10-2023

When Is a Belief Formed in an Epistemically Circular Way?

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Abstract

While there has been a great deal of discussion of whether and when beliefs formed in an epistemically circular manner can be justified, there has been almost no discussion of exactly which beliefs are formed in a circular manner. These discussions have tended to focus on an extremely limited number of intuitively-identified paradigm examples concerning attempts to establish the reliability of a method of belief formation. Here, I seek to answer a prior analytical question about the nature of epistemic circularity by developing a criterion which sorts epistemically circular beliefs from non-epistemically circular beliefs.

Keywords

epistemology – epistemic circularity – positive epistemic status

1   Introduction

Consider the following arguments:

(Induction)
(1)   In the past, inductive inferences from representative samples have been generally conditionally reliable.[1]
(2)   Therefore, now and in the future, inductive inferences from representative samples are generally conditionally reliable.

(Perception)
(1)   It perceptually appears that I'm sitting in a chair right now.
(2)   I am in fact sitting in a chair.
(3)   [Conjoin several other pairs of premises with a form like (1) and (2)][2]
(4)   Therefore, my senses are reliable.

Suppose that in (Perception), the subject forms their belief in (2) and premises like (2) by using their senses. Given this stipulation, both (Induction) and (Perception) seem to exhibit some form of circularity. The circularity is not logical, however. An argument is usually characterized as being logically circular when the conclusion of the argument appears as a premise in the argument.[3] In neither of these cases does the conclusion of the argument appear as a premise. A different characterization of the circularity is needed. Following various authors, we will call the sort of circularity exhibited by these arguments *epistemic circularity*.[4] It will become clear why this choice of terms is apt below.

   The goal here is to offer a criterion which sorts beliefs formed in an epistemically circular way from those which are not circularly formed. While there has been a great deal of discussion of whether epistemic circularity is a vicious form of circularity, the question as to exactly *which* beliefs are formed

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1   An inferential method is conditionally reliable just in case the inferential method produces a high enough proportion of true beliefs when given only true beliefs in the premises as inputs.
2   Assume that the premise pairs together constitute a representative sample, etc. Assume this in all other cases of induction presented in this article.
3   Black (1954, 198) employs this conception of logical circularity to argue that arguments like (Induction) are not viciously circular arguments, because Black seems to identify vicious circularity with logical circularity.
4   See, e.g., especially Alston (1986, 1991, 1993, 2005) and Bergmann (2004, 2006).

in an epistemically circular manner has been mostly ignored.[5] Authors who have focused on this important issue have tended to rely on a limited range of examples that concern forming beliefs about the reliability of a method of belief formation, like (Induction) and (Perception); this is generally fine given their goals. The main problem addressed here is that conceptions of epistemic circularity have been overly narrow. For about five decades, philosophers have disagreed about the connection between reliability and justification, and this motivates an evaluation of whether epistemic circularity is confined to beliefs about the reliability of methods of belief formation. I'll show that there are examples of epistemic circularity that do not seem to involve whether the methods used to produce a belief are reliable. Furthermore, various examples strike many people as being epistemically circular whether or not they take the reliability of the method that produces a belief to be necessary for justification, and this needs explanation. Hence, a more general criterion of epistemic circularity is needed, and circularity affects more beliefs than seems to have been realized.

I will argue in favor of a criterion according to which we encounter epistemic circularity when we rely on a method to form beliefs that ascribe epistemically good properties to itself or to the beliefs which are outputs of that method. To motivate this criterion, I will work through some other criteria, showing why each is inadequate, and develop different kinds of examples of epistemically circular belief. That a method is reliable is *one* very important epistemologically good property for a method to have, but not the only one. We also wonder about whether beliefs formed on the basis of a method are justified, or instances of knowledge, etc. I will argue that beliefs related to such topics can also be formed in an epistemically circular manner.

