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Jan Willem Wieland: *Infinite Regress Arguments*

Springer Briefs in Philosophy. Springer Verlag, Cham, Heidelberg, New York, Dordrecht, London, 2014, vi + 68 pp, Softcover €53.49; £44.99; $54.99, ISBN: 978-3-319-06205-1

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This compact booklet addresses informal logical aspects of infinite regress arguments. We know what infinite regress arguments are from such examples as Plato's Third Man problem. It is presented here for tradition sake in its original formulation, where for convenience 'man' does duty for 'human being'. Plato's theory of abstract Ideas or Forms, in order to explain how it is that Phaedo and Meno are both men, posits their belonging to, participating in or falling under a higher ideal abstract universal Man. The theory thereby takes the first irreversible step toward an infinite regress of ideal abstract universal men of increasingly higher order, beginning with the third MAN, for which there seems to be no legitimating explanatory rationale. A further example, to have several on hand, is the infinite regress that occurs on the assumption that every occurrent event has a temporally prior cause, or, simply, that every event has a cause that is also an event. The logical structure, classification of types of infinite regress arguments, along with their argumentative and polemical rhetorical force, are among the topics one hopes to find in a short treatise or practical manual on the category of infinite regress arguments. It is much the same objective as Claude Gratton's 2009 book, also titled *Infinite Regress Arguments*, but with greater leg-room at 224 pages.

Some of these desiderata are addressed by Jan Willem Wieland, but there are also regrettable omissions and some apparent mistakes of theory, interpretation and application that mar the book's overall impression and potential usefulness. To preview one lacuna, Wieland often says that a certain form of infinite regress reasoning is *absurd*, but he does not say *why*. He does not say whether it is because all infinite regresses are self-contradictory, or because there is a kind of infinite

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regress that is self-contradictory or otherwise absurd, to which the argument in question belongs, while other kinds of infinite regress might be logically unobjectionable, potentially even valuable. We might think in these positive terms of the infinite regress of successor function applications to products of the function under an induction in the Dedekind-Peano axioms for elementary arithmetic. The infinite regress reasoning of mathematical induction proves many important theorems that we should be loathe to leave unsupported by deductively valid derivation, just as it gives us the natural numbers in a recursive iteration, with 0 as basis, $\ldots S(S(S(0)))\ldots = \{1, 2, 3, \ldots\}$. If all infinite regress reasoning is absurd, then the foundations of mathematics must expect to suffer serious amputation.

Wieland, remarkably, evinces no awareness of the need to distinguish, crudely speaking, good from bad infinite regresses, although he recognizes the existence of both constructive and destructive applications. The book is nevertheless sorely lacking a solid theoretical ground for exactly this conceptual distinction. Since Wieland offers a menu of services that infinite regress thinking is supposed to be able to provide to argument and argumentation theory. Early in the discussion (1.4), he asks: 'What can one do with an IRA [infinite regress argument]? It is often thought that an IRA can be employed as a negative, destructive weapon against one's opponent's views…But there are positive, constructive goals as well. For example, Aristotle uses an IRA in order to demonstrate the necessity of a highest good…' (6). Wieland, however, does not inquire into how it is that the same argument form can be constructively and destructively deployed, that some but not all infinite regresses are in some unspecified sense absurd, or whether there must not be some systematic basis for accepting some kinds of infinite regress and for rejecting others. The criteria needed to support the two-edged sword of infinite regress arguments, and the understanding of why some are constructive and others destructive is just what an argumentation approach to infinite regress reasoning ought to provide, but are unfortunately nowhere to be found in Wieland's monograph. Nor are any suggestions ventured generalizing the kinds of assumptions from which an infinite regress is supposed to sprout, or the resulting internal logical structures that might be distinctive of infinite regress, both philosophically objectionable and unobjectionable.

Concerned that physical space might be bounded, Lucretius, in his first century BC didactic Stoic-inspired poem, *De Rerum Natura*, offers the argument that a javelin thrown at the hypothetical boundary of space would either be blocked, implying something in a space beyond it, by which the projectile is stopped, or continue through and beyond the supposed boundary, implying that it is no boundary at all. That offers an infinite regress argument for the infinite geometrical dimensions of space that, although certainly contemporary cosmologists do not accept, is in any case a constructive rather than destructive application of infinite regress reasoning. It is hard to see how an infinite regress could ever be used constructively except by refuting another competing proposition. Wieland does not consider the possible reciprocity in larger scale argument structures by which an infinite regress accomplishes a constructive purpose by first engineering the destruction of a competing proposition, or the reverse. This nexus, overlooked in any detail by Wieland, is presumably where the real interest in managing infinite regress reasoning resides.

