliability." (1993), p. 12.

² On this point I am in agreement with Alston. See his (1993), p. 8f.

³ Obviously this is not a deductively valid argument. It is intended to provide strong nondeductive, or defeasible, support for its conclusion. The same applies to the arguments displayed below.

⁴ Expand this paragraph: explain that what you have in mind is the sort of argument that is supposed to meet the standards of philosophical reflection. Perhaps even stronger: the sort of argument that effectively rebuts a skeptical challenge. To this it might be replied that we should not play the skeptic's game, because we are bound to lose it. To which I reply: let's play that game and let's try to win it.

⁵ Fumerton (1995), p. 177

⁶ Alston (1993), p. 13.

⁷ Alston (1993), p. 15. He refers to this kind of circularity as "epistemic" circularity, and takes it to be the kind of circularity that prevents an argument that exemplifies it from having any force. I agree with Alston that track record arguments for the reliability of our faculties exemplify epistemic circularity, but, as I will argue in this paper, this does not rob such arguments of their rational force.

⁸ Reference.

⁹ "if I were to ask myself why I should accept the premises, I would, if I pushed the reflection far enough, have to make the claim that sense perception is reliable." (15)

¹⁰ It might be objected that I can defend the reliability of my sense perceptions, or, for that matter, my memory, without relying on track record evidence. Perhaps I could have an expert, say a neurophysiologist, examine my sense organs and memory and attest to their reliability. It is doubtful, however, that reliance on track record evidence can be eliminated in this way. For this maneuver to work, I would have to defend the assumption that the neurophysiologist is a reliable source of information. Perhaps I could defend this assumption by pointing out that she underwent many years of scientific training, and thus is likely to perform the examination in a scientific manner. However, since scientific methods and procedures rely to a large extent on track record evidence, it would seem that consulting a

neurophysiologist achieves no more than shifting the reliance on track record evidence into the background.

¹¹ It could be objected that the other approaches I'm talking about don't have the global consequence that no beliefs at all can be defended with cogent arguments. However, sustained philosophical questioning might drive us to the point where we must justify our ultimate premises. Consider EBE. EBE is either a direct premise of philosophical arguments for the rationality of our beliefs, or an implicit presupposition. In either case, it will have to be justified. So on the EBE approach, all arguments turn out to be indirectly e-circular as well. The same applies to the Epistemic Principles Approach.

¹² Here is how the argument can be modified to fit the objection considered at the end of section 7: Let B1 be the belief that my crystal ball is reliable. In forming this belief, I rely on my crystal ball. Let B2 be the belief that my memory is reliable. In forming this second belief, I rely on my memory. B1 is analogous to B2. But B1 is clearly unjustified. Therefore, B2 is also unjustified. My reply is as follows. If we fill in the details so as to ensure that B1 is indeed unjustified, there is significant disanalogy between the two beliefs: I have memory data supplying independent confirmations for my memory's reliability, but I do not have any such data that confirm my crystal ball's reliability. This explains why B2 is justified whereas B1 is not. For the full argument, see my discussion in this section.

¹³ To this argument, it could be objected that the independent confirmations I am appealing to are not really independent at all since I am merely remembering them. After all, when I call my wife and recognize her voice, I must remember that the voice I hear is my wife's. So in order to confirm that I dialed the correct number, I do have to rely on memory. Likewise, when I come home and a visual experience confirms that I arrived at the right house, I have to remember that the house I see is really mine. Again, the confirmation in question requires of me that I rely on my memory. So it turns out that what would appear to be independent confirmations are not really independent at all.

I do not think that this objection succeeds. It is true that the independent confirmations to which I appeal are no more than further memory data. So complete independence from memory cannot be achieved. Yet it makes an enormous difference whether the memorial data in question--confirmations of one faculty (or source) by other faculties (or sources)--are available or not. With regard to the crystal ball, I do *not* remember independent confirmations: confirmations supplied by sources other than my crystal ball itself. Therefore, it would be unreasonable of me to consider my crystal ball unreliable. Yet isn't it clear that, if I did remember a sufficiently large number of independent confirmations, it *would* be reasonable of me, as it is in case (i), to consider my crystal ball reliable? This suggests that the presence or absence of independent confirmations, albeit merely remembered, makes a crucial difference. So my reply is this: With regard to my memory, there is an abundance of independent confirmations, although

admittedly nothing more than memory data. Alas, with regard to my crystal ball, I am not in possession of such data. This is why we must judge the two arguments differently: whereas the Memory Argument is cogent, the Crystal Ball Argument is not (if set up as in the second case).

References

Alston, William

1989 *Epistemic Justification. Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

1991 *Perceiving God. The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

1993 *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

1999 "Perceptual Knowledge," in Greco/Sosa 1999, pp. 223-42.

BonJour, Laurence

1999 "The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism," in Greco/Sosa 1999, pp. 117-42.

Brewer, Bill

1999 *Perception and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Chisholm, Roderick

1989 *Theory of Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall).

Davis, Martin

1998 "Externalism, architecturalism, and epistemic warrant," in Crispin Wright, Michael Smith and Cynthia MacDonald, eds., *Knowing Our Own Minds: Essays in Self-Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 321-61.

2000 "Externalism and armchair knowledge," in Paul Boghossian and Christopher Peacocke, eds., *New Essays on the A Priori* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 321-61.

Dretske, Fred

1970 "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67, pp. 1007-1023.

Fumerton, Richard

1995 *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield).

Greco, John and Sosa, Ernest

1999 *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

Huemer, Michael

200 *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield).

Price, H.H.

1932 *Perception* (London: Methuen).

Pryor, James

2000 "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist," *Nous* 34, pp. 517-549.

2002 "Is Moore's Argument and Example of Transmission-Failure?" (Unpublished Manuscript)

Ernest Sosa

1997 "Reflective Knowledge in the Best Circles," *The Journal of Philosophy* 94, pp. 410-430.

Van Inwagen, Peter

1993 *Metaphysics* (Boulder: Westview Press).

Wright, Crispin

2000 "Cogency and question-begging: some reflections on McKinsey's paradox and Putnam's proof, in Enrique Villanueva, ed., *Philosophical Issues* 10, pp. 140-63.

2002 "(Anti-)Skeptics Simple and Subtle: Moore and McDowell," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65.