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VICIOUS REGRESSES, CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS, AND STRONG AWARENESS INTERNALISM

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Abstract

That a philosophical thesis entails a vicious regress is commonly taken to be decisive evidence that the thesis is false. In this paper, I argue that the existence of a vicious regress is insufficient to reject a proposed analysis provided that certain constraints on the analysis are met. When a vicious regress is present, some further consequence of the thesis must be established that, together with the presence of the vicious regress, shows the thesis to be false. The argument is provided largely through the examination of Michael Bergmann's (2006) vicious regress argument against strong awareness internalism and a partial defense of that thesis against Bergmann.¹

I. Introduction

That a philosophical thesis entails a vicious regress is commonly taken to be decisive evidence that the thesis is false. In this paper, I argue that the existence of a vicious regress is insufficient to reject a proposed analysis, provided that certain constraints on the analysis are met. This project can be thought of as an attempt to understand the structure of an argument that could be used against a philosophical thesis when the thesis entails a vicious regress. An argument with a premise asserting that a thesis entails a vicious regress (perhaps together with a conditional claim that says 'if that thesis entails a regress, then the thesis is false) always requires another premise that says why the vicious regress is problematic. Only the conjunction of these can serve as premises for a compelling (strong or valid) argument against the thesis in question. And as I hope to make clear, not just any additional premise will do.

My argument assumes a certain characterization of philosophical analysis according to which, on one well-known version, the philosopher's goal is to offer necessary and sufficient conditions describing the correct use of some term. (It is not necessary to understand *terms* as the primary objects of philosophical analysis; I clarify this shortly.) So understood, philosophical analysis is a descriptive enterprise of a certain sort. The armchair philosopher generally need not worry about whether a proposed analysis entails a vicious regress, for it may be that the target term could never be used to make a true positive claim. Under some circumstances, though, a vicious regress can pose serious trouble for a thesis.

The central claim of the paper is conditional: if a thesis lands in vicious regress *and* the vicious regress resulted from doing conceptual analysis under the conditions to be described here *and* there is no further problem with the argument which appears as a result of the presence of the vicious regress, then the thesis is not defeated by the vicious regress. Defense of that thesis largely follows the case of Michael Bergmann's dilemma against awareness internalism, one

¹ I thank Bryan Appley, Ali Hasan, Ryan Cobb, and an anonymous referee for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also thank Landon Elkind for discussion concerning vicious regresses and objects of analysis, and for help preparing the final manuscript. I especially thank Bryan Appley for pressing me to discuss the self-defeat issue that arises if the concept of epistemic justification is unexemplifiable (see section five).

horn of which is a vicious regress argument.² The structure of this paper is as follows. In the second section, I describe two different regresses and explain why one is vicious while the other is not, as well as what makes a vicious regress vicious. In the third, I describe Michael Bergmann's dilemma against awareness internalism. In the fourth, borrowing from Richard Fumerton's distinction between analytic and synthetic awareness requirements, I distinguish analytic and synthetic regresses.³ I argue that analytic vicious regresses are always problematic, and synthetic vicious regresses are sometimes problematic. In the fifth section, I describe the conception of philosophical analysis which sometimes tolerates vicious regresses as unproblematic, and I make clear the peculiar problem facing strong awareness internalism before concluding in the sixth section.

II. Regresses and Objects of Philosophical Analysis

We must distinguish virtuous infinite regresses and vicious infinite regresses, and, further, vicious *unproblematic* regresses from vicious *problematic* regresses. The truth regress is a familiar example of a virtuous (i.e. non-vicious) regress. The regress follows from the claim, 'It is true that p' plus the entailment principle, 'If it is true that p, then it is true that it is true that p.' The conjunction of those claims entails that when it is true that p, it is also true that it is true that p, with 'it is true that' iterated infinitely many times.