There is much to admire in Wieland's book, but in the interests of space for purposes of this review, I am going to concentrate on some of the reservations I had concerning the book's design. There are five chapters, concerning which, Wieland explains:

- Chapter 1 [Introduction] introduces the topic, presents an overview of classic IRAs, and explains what we should expect from theories about IRAs.
- Chapters 2 [The Paradox Theory] and 3 [The Failure Theory] summarize two theories of IRAs that have been presented in the literature: namely The Paradox Theory and the Failure Theory.
- Chapters 4 [Case Study: Carroll's Tortoise] and 5 [Case Study: Access and the Shirker Problem] concern two case studies which illustrate the general insights about IRAs presented in the previous chapters in some detail. (1).

Wieland characterizes the study as metaphilosophical, by which he means that it is about how philosophers [only?] *can* and *should* proceed in their inquiries. 'Indeed, Wieland continues, 'what steps can and should philosophers [only?] take to defend their views?' There follows a howling *non sequitur* and a strange qualification: 'IRAs, then, are arguably one of the main philosophical argumentation techniques (that is, next to thought experiments)' (1). Wieland concludes the overview with this succinct statement of purpose:

> The book's ultimate aim is to make a difference to the philosopher's [only?] practice. Particularly, the hope is that from now on disputes about any particular IRA (concerning what it establishes, or concerning whether it can be resisted) will be more clearly motivated, and indeed more clearly framed, in terms of the guidelines outlined in what follows. (1).

One question to ask of Wieland's five chapters is accordingly whether or not the discussion of infinite regress arguments in the end satisfies these objectives. Since argument patterns are the common property of philosophers and non-philosophers with a stake in the outcomes of reasoning methods alike, it is peculiar for Wieland repeatedly to target *philosophers* and *philosophical* argument, and to describe the project as *meta-philosophical*, in the sense of laying out the possibilities and norms for arguing by means of infinite regress, rather than a topic of more general argumentation or meta-argumentation theory. The topic so construed is understood more universally as a matter of logic for all, and not just for philosophers, even if the logic of choice for such discourse analysis is informal rather than symbolic mathematical logic. Whether construed as directed exclusively or only primarily in the first instance to philosophers, there are more substantive difficulties in Wieland's theory of infinite regress arguments.

We are not off to a stunningly good start already beginning on page 2 and following, where Wieland confuses the problem of the criterion with the sufficient reason model of epistemic justification. This is the second of Wieland's two introductory examples of infinite regress reasoning, to the first of which we shall

return in due course. The sufficient reason model says that for every true proposition there is a sufficient explanation of its truth in the form of another true proposition. This is certainly infinitely regressive, but it is not the infinite regress of the problem of the criterion, because the problem of the criterion is not infinitely regressive but viciously circular. The difference is clear already in the terminology by which the problem of the criterion is designated in early sources as the *diallelus* or wheel, precisely because of the circularity it engenders. The difficulty, as Sextus Empiricus remarks in the passage Wieland quotes (on his page 2) from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, also makes this perfectly obvious in his formulation of the problem interpreted as a dilemma in its first horn. The problem is that to know whether a proposition is true we must consult a correct general principle, while a general principle is judged correct from among all the principles that might clamor for acceptance if and only if it implies all and only true propositions. That is a skeptical challenge, because it suggests that knowledge needs impossibly to bootstrap itself at once with all correct principles and all propositional truths. Sextus merely remarks in the second horn that if we then try to justify a choice of criterion by appeal to another criterion, then we are launched on an infinite criteriological regress. Even if that is right, it is not part of the problem of the criterion itself, but only a counter-consideration that seems to force epistemology into the jaws of the problem of the criterion properly construed in the dilemma's first horn.

