0. Introduction

I shall address the title question, and the answer I shall give is: maybe nothing much. I'll first distinguish between arguments that exhibit logical and epistemic circularity. In the second section, I'll discuss two prominent objections to circular arguments. The first objection is that circular arguments are problematic because the justification they produce for the conclusion is so easily obtained that it becomes trivial. The second objection is that circular arguments are problematic because they are rationally unpersuasive in the context of a debate. My response to these objections argues that they only affect logically circular (LC) arguments—leaving epistemically circular (EC) arguments untouched. I will draw two conclusions. First, to the extent that any particular EC argument *is* problematic, this is due only to accidental features of it that can be removed or corrected. Second, the aforementioned fact reveals that a common objection to externalist versions of foundationalism, viz. they permit EC argumentation when they shouldn't, is unsound.

1. Logical and Epistemic Circularity

In this section, I'll distinguish between two kinds of circularity that can occur in an argument: logical and epistemic.[1] There are significant differences between them. I'll explore how these differences handle objections in the next section.

1.1 Logical circularity

[1] Some authors have also distinguished between circular arguments and circular beliefs. It is plausible to think, however, that circular beliefs just are beliefs that the conclusions of circular arguments are true. So I will continue to focus on circular arguments. See Michael Bergmann (2006).

A LC argument is such that the premises are justified only if the conclusion is already justified. Consider this argument:

1. Today is the day after Sunday (S)
2. If today is the day after Sunday, then today is Monday (S ⊃ M)
3. Therefore, today is Monday (M)

If one possesses the relevant concepts, we can create a case where one will be justified in believing the first premise only if one infers it from the already justified conclusion.[2]

If the conclusion of any argument is to be justified, justification must transfer to it from justified premises. Yet if the initial premises are justified only if justification transfers to them from the already justified conclusion, we need to insert the conclusion as an additional premise. The fleshed out argument looks like this:

1. M
2. M ⊃ S
3. S
4. S ⊃ M
5. ∴ M

The argument remains valid, but the initial premises have become logically irrelevant—the conclusion follows directly from the first premise.

The key feature of an LC argument is that *no new justification is produced by the premises for believing the conclusion beyond the justification already possessed by conclusion.* This feature creates a more serious epistemic worry. Either M is already justified as a premise or it isn't. If M is already justified, then there is no need to infer it as the conclusion. But if M is not already unjustified, justification cannot transfer from it to the initial premises, or to itself as

[2] For present purposes, I'm also setting aside issues related to various belief paradoxes. For example, one might believe that "today is Monday" as well as "today is the day after Sunday", yet not believe the latter on the basis of the former because one fails to realize that the relevant predicates are co-referring. Here I'm assuming that one does realize this fact, and so believes that today is Monday if and only if one believes today is the day after Sunday.

the conclusion. Thus, LC arguments are either epistemically unnecessary or non-justificatory.

1.2 Epistemic circularity

An EC argument is such that the premises are justified only if the conclusion is true. A paradigmatic instance of such an argument is the reliabilist's track record argument for the reliability of a belief producing process:

1. Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the visual belief that P and P
2. Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the visual belief that Q and Q
…
n. Most of my beliefs formed solely via vision are true
C. Therefore, vision is a reliable belief producing process

One will find this argument plausible only if one already accepts reliabilism. However, one need not be an externalist to use this general sort of argument. The internalist could infer from premises produced by introspection or direct awareness that such a process is legitimate, i.e. it produces beliefs that are probably true.

Why are the premises of an EC argument justified only if the conclusion is true? The conclusion of a track record argument is the claim that a belief-producing process is somehow truth-conducive. Even if true, this conclusion is a necessary but insufficient condition for the premises being justified. A true epistemic principle must also underwrite the conclusion.[3] Epistemic principles are conditionals of the form "If a belief B satisfies conditions C, then B is epistemically justified". The epistemic principles I'm interested in specify the conditions for *non*inferential justification. The conclusion of the reliabilist's track record argument just given presupposes the truth of the epistemic principle "If a belief B is produced by a belief-independent, unconditionally reliable process, then B is noninferentially justified". If both the conclusion and the epistemic principle are true, then the premise beliefs produced by vision meet

[3] Other necessary conditions must also be in place for the premise beliefs to be justified as well, e.g. the process specified by the conclusion must produce the beliefs.

conditions C and are noninferentially justified. If the conclusion is false and the epistemic principle is true, then vision is not a reliable belief producing process and the premise beliefs are unjustified since they fail to meet conditions C.

1.3 Dependence relations

To be reasonable in believing the conclusion of an argument on the basis of its premises, one must first be reasonable in believing the premises. The salient difference between LC and EC arguments is the way their premises become justified. For both types, the justification of the premises depends somehow on the conclusion. What differs is the nature of the dependence relation holding between them.