2   Epistemic Circularity, Arguments, and Non-Inferential Beliefs

As a first pass, it might seem that what makes an argument like (Perception) circular is that we appeal to perception to form beliefs in some of the premises, and then infer that perception is reliable from those premises. In (Induction), we make an inductive inference to form a belief in the conclusion that

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5 For a few examples of discussions of the implications of epistemic circularity, see: Alston (1986, 1991, 1993, 2005); Bergmann (2004, 2006); Boghossian (2002); arguably Cohen (2002); Fumerton (1995); Lammenranta (1996, 2003); Lemos (2007); Reed (2006); Sosa and Stroud (1994); Sosa (1997, 2009); Stewart (2013); Vogel (2000); Wright (2002). Note that as I read him, Cling (2002, 2003) focuses on a different form of circularity (effectively a form of logical circularity).

inductive inferences are conditionally reliable. This suggests the following criterion for an epistemically circular argument:

(A) An argument *A* is epistemically circular if and only if (i) the person employing the argument uses a method *M* to form a belief in at least one of the (essential) premises of *A* when the conclusion of the argument is that *M* is reliable, or (ii) the person employing the argument uses an (essential) inferential method *M* in the argument when the conclusion of the argument is that *M* is conditionally reliable.[6]

(A) would classify both (Perception) and (Induction) as being epistemically circular arguments, because they satisfy (i) and (ii) respectively.

However, there are two reasons to reject a criterion like (A). First, as stated, (A) is a bit gerrymandered. If it is possible to condense (i) and (ii) into a single broader condition, such a formulation would be better because it makes explicit what property arguments like (Perception) and (Induction) have in common at a deeper level. Second, and most importantly, (A) implies that it is *arguments* which are the bearers of epistemic circularity. But, there are examples of beliefs that are not based on arguments that seem to be epistemically circular as well.

The simplest example is (Intuition). Suppose that Igor forms the belief that rational intuition is reliable by intuiting its truth, *viz*. Igor intuits that intuition is reliable. Or, suppose that Mary remembers that beliefs placed in memory are reliably stored, or that Gus comes to believe that his gut instincts are reliable because he 'feels in his gut' that his gut instincts are reliable, etc. Bergmann (2004, 2006) suggests a similar example concerning a juror who wonders whether Hank the witness is trustworthy. Suppose that Hank asserts that he is trustworthy. The juror then comes to believe that Hank is trustworthy

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6   The discussion hereafter assumes that all premises and inferential steps mentioned are 'essential' premises or inferential steps. A premise *P* is an essential premise in an argument for a person when, if we assume the person employing the argument lacks a justified belief in *P*, then it is impossible for the argument to produce a justified belief in its conclusion for that person. Here I set aside cases where not all the premises are essential to simplify the discussion. Analogously, an essential inferential step is one such that if we assume justification would not transfer across that step, the person could not come to have a justified belief in the conclusion of an argument.

   Note that Alston suggests something close to at least (i) of (A), keeping in mind that Alston does think that a belief is justified only if it is produced by a reliable method. See Alston (1986, 323–329, 1993, 15, 2005, 202). For a critique of this sort of proposal, see Stewart (2013).

as a result of this assertion; this is a case of non-inferential testimonial belief acquisition. In all of these sorts of cases, the beliefs in question are not based on inferences or arguments. Intuitively, though, these beliefs are formed in an epistemically circular manner.

On reflection, cases like (Intuition) are strikingly analogous to (Perception) and (Induction), and this supports the idea that these cases should be classified together. In (Intuition), Igor intuits that intuition is reliable. He relies on a method to form the belief that the same method is reliable. Picking one example for comparison, in (Perception), the subject's belief that their own perceptual methods are reliable is based in part on a perceptual method (because some of the subject's beliefs in the premises of (Perception) are based on perceptual methods). In both cases, the subject forms the belief that a method M is reliable by employing method M. The same diagnosis applies to Mary, Gus, Bergmann's juror, etc. Thus, the beliefs in all of these cases seem to be circularly-formed in an analogous manner. So, a criterion like (A) is too narrow in its focus on arguments; a proper criterion must also be applicable to some non-inferentially formed beliefs.

Introducing some terminology at this point will be useful. A subject S's belief that p is an *epistemically circular belief* (EC-belief) if and only if S's belief that p is formed in an epistemically circular way. So, a belief in the conclusion of (Perception) formed on the basis of the argument is an example of an EC-belief. Non-EC-beliefs are beliefs that are not formed in an epistemically circular manner.

