Assessing Infinite Regress Arguments

13.1 The problem of identifying vicious regresses

A common form of argument in philosophy claims that some philosophical thesis, T, generates an infinite regress, whereupon the reader is supposed to see that T must therefore be rejected (see Chapter 2). Such arguments often prove controversial, and the controversy usually centers on whether the infinite regress in question is vicious or benign. In this chapter, I offer an account of when an infinite regress is vicious, which I deploy to assess the six infinite regresses discussed in Chapter 2.

To review, in Chapter 2 we discussed the following six infinite regresses and/or regress arguments:

1. **The Cosmological Argument (concerning the Regress of Causes):** This argument claims that because an infinite regress of causes is impossible, the universe must have a first cause, that is, something that was not itself caused by anything but that caused everything else.

2. **The Regress Argument for Foundationalism (the Regress of Reasons):** This argument claims that because there cannot be an infinite series of reasons for any belief, there must be some beliefs that are justified in a way that does not depend on reasons. These ‘foundational’ beliefs would be the source of the justification for all other justified beliefs.

3. **The Third Man Argument (the Regress of Forms):** This argument claims that Plato’s theory of the Forms should be rejected because it entails that there is an infinite series of Forms for any property – for example, that there is an infinite series of Forms of Man.

4. **The Regress Argument against Resemblance Nominalism (the Regress of Resemblances):** This argument claims that resemblance nominalism should be rejected because it entails the existence of an infinite series of resemblance relations.
5. **McTaggart’s Argument against the Reality of Time (the Regress of Temporal Properties):** This argument claims that time must be unreal, because the reality of time requires an infinite series of ever more complex temporal properties (for example, the presentness of e, the presentness of the presentness of e, and so on).

6. **The Truth Regress:** P entails that it is true that P, which in turn entails that it is true that it is true that P, and so on. Unlike the previous cases, no one claims that this regress is vicious, so no infinite regress argument has been advanced based on this regress.

In the first five of these cases, an important philosophical argument hinges on the claim that the infinite regress in question is ‘vicious’. But those who advance these arguments are rarely clear about what would make a regress vicious.

There seem to be at least three main ways that an infinite regress might be problematic (perhaps there are more, but these are the three obvious ways). The three problems are: metaphysical impossibility, extreme implausibility, and explanatory failure.¹ Let us discuss these in turn.

### 13.2 Viciousness through metaphysical impossibility

Let us begin with the problem of *metaphysical impossibility*. This is the alleged problem that motivates the Cosmological Argument. It is said that an infinite regress of causes is metaphysically impossible, either because it is in principle impossible to complete an infinite series, or because it is impossible for there to be an ‘actual infinity’.

My account of metaphysically impossible infinities is by now familiar; I have nothing substantive to add to it here. On my account, an infinite regress would be vicious by virtue of a metaphysically impossible form of infinity only if it somehow implicated an infinite natural intensive magnitude. No such impossibility is involved in the regress of causes. The infinite series of causes would be an example of infinite *cardinality* (infinitely many causes). If we assume that each cause must have at least some minimum duration and that the causes are sequentially arranged,

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¹ This taxonomy draws on the work of Nolan (2001) and Bliss (2013). Nolan recognizes four problems that infinite regresses may have: contradiction, failure of intended reduction, conflict with the known finitude of a domain, and quantitative extravagance. The first corresponds (but only loosely) to my category of metaphysical impossibility, the second to my category of explanatory failure, and the third and fourth to my category of implausibility. Bliss emphasizes the problem of explanatory failure.