The truth regress is an easy example of an infinite regress that is not at all troublesome. That some claim is true is sufficient for the truth of infinitely many truth claims. The truth regress does not show that the concept of truth is unintelligible, or that it would be physically or metaphysically impossible for anything to be true, or any such claim which would impugn either the entailment principle, 'If it is true that p, then it is true that it is true that p,' or 'It is true that p.' (The regress would be analytically vicious, however, if the analysis of 'true' included the entailment principle, since the entailment principle includes reference to truth. I discuss analytic regresses in section four.)

Let us understand a *vicious* regress to be one which shows that the target of philosophical analysis is unexemplifiable. Talk of 'unexemplifiability' naturally suggests that properties are the targets of analysis. I do not mean to suggest that. And while there are multiple candidates for the objects of analysis which are consistent with my arguments about regresses, I shall stick mostly to talk of terms (words in a language) and concepts (mental entities expressed by terms). For the target of analysis to be unexemplifiable means that the object of analysis, whatever it is, is such that *necessarily*, terms expressing or referring to that object cannot be used to make true positive claims. In that way, unexemplifiability is different from other ways in which a term cannot be used to make true positive claims. For example, J.L. Mackie argued that the property of goodness does not exist, and that consequently the sentence 'X is good' is always false.⁴ According to Mackie, the nonexistence of the property of goodness is the reason true positive claims about goodness cannot be made. It seems, though, that *had there been* such a property as goodness, it would be possible to make true positive claims about goodness. For all Mackie tells us, goodness is exemplifiable, though, according to Mackie, it is not exemplified.⁵ Things are

² Michael Bergmann, *Justification without Awareness* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ See Richard Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

⁴ J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Pelican Books, 1977).

⁵ This interpretation depends upon reading Mackie as holding that it is a contingent fact that goodness does not exist. 'Good' does not refer, therefore 'X is good' is always false, but contingently so. On this reading, then, what makes 'X is good' always false is not that goodness is unexemplifiable, but that 'good' simply fails to refer. Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting clarification of this point.

different with a vicious regress: the target of analysis itself *could not* exist, on the assumption that the analysis offered for the analysandum is correct.

As the account suggests, unexemplifiability allows that a term may be *mentioned* in a true positive claim, so long as it is not *used*. If ‘good’ denotes some impossible Platonic object, we can truly say, “‘Good’ is a four-letter word’ but we cannot truly say ‘Pleasure is good.’ When a target of analysis is unexemplifiable, and the exemplification of the target is a necessary condition of the truth of some other expression, it will be impossible to make true positive assertions using the latter expression. For instance, if knowledge is justified true belief, and justification is unexemplifiable, then ‘S knows that p’ is necessarily false.

There are multiple candidates for the objects which philosophers seek to analyze when they are performing analyses. And while philosophical analysis has often been called ‘conceptual analysis,’ it is not necessary to think of concepts as the ultimate analyzanda of philosophical analysis. A few other candidates include terms, properties, states of affairs, and facts. While some of these are harder to fit easily into the account of regress I defend here, all are compatible with my account (though some are more easily compatible than others). I said that what happens with a vicious regress is that there is something about the target analysandum which makes it that any positive claim using the term expressing the analysandum is false. Clearly, whatever candidate one prefers for the kind of things which are the ultimate analyzanda of philosophy—whether concepts, properties, or whatever—vicious regresses will never be compatible with an actually existing analysandum that is unexemplifiable. A philosopher analyzing the *property* of goodness cannot accept the conclusion that the property is unexemplifiable, otherwise, the philosopher was not analyzing the property of goodness!⁶ A philosopher who wants to hang on to the idea that properties are the ultimate analyzanda can still accept the arguments concerning regresses offered in this paper, provided that a distinction is made between that which is the target of analysis (what I have been calling the analysandum) and the means by which the analysandum is analyzed. The latter may still be properties—again, I am trying to be as neutral as possible—but then the philosopher who seeks to analyze the property of goodness will have to do it by analyzing properties thought to be constitutive of or sufficiently similar to the property of goodness rather than identical to it: there will have to be something that goes proxy for the property of goodness, in some way. The easiest way to think about what might go proxy for the analyzanda is in terms of concepts or terms: those things by which we *think about* or *describe* the objects of chief philosophical interest. Now, if concepts or terms are *themselves* the analyzanda, then the worries raised for properties (and which extend in slightly different ways to the other candidates for the analyzanda) do not even appear. So, whatever the analyzanda are, for this paper it will be possible and convenient to describe philosophical analysis in conceptual or linguistic terms.