Epistemic circularity is fundamentally a property of *beliefs formed in particular ways*, which includes beliefs formed on the basis of an argument.[7] Consider the proposition that perceptual methods are reliable. If a subject forms a belief in this proposition on the sole basis of (Perception), the resulting belief is intuitively an EC-belief.[8] Suppose instead that a subject forms a belief

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7 I thus disagree with Alston's (1986, 326) remark that "the concept of circularity that is involved here applies primarily to arguments."

8 A person might have multiple arguments in favor of the truth of a single belief, or many different kinds of grounds, etc.; the justification, permissibility, etc., of a belief might be overdetermined. But, in this paper, I will assume that the only methods relevant to whether a belief is justified, etc., are stipulated in the examples.

   It also might be objected that I focus too much on methods which produce rather than sustain a belief; e.g., while a person might have initially formed a belief on the basis of wishful thinking, it might now be sustained by a better method, say, perception. I focus on methods used to form a belief for ease of exposition. Everything I say below could be rewritten in terms of methods used to initially form or methods which currently sustain a belief, *mutatis mutandis*. That said, I will count memory as a method implicated in the possession of many beliefs, even though memory's role is typically to sustain beliefs rather than to produce new beliefs.

in this proposition by intuiting that it is true. This belief is not an EC-belief. The proposition believed is the same in these two cases, though. What differs is the method by which the subjects form their beliefs in the proposition. Thus, whether a belief is an EC-belief is partly a function of what methods are used to form the belief.[9]

The methods by which a subject forms a belief are thus relevant to whether a belief is an EC-belief. I will leave the notion of a method of belief formation at the intuitive level here, but some examples include sense perception (or perhaps vision, more specifically), making an inductive inference, rational intuition, etc. A subject's belief that p is *based* on a method M when the belief that p is the causal output of M. E.g., forming the belief that there is a tree on the basis of visual perception is an example a belief based in a method.

For present purposes, a historically-extended notion of a belief's being based on a method is required. In (Perception), for example, what makes a belief in the conclusion an EC-belief is that the subject forms beliefs in some of the premises by using perceptual methods, and then the subject infers that perceptual methods are reliable from those beliefs. To properly categorize beliefs in the conclusions of arguments or inferences as EC-beliefs or non-EC-beliefs, it is necessary to somehow include the methods used to form beliefs in premises and any inferential methods involved in the argument as some of the methods used to form a belief in a conclusion.[10] There are various ways of accomplishing this, as illustrated by the following example: Suppose that Klaus uses a perceptual method to form the beliefs that p, q, and r. Klaus then inductively infers that z from p, q, and r.

Upon which method(s) is Klaus's belief that z based? Two possibilities seem most salient here. One option is to claim that Klaus's belief is based on *an inductive method which takes beliefs formed by using perceptual methods as inputs.* Alternatively, we could say that Klaus's belief that z is based on *both* inductive *and* perceptual methods. The choice here seems largely one of emphasis. The latter is more tractable, though, since it treats methods as discrete, and so I will work within its framework. From the perspective of this framework, when a belief that p is based on methods M_1 and M_2, the belief that p can be said to be based in part on M_1, and also based in part on M_2.

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9   Evidentialist and reasons-based theories can also be captured within the methods framework. We can expand our list of methods to include things like 'being formed on the basis of reasons/evidence of kind K,' where K could pick out perceptual reasons or evidence, etc. So, a belief formed on the basis of perceptual reasons could be said to be based on a method of forming beliefs on the basis of perceptual reasons, etc.

10   Hereafter, I will speak indifferently of a belief being based on an argument or inference, although I realize that some may see these as distinct.

The basing relation employed here is transitive. So, if a subject's belief that p is based on method M_1, and a subject infers that q from p by using an inferential method M_2, then the subject's belief that q is based on both M_1 and M_2. This is why, e.g., in (Perception), the subject's belief in the conclusion (that their own senses are reliable) is based in part on perceptual methods, since perceptual methods are used to form beliefs in some of the premises of (Perception).[11]

As a final clarification, the analysis developed here is meant to apply to primary or original cases of epistemic circularity. Some other beliefs might *inherit* circularity by being inferred from a belief which is a primary case of EC-belief. Suppose a person has an EC-belief that p. They then infer the belief that q from p. The belief that q would seem to inherit circularity from the belief that p. This is plausible because if epistemic circularity does turn out to be somehow problematic, then the belief that q presumably is infected by the problem as well. Some sort of inheritance principle is needed to supplement the theory offered here.