The dependence relation that holds in a LC argument is inferential dependence. Premises are inferentially dependent on the conclusion when they are inferred from an already justified premise that re-appears as the argument's conclusion. These premises are inferentially justified.

The dependence relation that holds in an EC argument is noninferential dependence. Premises are noninferentially dependent on the conclusion when their formation satisfies the antecedent of the true epistemic principle underwriting the conclusion. These premises are noninferentially justified.

It is important to highlight the structural differences in arguments containing inferential and noninferential dependence. The circle created by a LC argument is an inferential circle. It has two arcs, where (i) the initial premises are inferred from a premise token of the conclusion's type, and (ii) the conclusion token is inferred from the premises. When both arcs have been completed, the circle is formed. An EC argument only completes the second arc; its conclusion is inferred from the premises. It does not complete the first arc, because that arc relies on a relation of inferential dependence that is only present in a LC argument. The circle created by an

EC argument is not an inferential circle.

2. Objections to Circular Arguments

In this section, I'll discuss two objections made against circular arguments in general. I'll argue that these objections only apply to LC arguments, which suggests that one will need different reasons to reject EC arguments.

2.1 Circular arguments are epistemically useless

This objection begins by pointing out that circular arguments can be used to justify any proposition, simply by asserting it as a premise and then inferring it as the conclusion. Paul Moser offers a clear statement of why this feature is unsatisfying:

> "Philosophers, among others, usually seek non-questionbegging supporting evidence for a simple reason: Questionbegging evidence fosters arbitrariness, in that it is easy to produce for *any* claim under dispute. …They need only support their disputed claims *with the disputed claims themselves*. …Questionbegging evidence is thus dialectically, or argumentatively, useless, and it fails to advance inquiry regarding the questions begged."[4]

The second sentence makes it clear that Moser intends a "questionbegging" argument to be one that is LC. If one gives a genuinely LC argument with justified premises, and infers the conclusion on the basis of those premises, one is guaranteed to have a justified belief in the conclusion. But this is only because one helps oneself to what one is trying to prove, viz. that the proposition in question is justified. Any proposition can be justified this way: assume p is justified, and then justifiably infer p. What is problematic about this is that if *any* proposition can be justified so *easily* then there is something uninteresting about the sort of justification produced by a LC argument. The support it provides is genuine but trivial; it is too thin to provide any interesting dialectical advantage. In any dispute, LC support for p can be instantly counter

[4] Paul Moser (1993), pp. 4-5

balanced by LC support for ~p. For these reasons, philosophers seeking to defend their views will not be content with LC support.

It is one thing to assume what is necessary for an argument to *possibly* produce a justified conclusion; it is another thing for the conclusion to *actually* become justified. All possibly justificatory LC arguments produce actually justified conclusions: if one meets the necessary conditions for forming the argument as LC, i.e. if one (justifiably) asserts p and then infers p, one is guaranteed to have a justified belief in the conclusion.[5] By contrast, I'll now argue that not all possibly justificatory EC arguments produce actually justified conclusions.

To defend this claim, I'll argue that (i) not every true proposition p can be the justified conclusion of an EC argument, and (ii) an argument's being EC does not guarantee that its true conclusion is justified. The first claim implies that EC arguments cannot be formed to support any true conclusion. The second claim shows that even if an EC argument can be formed to support a true conclusion, it is not necessary that the conclusion will become justified. If both claims are true, then its not the case that the justification conferred on the conclusion of an EC argument is trivial.

To defend the first claim, that not every proposition can be justified by an EC argument, I'll give examples of true propositions that cannot be the justified conclusion of such an argument. These propositions are such that even if true, there are no other propositions that are both (a) justified only if the former is true, and (b) if justified according to (a), would transfer justification to the former. For example, "red things are colored". There are no propositions that are both (a) justified only if red things are colored and (b) if justified according to (a), would

[5] This follows assuming the p really is justified as a premise. I'm taking this for granted here, although the issue will reappear later when I respond to the objection that circular arguments cannot convince skeptics.

transfer justification to "red things are colored". The best argument one might try to give would look something like this:

1. P is red and colored
2. Q is red and colored
…
n. All of the red things I've seen have been colored
C. Therefore, red things are colored

The premises of this argument could be justified even if the conclusion is false. They therefore fail to meet condition (a), being justified only if "red things are colored" is true. The true proposition "red things are colored" cannot be the justified conclusion of an EC argument.

