Infinite Regress Arguments: A Brief Introduction

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Infinite regress arguments (henceforth 'IRAs') are frequently used in all domains of philosophy, and show up in many debates in epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, metaphysics, and so on. In the history of philosophy, they have for example been employed against the thesis that everything has a cause, or against the thesis that everything of value is desired for the sake of something else. In present-day debates, IRAs are used to criticize certain theories of justification, certain theories of meaning, the thesis that knowledge-how requires knowledge-that, and indeed many other things.

Moreover, IRAs are powerful arguments. If your theory yields a regress, that is usually a bad sign. Still, regresses are all too often involved in controversy, i.e., between philosophers who raise the worry of a regress on the one hand, and philosophers who deny the regress or its importance on the other. In such contexts, the metaphilosophical question of what IRAs are, and how they can and should be used in philosophical debates, becomes an important one. In the following, I will introduce two of the main proposals on this issue, namely the proposals by Passmore (1961) and Black (1996), which are reprinted in this volume.

Passmore's chapter 'The Infinite Regress' has triggered and inspired the current debate. His main suggestion can be found at the end of the chapter:

> "Philosophical regresses … demonstrate only that a supposed way of explaining something … in fact fails to explain, not because the explanation is self-contradictory, but only because it is, in the crucial respect, of the same form as what it explains." (1961, p. 33)

Black has offered a challenging critique of Passmore's account, and suggested instead the following:

> "According to me, infinite regress arguments conclude to the negation of a proposition. … According to Passmore, they prove not that a proposition is false, but that an explanation is inadequate." (1996, p. 111)

Basically, their difference can be put as follows. According to Passmore, IRAs can be used to demonstrate that a certain solution to a problem fails (such as finding an adequate explanation or definition). According to Black, in contrast, IRAs can be used to demonstrate that a certain proposition is false, and not that a certain solution is inadequate. To illustrate the controversy, let us consider some examples.

First example: Juvenal's guardians. Famously, the Roman poet Juvenal posed the question: "But who will guard the guardians?" (*Satire* 6.O29-34). The IRA according to Passmore's ideas would run along the following lines:

> Suppose you want to have your partner guarded so that he or she can no longer commit unfaithful acts. As a solution, you hire a guardian. Yet, as it happens with guardians, they cannot be trusted either. So a similar problem occurs: you want to have the guardian guarded. As a solution, you hire another guardian. Regress. Hence, hiring guardians is a bad solution to have your partner guarded.

By contrast, the IRA according to Black's account would run in a different way:

> Suppose that your partner is unreliable, that all unreliable persons are guarded by a guardian, and that all guardians are unreliable. This yields a regress which is absurd. Hence, either it is not the case that all unreliable persons are guarded by a guardian, or it is not the case that all guardians are unreliable.

Second example: the ancient problem of the criterion. This is a problem that inspired many further problems, including Hume's well-known problem of induction (cf. *An Enquiry*). Here is a description of the problem by Sextus Empiricus:

> "In order to decide the dispute that has arisen …, we have need of an agreed-upon criterion by means of which we shall decide it; and in order to have an agreed-upon criterion it is necessary first to have decided the dispute about the criterion. … If we wish to decide about the criterion by means of a criterion we force them into infinite regress." (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, 2.18-20)

Suppose, for example, that you want to settle a dispute about whether Juvenal had a partner. To do so, you introduce another proposition, such as that Juvenal has been banished his whole life and so could not have had a partner. Of course,

this second proposition is disputable too. To settle that new dispute, you introduce a third proposition, say that the sources about Juvenal's banishment are highly reliable. Of course, this third proposition is disputable too, and so on into the regress. Again, the IRA can be made explicit in two different ways:

> Suppose you want to settle the dispute about some issue. As a solution, you introduce a criterion on the basis of which it can be settled. Yet, that criterion is disputable too. So a similar problem occurs: you want to settle the dispute about that criterion. As a solution, you introduce another criterion. Regress. Hence, you will never be able to settle disputes on the basis of further criteria.

> Suppose that at least one dispute is settled, that disputes are settled only if there is an agreed-upon criterion on the basis of which they are settled, and that there are agreed-upon criteria only if the disputes about them are settled. This yields a regress which is absurd. Hence, either it is not the case that disputes are settled only if there is an agreed-upon criterion, or it is not the case that there is such a criterion only if the disputes about them are settled.