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11   We do have to be careful in how we assess when a belief counts as being based in part on a method, though, especially with conjunctive and disjunctive beliefs. An example can help to illustrate the issue. Suppose Tess believes that p on the basis of method M_1, and believes that q on the basis of M_2. She then forms the conjunctive belief that p and q. If we assess the basing relations carelessly, it might seem as though the belief that p and q is based in part on M_1 and also in part on M_2 as well as the method of making conjunction introduction inferences. And, this is fine as far as it goes, if we are listing all the methods relevant to any of the *parts* of the whole believed proposition. But, Tess's belief that p is not based on M_2 at all, nor is her belief that q based on M_1. This matters when determining when a belief is an EC-belief; we could end up with false positive cases of EC-belief if we do not keep track of the methods used to form each component of a compound belief. If, e.g., p is the proposition that method M_2 is reliable, and we say that the conjunctive belief that p and q is based in part on M_2 because the belief that q is based on M_2, the final account of EC-belief offered below might seem to classify this belief as an EC-belief. Intuitively it isn't, though; while p does judge M_2 favorably, the belief that p is not itself based on M_2.

Ultimately, this is an issue with how to understand the basing relation in terms of methods of belief formation, and how this kind of basing relation should be applied to beliefs in compound propositions (similar issues would arise for the basing relation conceived in terms of reasons, so methods are not the culprit here). Unfortunately, these problems cannot be settled here. For now, I ask readers to assess the methods that a belief is based upon with some caution and judgment, being alert to issues of which methods are relevant to the different parts of believed propositions. I have tried to pick examples below that steer clear of these sorts of concerns. And, if problems arise from the improper assessment of which methods a belief is based upon, what this shows is that our understanding of the basing relation needs refinement, not that the criterion of EC-belief developed below is incorrect.

3   Methods and the Generality Problem

Speaking in terms of methods of belief formation raises the specter of the generality problem, according to which there is no principled way of characterizing the methods used to form a belief. Suppose I form the belief that it is 20° Celsius by reading a thermometer. The method I use to form this belief might be described as reading a thermometer, as reading a thermometer while wearing glasses, or as forming beliefs by using a human-made tool, etc. This might seem to signal an important difficulty. If it is *beliefs formed on the basis of a method* which are instances of EC-belief, then how we choose to describe the methods used by a subject to form a belief could affect whether the belief is classified as an EC-belief or not. Given how intractable the generality problem seems, it might seem better to avoid resting a criterion of epistemic circularity upon methods of belief formation.

In the context of sorting EC-beliefs from non-EC-beliefs, there is a simple way of resolving to the generality problem: the relevant methods will be specified by the content of the belief being assessed. Surprisingly, it is *helpful* that the possible characterizations of a method are open-ended. To help motivate this idea, notice that intuitively, examples of EC-beliefs emerge at many levels of description. If, say, Carl forms the belief that human cognition is reliable by employing human cognition, this belief is an instance of an EC-belief. Or, consider (Perception) again; roughly speaking, this is a case of EC-belief because the subject's belief that perceptual methods are reliable is based at least in part on a method that could be properly described as perceptual methods. Notice that in both cases, the content of the belief being assessed specifies a method.

Now compare the case of Violet, who relies upon her visual methods to form beliefs about the existence and location of physical objects at twilight, and then uses these beliefs as premises to infer the new belief that her visual methods at twilight are reliable. This is analogous to the original (Perception). But here, what makes Violet's belief an EC-belief is that the belief is partly based on the use of visual methods *at twilight*. The restriction to twilight is important. To see why, suppose instead that Violet somehow already knows that her visual perceptual methods of forming beliefs about the existence of physical objects are reliable in conditions of strong light. She wonders, though, whether beliefs in the existence of physical objects formed on the basis of visual methods at twilight are also reliably formed. Violet remembers that her visual methods during twilight yesterday produced the beliefs that there was a lamppost, a large oak tree, etc. Since she knows that these objects are unlikely to have moved in the intervening time, she now uses her visual methods in strong daylight to confirm their existence. Violet could come to believe in a *non-circular*

way that her beliefs in the existence of physical objects formed on the basis of visual methods at twilight are reliably formed, if she knows antecedently that her visual methods in strong light are reliable.