When a philosophical thesis entails a vicious regress it is because the analysis of the concept (keeping in mind what I just said about other candidate analysanda) renders the concept unexemplifiable. By the unexemplifiability criterion, it is clear that the truth regress is non-vicious: the regress does not entail ‘It is true that p’ is always false.

Some regresses, though, are vicious. For example, Galen Strawson argues that moral responsibility is impossible because moral responsibility requires freely choosing to be in a state

⁶ The basic idea behind this conclusion—namely that one cannot conclude that F is the correct analysis of X if X’s existence is a necessary condition of analyzing X, and F entails X does not exist—is present in Fumerton, ‘The Paradox of Analysis’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43:4 (1983) pp. 477-497.

from which one can act freely.⁷ But if an action from that state is one for which an agent is morally responsible, then the state itself must be one for which the agent is morally responsible. And so on. A single instance of morally responsible action therefore requires infinitely many choices for which the subject is morally responsible. Consequently, moral responsibility is impossible.

The regress Strawson presents is clearly vicious, for it entails that all occurrences of ‘S freely did A’ are false. That sentence is always false because the property of moral responsibility is unexemplifiable if Strawson’s argument is correct. That his account has this consequence is, by itself, no objection to it. Strawson’s point is that because our ordinary notion of moral responsibility has characteristics that make moral responsibility impossible, moral responsibility is impossible. That his analysis resulted in a vicious regress does not show that the analysis failed to capture our concept of moral responsibility. If his analysis is incorrect, that fact is not discovered by recognizing that it generates an infinite regress. Arguments against his account cannot simply point to the vicious regress and conclude that Strawson got it wrong.

So far, we have identified one virtuous regress and one unproblematic vicious regress. What would make a vicious regress problematic for a defender of the account that generates the regress? According to Michael Bergmann, awareness internalism faces a dilemma, and one horn of the dilemma—the strong awareness horn—generates a vicious regress: for that reason, awareness internalism should be rejected (Bergmann, *Justification*). It sounds like Bergmann is classifying that vicious regress as a problematic one. Let us consider Bergmann’s argument.

III. Bergmann’s Dilemma

Bergmann’s dilemma for awareness internalism arises in the following way. According to awareness internalism, epistemic justification requires that all factors which are relevant to the justification of a proposition for an individual are factors of which that subject is aware (or could become aware under certain conditions). So, for any justification contributor X of which one is aware and which is in fact relevant to one’s justification for a proposition p, one must, as a requirement for justification of p, either be aware *that* X is relevant to the justification of p (‘strong awareness’), or be aware of X in some non-judgmental way (‘weak awareness’).

If one need not be aware *that* X is relevant to the justification of p, then, says Bergmann, from the subject’s perspective, X is no more relevant to the justification of p than anything else is.⁸ The subject may conceive of X in any number of ways: but if the subject does not judge *that* X is relevant to the justification of p, there is no reason from the subject’s perspective why X should count toward the justification of p.

If that option is unappealing, one can add to one’s analysis of justification the requirement that X be relevant to the justification of p and the subject recognize or judge *that* X is relevant to the justification of p. A regress arises: the judgment that X is relevant to the justification of p must itself be justified. Since we are now requiring strong awareness, some justification contributor will need to be judged to be relevant to the justification of ‘X is relevant to the justification of p.’ And so on, *ad infinitum*.

That, in short, is Bergmann’s dilemma against epistemological internalism. It has a

⁷ Galen Strawson, ‘The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility’, *Philosophical Studies* 75 1/2 (1994) pp. 5-24.