Only true conclusions underwritten by true epistemic principles render appropriately formed premises justified. True propositions like "red things are colored", or "money doesn't grow on trees" or "3 is a prime number" cannot be the justified conclusion of an EC argument because they are not underwritten by an epistemic principle. What this shows is that, unlike LC arguments, it is false that any proposition meeting the necessary condition for the argument's formation—in this case being true—can be justified by an EC argument.

I'll now give two arguments in defense of the second claim, that an argument's being EC does not guarantee that its true conclusion is justified. First. An argument's being EC implies that the conclusion has a certain epistemic status, i.e. being justified, only if it already has a *different*, non-epistemic status, i.e. being true. By contrast, the conclusion of an LC argument has a certain epistemic status, i.e. being justified, only if it already has the very *same* status. Moreover, if we grant the plausible realist assumption that being justified is not identical to being

true, then it doesn't follow that the true conclusion of an EC argument is also justified.[6]

Second. There are many examples of EC arguments with unjustified conclusions. It is therefore false that satisfying the conditions necessary for the formation of this type of argument guarantees that one who believes the conclusion on the basis of the premises has a justified belief in the conclusion.

1 Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the belief that P and P
2. One of my beliefs formed via vision is true
C. Therefore, vision is a reliable belief producing process

If you're a reliabilist, the first premise is justified only if the conclusion is true, but the premises provide insufficient support to justify the conclusion. So the argument is EC but the conclusion is unjustified.

1. Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the belief that P and P
2. Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the belief that Q and not-Q
3. Solely on the basis of vision, I formed the belief that R and not-R
…
n. Most of my beliefs formed solely via vision are false
C. Therefore, vision is a reliable belief producing process

The premises of this argument are justified only if the conclusion is true; this is sufficient for the argument's being EC. But like the first example, these premises don't justify the conclusion.

Meeting the conditions necessary for the formation of a LC argument—but not an EC argument—guarantees that one who believes the conclusion on the basis of the premises is justified in holding that belief. LC arguments are deductively valid, so that the conclusion cannot fail to be justified when the premises are. EC arguments, however, are inductive, and so the conclusion can fail to be justified even when the premises are.[7] Producing such an argument

[6] This characterization of anti-realist or epistemic theories of truth is admittedly crude, and would require a more careful formulation in a different context. For my purposes, however, the characterization is sufficient.

[7] There is at least one epistemically circular argument that is deductive, viz.

with a justified conclusion is a non-trivial, genuine epistemic achievement. Permitting EC argumentation does not entail epistemic anarchy, as some have taken permitting LC argumentation to do.

2.2 Circular arguments are rationally unpersuasive

The second objection claims that circular arguments are deficient because they are rationally unpersuasive. Some arguments are unpersuasive because the premises are deemed false or the inference too weak. Circular arguments seem to commit a more egregious error, viz. blatantly assuming something controversial that is essential to the argument's cogency. This assumption does not imply that the conclusion is unjustified, when we distinguish between meeting the conditions sufficient for justification and following the rules for presenting an argument in a debate. So long as one's premises meet the conditions sufficient for justification and the inference is a good one, the conclusion will be justified—even if one violates the dialectical rule prohibiting question begging.[8] The salient problem with circular arguments is thus the *way* the conclusion would become justified. Since circular arguments are typically question begging, one should avoid them.[9]

LC and EC arguments beg different questions. After arguing that LC arguments are question begging in an objectionable sense, I will argue for the conditional claim that if one is a foundationalist, one won't find this objection compelling against the sort of question begging

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1. [any justified belief]
2. Thus, there are justified beliefs.

The conclusion follows deductively from the premise, and one cannot be justified in believing the premise unless the conclusion is true.

[8] See Peter Markie (2005) for extended discussion of the distinction. Markie distinguishes between "an inference's transferring epistemic support, on the one hand, and its not begging the question against skeptics" on the other.

[9] An argument is question begging only relative to a particular context where one's opponent doubts some claim presupposed by the argument. If there is no opponent, then there will be no one to beg the question against.

found in EC arguments. For present purposes, foundationalism is the thesis that there can be noninferentially justified beliefs.

A LC argument is such that the premises are justified only if the conclusion is already justified. LC arguments thus beg the question of whether the conclusion is justified. When one's opponent doubts that the conclusion is justified, no dialectical progress will be made when the only reason offered to believe the conclusion is the doubted claim itself. I've already argued in response to the previous objection that this feature is what makes the justification attaching to the conclusion of a LC argument trivial. It is the trivial nature of the justification that makes LC arguments unpersuasive in the context of a debate: a new reason must be given in support of the conclusion, if there is any hope of being persuasive. LC arguments do not provide new reasons, so they will not be persuasive.