Returning to the proposed solution to the generality problem in the current context, these examples all suggest that despite the open-endedness of our ability to describe a method, there is a simple manner of determining the proper way of describing the method used to form a belief: the content of the belief being assessed for circularity. When assessing whether a belief is an EC-belief, the content of the belief being assessed 'dissolves' the generality problem by itself providing the relevant description of the method. If the proposition believed concerns something other than a method of belief formation (or the beliefs output by a method), e.g., the believed proposition is that this cucumber is green, then the belief is not an EC-belief. If the proposition believed provides a description of a method of belief formation, and also ascribes a good epistemic property to that method (like reliability), then the belief being assessed is an EC-belief if the belief was formed in part on the basis of a method which can be properly described as the one mentioned in the proposition believed. Or, so I shall argue after critiquing a reliability-focused criterion of EC-belief in the next section.

Note that just because a method can be properly described in a particular way does not mean that there are not other completely acceptable ways of describing the method in question; what matters is whether the description of the method provided by the belief being evaluated is *one* of the proper ways of describing the method used to form the belief. Since the project here is to offer a criterion for sorting EC-beliefs from non-EC-beliefs, it is enough that we know which description of a method is relevant to the assessment of whether a particular belief is an EC-belief.

4   The Reliability Criterion of EC-Belief and Positive Epistemic Status

We are now in a position to consider another candidate criterion. Consider this remark by Lemos (2007, 118): "Let us say that a way of supporting the reliability of a source of belief, A, is *epistemically circular* if it makes use of beliefs that have A as their source." While it is unclear that Lemos offers this as a criterion of EC-belief (it is a mere sufficient condition), Lemos does represent a tendency in discussions of epistemic circularity to focus exclusively on beliefs about the reliability of methods as candidate EC-beliefs. Adapting Lemos a bit, we have:

(R)   Subject *S*'s belief that *p* is an EC-belief if and only if (i) *S*'s belief is based in part on method *M* and (ii) *p* concerns the reliability of *M*.

Most authors have focused on track-record arguments like (Perception) and (Induction), which have as their conclusions a proposition concerning the reliability of a method of belief formation. And, it is of course central to epistemology to establish the reliability of various methods of belief formation. So, (R) has something in its favor.

However, there are intuitively clear cases of EC-belief which do not seem to concern the reliability of a method. Consider some variants of (Intuition). (Permission): Penny uses intuition to form the belief that it is *epistemically permissible* to form beliefs on the basis of intuition. This belief is plausibly an EC-belief, even though the content of the belief does not concern the reliability of a method. Or, consider (Virtue). Victor wonders whether beliefs formed on the basis of intuition are *epistemically virtuous*. He comes to believe that intuited beliefs are virtuous by intuiting the truth of this proposition. Neither of these cases satisfy condition (ii) of (R), despite intuitively counting as EC-beliefs.

It might be suggested that a belief has the property of being epistemically permissible or virtuously formed only if that belief is formed on the basis of a reliable method, and so (ii) is satisfied after all.[12] But, this is highly contentious. Many philosophers—even those who accept a reliabilist theory of justified belief—would deny that *every* good epistemic appraisal requires reliable production. Epistemically blameless belief seems especially unlikely to require reliable production when a person acquires an unreliable method from a trusted source and had no clear reason to think the method is unreliable.[13] A criterion like (R) ties candidate EC-beliefs far too closely to reliability when there are intuitive cases of EC-belief where many would deny that the positive epistemic appraisal involved requires that the belief be produced by a reliable method.