Strangely, then, Wieland remarks offstage in footnote 2, p. 3: 'Actually, the Problem of the Criterion might also involve a *circularity*, rather than a regress. In that case, you prove that c1 correctly determines what is true and what is not by showing that it predicts the right results. Here, you already know what is true and what is not, and so whether p is true or not. This is circular, for we started from the situation where you still have to decide whether proposition p is true.' Wieland comes closest to the problem of the criterion here than elsewhere in the main body of the chapter. However, Wieland in footnote 2 misleadingly states, 'the problem of the criterion *might also* involve a circularity, rather than a regress' (emphasis added). It not only *might*, but it *does*. Wieland *cites* but does not seem to have consulted Roderick M. Chisholm's discussion in his 1982 collection, *The Foundations of Knowing*, including his 1973 Marquette University Thomas Aquinas lecture, *The Problem of the Criterion*. There Chisholm offers the problem explicitly and exclusively as a vicious circle to be broken in order to protect knowledge from a corrosive universal skepticism. It is also right there in the first part of the passage that Wieland quotes from Sextus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. The confusion on Wieland's part seems to lodge between the problem of the criterion, which as he acknowledges obscurely in his footnote, is a problem of circularity rather than infinite regress. The *diallelus* completes its dirty business in no more than one full cycle when the second half of the arc from truths to correct principles and correct principles to truths is closed. *That* is the problem of the criterion, as Chisholm takes it from Michel de Montaigne's (1576) *Defense of Raymond Sebond*.

The sufficient reason model of justification is infinitely regressive, but to my knowledge, although there are arguments in support of the principle, there are no courageous interpretations of sufficient reason, and specifically the infinite regress of justifications that the model implies, as an argument for or against any other

position. Unless we are willing to countenance a category of self-construction, the infinitely regressive reasoning of the sufficient reason model in epistemology does not seem to serve any further constructive or destructive argumentative purposes. That every true proposition is justified is infinitely regressive. But so what? The same is true of the Dedekind-Peano successor function +1(__), again, applied to each successive distinct product under recursive operation, and few complaints are raised. The principle of sufficient reason is accepted by G.W. von Leibniz, Arthur Schopenhauer, and such respected more recent thinkers as A.J. Ayer. If not by all or even by more, that is just the way of philosophy, where majority opinion counts for little to nothing anyway. Wieland's point here seems to boil down to saying that certain kinds of disputes about facts and principles can continue indefinitely. To that we might all numbly nod assent, but that is not the problem of the criterion, and the misnomer here does a glaring disservice to received terminology.

Wieland's first example is a problem of regressive guarding of potentially untrustworthy persons. I could not get very excited about the example, and I will say why in more compact terms than I have lavished on Wieland's second example. Wieland introduces the problem as inspired by the Roman poet Juvenal's question: Who will guard the guardians? Wieland begins: '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' (2). This *would* be a bad solution, to be sure, but *only* if the solution was to hire a new and different guard to guard every other previously hired guard. Who imagines that anyone would do *that*? Juvenal evokes trust where paranoia leads to irrational choices. There is nothing in Wieland's statement of the 'regress' to commit anyone cognitively challenged enough to adopt such a solution on the basis of Wieland's assumptions to an infinite regress of guard hirings. What always happens when those with power who do not trust others is to have a finite number of guards guard each other, preferably without any of them ever learning that A is guarding B and B is guarding C while C is guarding A. The infinite regress that Wieland describes in this first of his two examples is so easily defeated by the practicalities of a loop or circle rather than infinite regress of guardians that one wonders if it could ever be taken seriously as an argument form for generating a genuine infinite regress.

Wieland offers a second way in which Juvenal's 'question could be spelled out in two different ways' (2). The second way Wieland presents informally by means of this thought experiment:

> 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. (2).

Certainly, if you suppose (but why on earth would you?) that all unreliable persons are guarded by a guardian, and you put at least one guard on the job, then you engender an infinite regress of unreliable guards. Reliable or otherwise, the

logical problem here is all about the infinite string of guards. Once again, a genuine infinite regress is unmotivated in Wieland's example, if some of a finite number of unreliable guards can be made unreliably to guard each other. After all, they need not be completely unreliable one hundred percent of the time and in every respect. *If* Wieland patches up the example, pleads enthymematic license or the like, as is his right, by specifying that there must always be a new and different individual guard set to guard the last guard hired, *then* there is regress. Wieland, however, does not say this, and, more disappointingly, he has not said enough to explain why such a situation is supposed to be *absurd*. It would be so, perhaps, against the background assumption that *any* infinite regress is absurd, or more particularly that logically or physically there cannot be an actual infinite regress of such spatiotemporal entities as unreliable *guards*. Wieland is then maneuvered into a difficult dilemma. He cannot say that all infinite regresses are absurd, or he would have to admit that the infinite regress of natural numbers engendered by the Dedekind-Peano successor function is absurd. If Wieland then backs away from a general ban on all infinite regresses as universally absurd, making a special case for the impossibility of physical spatiotemporal entities in infinite regress, then he exposes his principle of distinction to the charge that it is ad hoc.