To finish the set of examples, let me just mention one further illustration of each account. Here is Carroll's IRA in 'What the Tortoise Said to Achilles' reconstructed along the lines of Passmore's account:

> Suppose you have to demonstrate that a conclusion follows from certain premises. As a solution, you add an extra premise to the argument: 'if the foregoing premises are true, the conclusion is true.' Yet, you do not show that the conclusion follows unless it is shown that it follows from the expanded set of premises. As a solution, you introduce yet another premise: 'if the foregoing premises are true, the conclusion is true'. Regress. Hence: on the basis of this procedure you will never show that a conclusion follows from certain premises.

Finally, Wittgenstein's IRA about rule-following reconstructed along the lines of Black's account (cf. *Philosophical Investigations*, §§185-224):

> Suppose that the correct use of the rule '+2' is fixed, that the correct use of any linguistic or mental item is fixed by a rule, and that rules themselves are linguistic or mental items. This yields a regress that is absurd. Hence: it is not the case that the correct use of any linguistic or mental item is fixed by a rule.

In light of these cases, it seems rather unlikely that such diverse IRAs have nothing in common. Indeed, IRAs seem to share a common structure. As I have shown, however, the literature on this issue has offered two quite different suggestions.

According to Black's account, IRAs demonstrate that certain propositions have to be rejected because they have regressive consequences which conflict, or form a paradox, with independent considerations. The notion of 'absurdity' plays an important role in this account. The fact that a certain regress is absurd does not follow from assumptions that generate the regress, and has to be argued for independently. For example, it has to be shown that an endless regress of criteria or guardians is absurd. Moreover, if the regress is not absurd (or vicious or unacceptable in any other way, cf. Nolan 2001), then none of those assumptions have to be rejected.

According to Passmore's account, in contrast, IRAs demonstrate that certain solutions fail because they get stuck in a regress of problems (similar to the initial problem) that are to be solved before the initial one is solved. For example, the solution of hiring guardians gets stuck in a regress of further people that have to be guarded. Here, the important question is not whether the regress is unacceptable (for example, whether an endless regress of guardians is unavailable, or too expensive), but rather whether the initial solution made any progress. As Passmore puts it:

> "It is the first step of the regress that counts, for we at once, in taking it, draw attention to the fact that the alleged explanation or justification has failed to advance matters; that if there was any difficulty in the original situation, it breaks out in exactly the same form in the alleged explanation." (1961, p. 31)

The proposals by Passmore and Black form the two main accounts of IRAs, and further suggestions made in the literature can be classified as versions or further developments of these accounts. One might wonder whether both accounts are *good* accounts of IRAs, that is, accounts which deliver valid and interesting reconstructions of existing IRAs. Black (1996, sect. 4) presents several worries about Passmore's account, and Gratton (2009) defends a view comparable to Black's. In my view, Black's worries are unsuccessful (cf. Wieland 2013), though they do highlight that we are dealing with two distinct accounts of IRAs. Following pluralist voices raised earlier in the literature (e.g. Sanford 1984, Day 1987), I think that both accounts can be considered fruitful accounts, and be used to facilitate and to correct reasoning with infinite regresses (cf. Wieland 2014). Let me end this introduction with a general statement of both accounts.

If you want to cast doubt on a proposition X of your opponent, you may devise a Black-style IRA. Here is a four-step recipe: (1) make X explicit as an instance of 'for all x of a certain sort, x is F only if such and such' (e.g. 'a dispute is settled only if there is a criterion'); (2) show that your opponent has to concede the corresponding instance of 'such and such only if there is a new item of that sort which is F' (e.g. 'there is a criterion only if the dispute about it is settled'); (3) introduce a simple trigger situation ('this dispute is settled') and generate a regress from these three ingredients; and (4) show that the regress entails something unacceptable, such that X must be rejected.

If you want to cast doubt on a solution X of your opponent (and perhaps turn this into an argument in favour of your own solution to the given problem), you may devise a Passmore-style IRA. Again, here is a four-step recipe: (1) make the given problem explicit ('you have to settle at least one dispute'), (2) make your opponent's solution explicit ('you settle a dispute by introducing a criterion'), (3) show that your opponent has to concede that the initial problem is not solved unless a similar kind of problem is solved ('you settle a dispute by introducing a criterion only if you settle the dispute about that criterion first'), and (4) generate the regress, and conclude that your opponent's solution fails (and that another solution has to be found).

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Further Readings

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Wieland, J. W. 2013. Infinite Regress Arguments. *Acta Analytica* 28: 95-109. (Defense of Passmore 1961 against Black 1996.)

Wieland, J. W. 2014. *Infinite Regress Arguments.* Springer. (Presents a statement of Passmore 1961 and Black 1996, and utilizes both accounts.)