To improve on (R), let's introduce the idea of *positive epistemic status*. A belief or method has positive epistemic status when it has an epistemically good feature; an epistemic term or property is a *positive* term or property if the ascription of the term or property is the ascription of an epistemically

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12   Goldman (1986) tries to analyze epistemically permissible beliefs in reliabilist terms when discussing J-rules. And, one type of virtue epistemology is broadly reliabilist.

13   Even Goldman (1988) comes close to accepting something like this by proposing a concept of 'weak' justification.

good feature to a belief or method. There are many sorts of positive epistemic statuses that a belief or method might have; a belief could be justified, permitted, warranted, rationally-held, blameless, etc., while a method could be knowledge-producing, justifying of its outputs, permitted-belief producing, etc.[14] Generalizing for current purposes, the claim that a belief or method satisfies a necessary or sufficient condition for having some sort of positive epistemic status itself counts as the ascription of a positive epistemic status to the belief or method.[15]

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14   That a belief is an instance of knowledge is also a positive status for the belief to have, but note that knowledge on most conceptions is not a *pure* epistemic term. Knowledge requires truth. Truth on most conceptions is not an epistemic property of a belief. And knowledge on most account also requires belief, which is not an epistemic term.

      It is not entirely clear what to say about whether the *denial* that a belief or method has a bad or negative epistemic status counts as the ascription of a positive epistemic status or not. E.g., it isn't obvious that stating that a belief's justification is *un*defeated involves ascribing a positive epistemic status to the belief or not. But, we don't need to decide what to say about such cases right now, and none of the cases discussed here involve anything like this.

15   There is also the interesting issue of epistemic circularity in the ascription of *negative* epistemic statuses to a belief or method. E.g., consider a person who intuits that intuition is unreliable. This involves relying upon a method to form a belief which ascribes a negative epistemic status to same method used to form the belief. Is this a form of epistemic circularity?

      It depends on whether we consider epistemic circularity to be definitionally connected to self-supporting beliefs—standard discussions tend to focus on only examples of self-supporting beliefs like (Perception), suggesting that most have thought that there is an important connection between EC-belief and circular self-support. But, epistemic circularity need not be defined to involve self-support; it could be extended to cover any case where there is the ascription of a positive or negative epistemic status to a method. Given past usage, though, I suspect it is better to work with a narrower definition of epistemic circularity that applies only to self-supporting beliefs, but nothing important hangs on this for present purposes. The criterion of EC-belief proposed in the next section could be easily adapted to add negative epistemic statuses if it turns out to be best to include beliefs involving the ascription of negative epistemic statuses to methods as possible cases of EC-belief. Or, a modified version focusing on only negative epistemic statuses could serve as a criterion of epistemically self-defeating belief.

      Whether or not beliefs which ascribe a negative epistemic status to themselves count as EC-beliefs, it is worth noting that there is a symmetrical notion to epistemic self-support which we might characterize as *epistemic self-defeat*. After all, if a person forms the belief that intuition is unreliable by intuiting its truth, then this belief seems like it epistemically defeats itself, implying that a person should not hold the belief because of its bad origin. See, e.g., Stewart (2005) for some discussion of self-defeating beliefs like this.

Note that truth is not a positive *epistemic* status for a belief to have on most conceptions, even if some think that the truth-related property of reliability is a necessary condition for a method to produce justified beliefs.[16] Still, truth is so central to our epistemic goals that I think it is plausible that the ascription of reliability to a method is the ascription of a positive epistemic property, whatever one thinks about whether justified, etc., beliefs must be a product of a reliable method. Given our deep epistemic goals of seeking true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs, reliable methods are those which when employed help us achieve some of our deep epistemic goals, which is a positive epistemic status for a method to have, or so it seems to me. This point expands out to include the ascription of other truth-related properties of methods to count as the ascription of positive epistemic statuses to those methods, e.g., that the next beliefs produced by a method will be true. This explains why (Perception), etc., are examples of EC-belief whether or not one accepts reliabilism.

5   The Criterion of EC-Belief

Now that we have introduced the more general notion of positive epistemic status, we can revise (R). So, in this section, I propose a final criterion for sorting EC-beliefs from non-EC-beliefs. This criterion is then tested against a few cases, illustrating how it is meant to work.