⁸ Bergmann calls this the ‘subject’s perspective objection.’ According to Bergmann, being open to the objection is what was supposed to motivate epistemic internalism against epistemic externalist views, since the latter do not require the subject to be aware of factors relevant to justification. Bergmann argues that, consequently, being open to the objection undermines the motivation for internalism.

predecessor in Laurence Bonjour's influential argument against foundationalism.⁹ Both of their arguments turn on the unacceptability of a regress of the sort described in the previous paragraph. Bergmann is convinced, as was Bonjour before him, that neither weak awareness internalism nor strong awareness internalism are acceptable. Bergmann thinks we should not accept a requirement on justification that entails justification is impossible.

Supposing that the strong awareness regress is indeed vicious, in what way is it vicious, and are regresses vicious in that way only consequences of false theses?¹⁰

IV. Analytic Regresses and Synthetic Regresses

To answer that question requires getting clear on the alternative ways of formulating the strong awareness requirement. Richard Fumerton distinguishes a strong awareness requirement as an *analytically* necessary condition of justification and a strong awareness requirement as a *synthetically* necessary condition of justification.¹¹

There is an important distinction between a belief's justification *entailing* the having of other justified beliefs and a belief's justification *consisting* in the having of other justified beliefs (Fumerton, *Metaepistemology*, p. 81).

When awareness that all the conditions of justification have been met is proposed as itself a constituent of justification, a *conceptual* regress ensues. Suppose a philosopher proposes the satisfaction of a set of conditions X as constitutive of justification. If that philosopher regards as partly constitutive of X the strong awareness that conditions X are met, the analysis is stuck in a regress: X requires awareness that X which requires awareness that X...*ad infinitum*.¹² This is a conceptual regress because the conditions proposed as analytically necessary and sufficient for justification recur infinitely. Even an infinite being with infinite time could not perform the intellectual feat necessary to have a single justified belief. The problem, in this case, is that there are no defined necessary and sufficient conditions for the possession of justification that would make for an adequate foundational understanding of justification, because the definition of those conditions makes reference to the satisfaction of those very conditions.

The problem with a conceptual regress is that the concept for which an analysis is proposed turns out to be unintelligible because it is infinitely complex: the analysis makes reference to the satisfaction of the conditions stated in the analysis; that is, the analysis makes reference to itself being satisfied. It is not only the case that a finite human cannot understand the concept, or that children or small animals could not understand the concept—though both of these are true. The problem is that the proposed analysis renders the concept itself incapable of being understood, without discriminating what sort of being would be doing (or not doing) the understanding. The concept is literally unintelligible.

⁹ See Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, (Harvard University Press, 1985). Bonjour has since changed his mind. See his 'Replies', *Philosophical Studies* 131 (2006) pp. 743-759, and Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (Oxford University Press, 2003.)

¹⁰ Evan Fales has argued that the regress is not vicious. See Fales, *A Defense of the Given* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1996) and 'Turtle Epistemology', *Philosophical Studies* 169:2 (2014) pp. 339-354. I do not discuss his argument here because I want to see what the defender of strong awareness could say after accepting that the regress is vicious.

¹¹ Fumerton's terminology is strong 'access' rather than strong 'awareness.' I have used the latter terminology to make it obvious that Fumerton and Bergmann are discussing the same issue.

¹² In other words, the subject must be aware that all of the conditions of justification are met, and one of those conditions is that the subject be aware that all of the conditions of justification are met, *ad infinitum*.

Things are different when strong awareness is a synthetically necessary requirement of justification. On that way of understanding the requirement, the defender of strong awareness claims that the conditions that constitute first-level justification entail that justification that the first-level conditions obtain is possible at the second level, and justification that the second-level conditions obtain is possible at the third level, and so on, for every level. But possession of higher-level justification is no part of the analysis of lower-level justification. Consequently, no conceptual regress arises.