An EC argument is such that the premises are justified only if the conclusion is true. Furthermore, an EC argument need not be unpersuasive because the conclusion receives insufficient support. As I argued in the previous section, EC arguments need not have justified conclusions. Yet when the conclusion *is* justified, the justification coming from the premises provides new reasons; hence, the justification conferred on the conclusion won't be trivial. An EC argument doesn't have to be unpersuasive for the same reason that an LC argument is unpersausive.

Like any argument, one will not be justified in believing the conclusion of an EC argument unless one is first justified in believing the premises. By definition, one will be justified in believing the premises of an EC argument only if the conclusion is true. So the skeptic might ask for a reason to think that the conclusion is true. This is not because one has *obviously* begged the question of the conclusions' truth. The premises provide the requisite

reasons. Realizing this, the skeptic might ask for reasons to believe that the premises are true.

Recall that the premises of an EC argument, if justified, are noninferentially justified. In general, the foundationalist will always deem it unnecessary to provide reasons for thinking that a purportedly noninferentially justified proposition is true in order to be justified in believing it.[10] If it were necessary, then it would be impossible for the premises to be noninferentially justified. In light of this, the skeptic may charge the foundationalist with begging a different question, viz. the question of whether the premises are justified. If begging the question means assuming something controversial that is essential to the argument's cogency, and one assumes that a proposition is true and holds it without offering a further reason to believe it then EC arguments are question begging in this sense. So the skeptic will be unpersuaded by an EC argument because he does not accept that the premises are justified.

I suggested earlier that, all else being equal, one should avoid giving question-begging arguments. What the present discussion shows, however, is that the sort of question begging occurring in an EC argument is one that that foundationalist must learn to accept. If the only way to persuade the skeptic is to give him a reason to believe that the premises are true, then the foundationalist's EC argument will always fail to persuade the skeptic. If this means that EC arguments are objectionable because they are rationally unpersuasive, then foundationalism is similarly objectionable. Since the premises can be noninferentially justified only if foundationalism is true, otherwise acceptable EC arguments are defective only if foundationalism is false. Therefore, if one is a foundationalist, EC arguments are not defective for being rationally unpersuasive.

[10] This does not imply that an inferential reason is not available, or could not be given to support the same proposition in a different context.

3. Conclusions

I've argued that there are important structural differences between LC and EC arguments, which enable the latter to avoid two prominent objections made against circular arguments generally. The primary conclusion of the paper is this: EC arguments do not have *intrinsic* problems. If any particular EC argument is problematic, this is due to its exhibiting at least one of the following three features: either (i) the premises are unjustified because either the conclusion or its underwriting epistemic principle is false, (ii) the premises are justified but provide insufficient support to justify the conclusion, or (iii) the inference rule(s) used to infer the conclusion are inadequate, e.g. the conclusion is inferred by affirming the consequent. The first feature can be avoided by adopting a true conclusion and epistemic principle. Nothing about the structure of an EC argument necessitates using one epistemic principle rather than another, so there is no intrinsic problem with EC arguments in this respect. The second and third features are structural problems that any argument can have. With respect to these features, EC arguments are again not problematic for special reasons. Any problem with a particular EC argument is accidental, not essential, to it. Therefore, EC arguments should be judged for cogency on a case-by-case basis. They cannot be rejected categorically.

A secondary conclusion to draw is that a prominent objection to externalist foundationalism fails. Internalist foundationalists have argued against externalist versions of foundationalism on the grounds that the latter are committed to approving of some EC arguments when they shouldn't. Since EC arguments are problematic, any theory of justification that permits using them is also problematic.[11] This objection is correct only if there really is something wrong with the externalist's EC argument. The problem, I've argued, can be due to

[11] Fumerton (1995) and Vogel (2000) contain lucid presentations of this objection. See Bergmann (2006) for further discussion of this objection in the context of the internalism/externalism debate.

any of three features. If it is due to feature (ii), the externalist can provide additional premises. If due to feature (iii), the externalist can attempt to restructure the argument so that it uses only legitimate inference rules. If due to feature (i), however, the externalist can solve the problem only by giving up on their externalist epistemic principle for noninferential justification.[12] On the assumption that the externalist is careful in putting forward the argument, the problem with the externalist's EC argument is not that it is an EC argument, but that it is an *externalist* EC argument. A crucial premise of the internalist's objection, i.e. "EC arguments are problematic", when taken categorically, is therefore false. The argument is unsound and the objection fails. Thus, participants in the internalism/externalism debate should look elsewhere than usage of EC arguments for grounds for criticism. The focus of the debate should be on each side's epistemic principles, rather than on this particular use of them.

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[12] This doesn't mean that the externalist must become an internalist. He might adopt a different externalist epistemic principle. The internalist, of course, will object to the newly adopted epistemic principle as well.