I propose the following Criterion of EC-Belief:

(C)   Subject S's belief that p is an EC-belief if and only if

(i) p alone or the conjunction of p together with true epistemic principles entails that method M or beliefs formed on the basis of M satisfy either a necessary or sufficient condition for having some sort of positive epistemic status

AND

(ii)   the belief that p is formed in part on the basis of a method which can be properly described as M.[17]

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16   There are epistemic conceptions of truth. If the reader happens to prefer one of these, then the ascription of truth to a belief in fact is the ascription of a positive epistemic property. But, there are clearly many non-epistemic notions of truth, e.g., the correspondence theory. The theory below could be applied to ascriptions of truth which are epistemic, though. But, for simplicity, I'll assume that a non-epistemic view of truth is correct.

17   Unfortunately, condition (i) will be satisfied trivially by all beliefs in contradictions if we employ standard classical logic, because contradictions result in 'explosion.' The result is

The proposal replaces the focus on reliability found in (R) with having some sort of positive epistemic status. As a result, it does not make any contentious assumptions about which sorts of beliefs can be EC-beliefs, except that those beliefs somehow concern some positive epistemic status, which hardly seems controversial when thinking about circular self-support.

Let us test (C). Here I will briefly apply (C) to four test cases: (Induction), (Perception), (Intuition), and (Permission), showing how the theory is meant to be applied and that it delivers plausible verdicts in all of these cases.

Recall (Induction):

(1) In the past, inductive inferences have been generally conditionally reliable.
(2) Therefore, now and in the future, inductive inferences are generally conditionally reliable.

As argued in the last section, if the content of a belief is such that it ascribes reliability or conditionally reliability to a method, then this is the ascription of a positive epistemic status to that method. Since conclusion (2) ascribes conditional reliability to current and future inductive inferences, it thus ascribes a positive epistemic status to them. So, (C)(i) is satisfied. Since the subject forms a belief in (2) on the basis of (Induction) now, the belief is based at least in part on the basis of a method that could be properly described as making an inductive inference now or in the future. So, (C)(ii) is also satisfied. Thus, (C) properly classifies (Induction) as a case of EC-belief even for those who reject reliabilism, explaining the common reaction that there is something circular about (Induction).[18] Of course, those who accept standard reliabilism have another route to connect conditional reliability to positive epistemic status through the concept of justification; following Goldman (1979, 116–117), an inferential method is capable of producing justified beliefs (which is clearly a positive epistemic status for a method to have) only if that method is

that (C) would classify any belief in a contradiction as an EC-belief if we employ classical logic, and this doesn't seem right.

There are various ways of handling the problem; the account could be revised to apply to only non-self-contradictory beliefs or only in cases where the proposition does not entail that (C) is satisfied only because the proposition entails everything. Or, this shows that a relevance logic which counts entailments through explosion alone as *irrelevant* entailments needs to be employed when applying (C)—this strikes me as probably the best response, but I cannot develop it further here.

18 No wonder many have rejected Black's argument that there is nothing circular here. In fairness to Black, he seemed to be focusing on whether this sort of inference is *viciously* circular, arguing that it is not. In this, I agree with him.

conditionally reliable.[19] But this can be shown to be a case of EC-belief whether or not one makes this reliabilist assumption about justification.

Let us now briefly turn to (Perception).

(Perception)
(1) It perceptually appears that I'm sitting in a chair right now.
(2) I am in fact sitting in a chair.
(3) [Conjoin several other pairs of premises with a form like (1) and (2)]
(4) Therefore, my senses are reliable.

Suppose that the subject forms beliefs in premises like (2) by employing perceptual methods. How does (C) classify the subject's belief in (4)? We here rely again on the claim that the ascription of reliability to a method is automatically the ascription of a positive epistemic status to that method given our deep epistemic goals. So, (4) ascribes a positive epistemic status to perceptual methods. Thus, (C)(i) is satisfied. Furthermore, the subject's beliefs in premises like (2) are formed in a way that could be properly described as employing perceptual methods. Given that the basing relation is transitive, the subject's belief in (4) is based in part on methods which can be properly described as perceptual methods, and hence (C)(ii) is also satisfied. So, (C) correctly classifies the subject's belief in (4) as an EC-belief.[20]