On the whole, Wieland speaks all too freely of the absurdity of infinite regresses in particular categories, when he gets his hands on one. Which he never explains, and whose fundamental logic, formally or otherwise, he does not choose to examine. Wieland §1.3 Overview of Classic Cases (4–6) *says* without attempt at justification, infinitely regressive or not, that numerous regresses are such that, in Wieland's repeated phrase, 'This yields a regress that is absurd.' The expression appears in five of Wieland's twelve 'classic cases', and in other instances may be implied when he says only, as though that were criticism enough, 'Regress'. It is possible, but a problem arising again from Wieland's inexact distinctions, that he means contextually for these regresses also to be considered in the same sadly unexplained sense 'absurd'. If Wieland does not dismiss all regresses, overlooking the integers and other useful infinite regresses produced from modest input by infinitely regressive ideal function applications, then there must be a difference between 'Regress' and 'Absurd regress' or 'Regress that is absurd'. On examination, the 'Regress' cases do not appear structurally much different than the cases of which Wieland writes, 'This yields a regress that is absurd'.

Why, to rewind a few frames, are *any* of Wieland's classic cases supposed to involve *absurd* infinite regresses? Take Plato's Third Man, justly deserving attention in this connection as Wieland's first choice of classic case. If individual flesh and blood human beings are all human beings, men in the generic intended gender-neutral sense, by virtue of participating in or imitating or striving to approximate an ideal abstract Platonic Idea or Form of Man, then to account for the fact that all the flesh and blood men AND the ideal abstract Platonic Idea or Form of Man are also in some presumably more comprehensive sense a man, there must be a yet higher ideal abstract Platonic Idea or Form of MAN, to which Man and all the individual flesh and blood men belong, and by virtue of which they are all men. What is absurd about that? The problem historically is not one of internal incoherence implied by Plato's Third Man, but rather collision with Ockham's

Razor as the principle that entities ought not to be multiplied beyond explanatory necessity. The question of whether or not there is an explanatory necessity for the infinite regress of Platonic Ideas implied by the Third Man rather depends on what kinds of things you are trying to explain and what other resources might be available to explain the same phenomena equally well but without appeal to the existence of abstract universals. The Platonist, in my opinion, and as I have argued elsewhere (Jacquette, 'Axiom of Infinity and Plato's Third Man', *Russell: The Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies*, 30, 2010, 5–13), can answer the demand of Ockham's Razor for explanatory relevance in several ways.

Taking inspiration from the motto above Plato's Academy, we are popularly told, Let No One Ignorant of Mathematics Enter Here, we can justify the infinite regress of Plato's Third Man on the grounds that it thereby serves as an actual infinity onto which other mathematical sets and series can be one–one mapped, once their functions are defined in the philosophical foundations of mathematics. Besides, it should be enough merely to reply that at every plateau of the infinite regress of the Third Man there is indeed an explanatory need for the next higher-order ideal abstract man in ascent, because there is no other way to explain how it is that a certain set of existent individuals share a putatively universal property that makes them all entities of a particular specific kind. Why should such an answer not be good enough for Ockham? Ockham's own answer, historically speaking, is to shave Plato's beard down to the follicles by explaining what Plato's theory of Ideas proposes to explain in another way.

Ockham substitutes the *naming* of things, hence his nominalism, based on shared mental concepts of the things, hence his conceptualism. Naming alone, that sort of bare-knuckle nominalism, does not really serve, because one always wants to know why just these things should be singled out for inclusion under a particular predicate term. Bare-knuckle nominalists sometimes feign as though all naming is conventional anyway, but in practice they rely on the same distinctions including some things and excluding others that Platonic realists consider to be rooted in the archetypal Platonic Ideas of things. Appealing to concepts as a basis for naming *sans* universals is better than bare-knuckle nominalism, *except* for the problem that concepts are subjective.