For the sake of consistent terminology, let us distinguish synthetic regresses and analytic (Fumerton: ‘conceptual’) regresses.¹³ Analytic regresses are always vicious and problematic. There could not be an analytic regress that was virtuous, nor an analytic regress that was vicious and unproblematic. Analytic regresses are problematic because when a proposed analysis suffers from an analytic regress, it follows that no one could have ever even had a thought which involved that concept as a constituent: but if the analysis started with first considering the concept, then it is has to be possible to have a thought using that concept. That is why an analytic regress is so bad: an analysis that generates one lands the philosopher in a sort of self-contradictory state, committed to both affirming and denying the intelligibility of a certain way of thinking. Analytic regresses are vicious because the analysandum is unexemplifiable, and they are problematic because an analysis that lands in one is unintelligible.

A synthetic vicious regress, on the other hand, allows that the target of analysis is intelligible: but if the proposed analysis is correct, then the property picked out by the concept is unexemplifiable. Strawson’s regress is synthetically vicious. If Strawson’s argument for his analysis of moral responsibility is good, then the notion of moral responsibility is perfectly meaningful and understandable, but there is no moral responsibility. The viciousness of the regress attaches to that latter consequence: if the analysis is correct, then, necessarily, there is no moral responsibility.

The way in which a target of analysis is unexemplifiable requires some clarification. In the case of Strawson’s account of moral responsibility, it is simply impossible that any action performed by any being whatsoever could ever count as morally responsible. Contrast that with the synthetic strong awareness regress. That regress entails only that beings with finite intellectual capacities would never possess justification, because finite minds are unable to comprehend vastly complicated propositions. So, it is not really the case that a target of analysis which suffers a synthetic vicious regress is unexemplifiable full-stop: it may be that the analysandum is unexemplifiable only under certain circumstances. E.g. if the synthetic strong awareness requirement is true, perhaps an infinite mind could still possess justification, because there is, plausibly enough, no limit to the complexity of propositions that mind could entertain. For this reason, talk of unexemplifiability should be thought of as including, where appropriate, reference to the relevant circumstances under which an analysandum is unexemplifiable.

Undoubtedly, finite minds like ours cannot entertain infinitely complex propositions like those that would be justified if the synthetic strong awareness condition were true and we possessed first-level justification. So, if the synthetic strong awareness regress is vicious, does it follow that the strong awareness requirement is false?

V. Conceptual Analysis

Not necessarily. It depends on one’s conception of philosophical analysis. I have already

¹³ This terminological stipulation is made to make obvious the distinction between regresses due to *analytically* necessary conditions from regresses due to *synthetically* necessary conditions.

alluded to the idea that a philosopher defending a thesis that lands in certain types of regress is not therefore committed to defending a demonstrably false principle, and that the reason for that claim has something to do with taking philosophical analysis to be a special sort of *descriptive* enterprise. We are now assuming that the strong awareness regress is synthetically vicious, and asking whether or not the fact that it entails justification-scepticism is sufficient to formulate an argument against the strong awareness requirement. For if the requirement is true, not only is there no knowledge, no one has a single belief in the vicinity of knowledge, epistemically speaking. If the strong awareness requirement brings with it a vicious regress, no one has an all-things-considered good reason to believe they have hands, or that $2+2=4$, or that they are being appeared to greenly, or whatever. This is bad news even for a sceptically-minded Cartesian internalist.

Granting all of this, it is unclear that we therefore have a good reason to think the strong awareness requirement is false. Some conditional premise is missing, something approximately of this form:

If an epistemological thesis entails that no finite minds possess epistemic justification, then that epistemological thesis is false.

The clearest argument in Bergmann about what is unacceptable about the strong awareness requirement is that because finite minds cannot entertain infinitely complex propositions, justification is impossible for beings like us. That seems to correspond well enough to the conditional just offered. In Bergmann's words,

Every belief of every believer is unjustified. This is because every believer (with a finite mind) lacks the ability to grasp an infinite number of propositions or concepts of ever-increasing complexity. It turns out, therefore, that if the strong awareness requirement on justification is correct it is literally impossible for a finite mind to have justified beliefs. Surely this implication is a good reason to reject the proposed criterion (*Justification*, p. 23).