In the original (Intuition), Igor forms the belief that intuition is reliable on the basis of intuition. The propositional content of Igor's belief ascribes a positive epistemic status to the method of forming beliefs on the basis of intuition. So, (C)(i) is satisfied. Further, Igor's belief is formed in part on the basis of

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19   There is another interesting possibility here too. Suppose that the ascription of conditional reliability to a method does *not* alone count as the ascription of a positive epistemic property. If we remain convinced that (Induction) is a case of EC-belief, and also that (C) is plausible and on the right track, then this could actually amount to an *independent* source of evidence that formation by a reliable or conditionally reliable method is a necessary condition for a belief's being justified. If this sort of principle is needed to account for our intuitions about which beliefs are EC-beliefs when combined with a criterion that is otherwise plausible, then we perhaps have an unexpected source of evidence for such principles: intuitions about EC-beliefs.

20   Like with (Induction), a standard reliabilist can also argue that there is an outside assumption that can be used to show that (Perception) is a case of EC-belief. Reliabilists claim that beliefs in premises like (2) are justified only if they are the product of a reliable method. On this view, formation by a reliable method is a necessary condition for having the positive epistemic status of being justified, which counts as the ascription of a positive epistemic status to a belief or method. But as argued here, one need not rely on reliabilism to accept that (Perception) is a case of EC-belief.

a method which can be properly described as intuition. Hence, (C)(ii) is also satisfied. Thus, (C) delivers the proper results in (Intuition) as well; Igor's belief is an EC-belief.

Finally, in (Permission), Penny forms the belief that it is epistemically permissible to form beliefs on the basis of intuition by intuiting the truth of this proposition. The believed proposition alone entails that beliefs formed on the basis of intuition satisfy a sufficient condition for having the positive epistemic status of being epistemically permitted. (C)(i) is satisfied. The only remaining question is whether Penny forms this belief in part on the basis of a method which can be properly described as intuition. She does. Therefore, (C)(ii) is satisfied. Thus, Penny's belief is an EC-belief, and (C) delivers the proper result, in this case needing to rely on no external epistemic principles at all.

(C) fares very well in classifying these cases. While there are issues about what to make of the relation of external principles to (C), this seems inevitable if a criterion of EC-belief is stated in such a way that it does not depend on contentious assumptions about the analysis of epistemic terms or properties, and does not build in hidden and objectionable assumptions about the contents of candidate EC-beliefs like (R). And, I have argued that the ascription of a property to a method counts as the ascription of a positive epistemic property when the property in question implies that the method will help us achieve our deep epistemic goals, which allows us to sidestep some issues about which external principles are true. Overall, (C) seems very promising.

6   Conclusion

(C) is the correct criterion for sorting EC-beliefs from non-EC-beliefs, or at least the best criterion given the options canvassed here. (C) has connections to some other important matters as well. As is usual in philosophy, the development and defense of (C) is just the first step in a much broader argument. While I cannot develop it further here, (C), if even roughly correct, shows that that there are many more kinds of EC-belief than seem to be identified in the literature, which focuses almost exclusively on track-record arguments for the reliability of a method. Further, I think that if properly applied, (C) shows that every epistemic theory will have to grapple with the problem of epistemic circularity.[21] This means that externalist theories of justification have a simple

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21   Some infinitist epistemic theories, e.g., those postulating an infinite number of distinct methods, might be able to resist this conclusion (there might be other options too), but it is not clear that these theories have much else going for them as theories of *doxastic*

response when it is claimed that their theory incorrectly implies that some EC-beliefs can be justified; *every* theory will need to accept this result on pain of skeptical conclusions concerning beliefs about the positive epistemic statuses of our own beliefs. This criterion also points the way to a deeper understanding of epistemic circularity: epistemically circular beliefs emerge when human beings attempt to assess the epistemic standing of their own beliefs, and so EC-beliefs involve a sort of covert level-ascent. But, these are arguments for another day.

Acknowledgments

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instead of propositional justification. Further, such theories seem to face the issue of whether an infinite regress of methods (or beliefs) does anything to stave off concerns about the positive epistemic status of these methods (or beliefs). This is hardly clear.

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