Surely? That depends very much on whether the audience to which Bergmann pleads regards as true the conditional, 'If an epistemological thesis entails that no finite minds possess epistemic justification, then that epistemological thesis is false.' For those who do, at least a partial account of their philosophical enterprise is needed to support the conditional claim.

Part of what many philosophers take themselves to be doing when they do philosophy is attempting to figure out what the correct definitions are that express concepts of philosophical importance. (Again, I use talk of 'terms' and 'concepts,' but the argument in the paper is compatible with other views about the analysanda of philosophical analysis.) We do this by means of thought experiments: hypothetical scenarios in which we ask ourselves whether we consider some term of philosophical importance to be correctly applied in an imagined scenario.¹⁴ The imaginary nature of these scenarios allows that we can arrive at an account of a concept without that concept ever being used to make true positive claims in ordinary discourse. Epistemologists sympathetic with the method of analysis construed in roughly this way should have as their goal the providing of accounts of core epistemic concepts like knowledge and

¹⁴ See Fumerton (*Paradox*) and Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 1998) for defenses of this view.

justification that are adequate to the concepts we actually possess, regardless of whether or not their analyses allow that true positive claims are often or ever made using terms that express those concepts.¹⁵

Clearly, Strawson did not begin his investigation of moral responsibility by seeking out actual instances of moral responsibility. If he is right, there are not and have never been any. An objection to the effect of, 'But surely, there *are* free actions!' is not only idle, but philosophically inappropriate: Strawson's method is not to identify acts that people have called free and then figure out how to make those claims true. The method is to figure out what free action is, and then to apply that account to actual circumstances. It was by following that method that he concluded there are no free actions.

From a common-sense point of view, it would be surprising to discover that free action is impossible. From the same point of view, it would be surprising if there are no justified beliefs. But the armchair philosopher's job is to discover the boundaries of our concepts, not to make ordinary claims involving important philosophical terms come out true. If that method is correct, then philosophical conclusions to the effect that much of ordinary thought and talk is false can be expected as a somewhat regular occurrence.¹⁶

What of the strong awareness regress, then? If the regress is vicious, that itself is insufficient for the armchair philosopher to reject it: it may well be that the strong awareness requirement is part of our understanding of justification. That defenders of strong awareness end up in vicious regress does not suggest they have failed to correctly describe our concept of justification.

I said the presence of a vicious regress does not *itself* show the strong awareness requirement to be false. To form an argument against the strong awareness requirement on the basis of the vicious regress, some further premise must be provided which, in combination with the vicious regress premise, shows that strong awareness internalism is false. But there might be

¹⁵ One might think that a particularist like Bergmann (see *Justification*, p. 22) has a way out by simply denying the strategy described here. Now, he may do just that. I have three responses. First, the argument of this paper is conditional in structure. If someone accepts my description of philosophical analysis, then regresses are not necessarily problematic. I am not attempting to refute all attempts at showing the antecedent of that conditional is false.

Second, the strategy I describe in the paper *is* particularist, in a way: we count as provisionally justified certain beliefs formed in certain imagined ways under carefully described imaginary conditions. The kind of particularism Bergmann is occasionally interested in defending is much more extreme and ultimately question-begging: he says we should sometimes attempt to identify the criteria for justification by appealing to 'our knowledge of which beliefs are justified and which aren't' (*Justification*, p. 22). Well, if he *knows* that some beliefs are justified, then they *are* justified, and any view that challenges that is false—and Bergmann knows it.

Third, the radical sceptic can always ask the particularist for the list of actual (read: 'real world') examples whose status as knowledge or justification the particularist insists on: the sceptic can then challenge those examples one-by-one in an attempt to undermine the particularist's quest to define 'knowledge' or 'justification' around those pet examples. (E.g. 'How do you know that case is not a Gettier case?' etc.) The goal would be to appeal to methodist intuitions shared with the particularist in the hope of persuading the particularist to abandon particularism about the concept under discussion.

¹⁶ I do not mean to suggest that speakers who use terms which philosophers, post-analysis, conclude are never or infrequently used to make true positive claims are therefore somehow surprisingly ignorant of their own language. For instance, when a speaker makes a claim of the form 'I know that p,' it is easy to get the speaker to retract the initial claim, or somehow revise it, by mentioning some possibility contrary to p which or by asking, 'Are you sure?' The fact that speakers are sensitive to such challenges shows that they are already implicitly aware of what the standards for 'knows' are: so, even if they often speak falsely using terms of philosophical interest, they may well do so without being ignorant.

another candidate premise:

If an epistemological thesis entails that no one has justification for believing anything, then no one has justification for believing that epistemological thesis itself.

This claim seems more troublesome. The charge is that if strong awareness internalism generates a vicious synthetic regress, then the strong awareness internalist is in a self-defeating position.¹⁷ The position would be self-defeating because not only does the internalist philosopher not possess epistemic justification for believing the strong awareness principle, neither does that philosopher have any epistemic justification for defending any of the methodological premises that partly contributed to the eventual arrival at this self-defeating position.

A full discussion of epistemic self-defeat would take us too far afield. But it seems that the strong awareness internalist who accepts that the regress is vicious is not completely without dialectical resources. While those sceptics must accept the consequences outlined in the previous paragraph, they can also simply stipulate their philosophical methodology without claiming that it is justified, and go on to advance their argument. The conclusion of the argument will not, by their lights, be justified by its premises—because, *ex hypothesi*, no propositions are ever justified—but they may at least still be able to entice their opponents into accepting their description of the standards of epistemic justification by providing arguments that are appealing to those opponents. At every stage, if asked, the strong awareness sceptic will have to concede that none of the claims in question are justified. But if this sceptic succeeds in convincing opponents to accept the strong awareness principle, the sceptic will have at least won the dialectic. The strong awareness sceptic is not defeated by pointing out that the strong awareness principle leads to scepticism. If the non-sceptic is unable to find what is wrong with the sceptic's argument, then it would seem that the non-sceptic ought to embrace scepticism.¹⁸

VI. Conclusion

Whether or not the strong awareness sceptic is able to deflect some of the unsavory consequences in this way, the main thesis of this paper stands: the presence of a vicious regress itself is always insufficient to undermine a philosophical thesis. In every case, some further claim must be established, and it is only the two claims together which even *might* court trouble for a philosophical position. So long as philosophical analysis is descriptive in anything much resembling the way portrayed above, philosophers should not be worried when their positions entail vicious *synthetic* regresses, unless there is some further reason to think the nature of their synthetic regress will land them in an all-things-considered untenable position.

To very briefly summarize, one may regard a regress as unproblematic for one's own

¹⁷ Bergmann (*Justification*, p. 23) mentions that acceptance of strong awareness internalism in the face of this sceptical consequence puts the internalist in a self-defeating position. He moves on to claim that we can reject strong awareness internalism for this reason. I argue shortly that things are not so easy.

¹⁸ The claim in this final sentence is defended by Fumerton (*Metaepistemology*, p. 51). I should also add that the 'ought' in the footnoted sentence cannot be a genuine epistemic 'ought,' for if the strong awareness sceptic is right, then there are no genuine epistemic 'oughts': for according to the sceptic there is no epistemic justification, and plausibly, 'S epistemically ought to believe that p' just means 'p is justified for S.' This 'ought' claim will, it seems, have to be thought of as equivalent to a claim about the dialectical position in which the non-sceptic is stuck when the non-sceptic is being slowly convinced by the sceptical argument.

philosophical position when [(1) it is non-vicious;] OR [it is (2) synthetically vicious AND (3) the analysandum is one which need not be exemplified as a necessary condition of performing the analysis in the first place AND (4) there is no further claim which, when added to a claim describing the nature of the regress, entails that the regress-generating principle is false or somehow otherwise problematic (e.g. self-defeating in some way).]

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