To say that different linguistically competent psychological subjects have the same concept cannot mean much more than that they use the same language to talk about their distinct intersubjectively impenetrable concepts. It is a language that we nevertheless learn from one another, and there is never in the nature of the case any possible direct comparison of concepts themselves as experienced and put into play by different thinkers. Inquiry shunning subjectivity is thereby thrown back onto the objectivity of names alone, the real-time concrete utterances and inscriptions of designators by which common concepts are supposed to be named, and more generally to the language of concepts and concept description rather than to the concepts themselves. Since their potentially distinct subjective contents cannot be compared within any single consciousness, except through consideration of shared language use, a conceptualist nominalism like Ockham's, here crudely so characterized, does not offer a solid foundation for theory-building in metaphysics, even when compared with bare-knuckle nominalism.

What Ockham's conceptualism does add to bare-knuckle nominalism is further freighted with difficulties of its own. If the number 9 is a concept, and if concepts are psychological phenomena, as Ockham explicitly holds, then if one person is thinking that $9 = 3(3)$ and another is thinking that $9 = 18/2$, they are actually thinking about different number 9s, the ones residing respectively among their distinct concepts in their distinct subjective psychologies. The same is true even if both think at any time, $9 = 3(3)$, or if both think at any time $9 = 18/2$, or, of course, anything else one likes, true or false, *about* the number 9. According to conceptualism, there must be as many different number 9s as there are persons who have a distinct episodic concept or conceptualization of what are otherwise called *the* number 9, who have that commonly singly *named* concept in their thoughts.

There must be unlimitedly many different 9s, which, like concepts generally, cannot be all laid out on a table for public comparison, but are the possession of a single conceptual subjectivity in the case of every individual linguistically competent thinker. The concepts cannot be judged in their own terms beyond comparison of their linguistic expressions. This takes us back from thing to name for thing, and hence back to bare-knuckle nominalism.

Wieland sets store by a distinction between two different purposes of infinite regress arguments. He calls these the Paradox Theory and the Failure Theory. On reflection, I could not detect that much difference between them. Wieland says of the Paradox Theory: 'According to this theory, the goal of an IRA is to refute a proposition' (11). We let pass that this is true of many other argument forms, and that infinite regresses when they have this force might better be understood as filling one vital moment in a *reductio ad absurdum* inference. Nor shall we place any weight on the fact that propositions can and often are refuted without benefit of paradox, paradox in the sense of logical antinomy being a rather extreme case for the logically unwary. The Failure Theory, supposedly in contrast, Wieland explains as having the goal of showing 'that a solution fails to solve a given problem' (21).

Wieland does not aid the cause by explaining what he must consider to be the difference between a solution and a proposition. Often, a solution to the kinds of philosophical problem that Wieland seems to have specifically in mind takes the form of or can be readily expressed as a proposition, even if the solution to a problem is formulated as something like an instruction to replace the washers in a faucet as a solution to the problem of its dripping. If a proposition is offered as a solution to a problem, and the solution fails for intrinsic reasons, then it may in all likelihood be a result of the fact that the proposition is false. The failure of the solution in that kind of case on these assumptions is then proof that the proposition is false. If I venture the opinion that your faucet will stop dripping if you replace the washers, and you do so with the proper size and thickness of washer, using the right tools and techniques, but the dripping continues, then the proposition that your faucet will stop dripping if you replace the washers will have been proven false by the fact that what was proposed fails as a solution to the problem of fixing the drip.

With that wrenching tight a conceptual connection between what Wieland calls the Paradox Theory and the Failure Theory it is astonishing that Wieland does not look into the question of whether there are really two theories, or if one is subsumed

by another still with its own characteristics, or if one is reducible to the other as a special case. He merely presents the two as though he had found two kinds of shells on the beach, and did not ask whether they belonged to different species or different life cycles of the same marine animal. I do not know offhand what the answers to any of these questions are, but I would have liked to have seen in a study on the general topic of infinite regress arguments considerably more about these distinctions and how they stand up under critical scrutiny, whether they are as distinct and discrete as Wieland seems to suppose. If they are not that, then it would be important to have a clear understanding of why Wieland puts forward these two categories. It is not clear from surrounding text, for example, how Wieland thinks of the two kinds of theories of infinite regress arguments as generating either paradox or failure, perhaps in a choice of axioms.

We should not lose sight of the integers and the Dedekind-Peano successor function in elementary arithmetic as generating an infinite regress of numbers without which mathematics would be impoverished in the extreme. What, then, is the infinite regress of integers and the infinite regress argument by which it is supported—a paradox or a failure? Why suppose that it is either? Infinite regress reasoning it nevertheless manifestly is. Wieland seems to think that infinite regress is always a bad thing, but a bad thing of one supposedly distinct type rather than another. We have nevertheless also already quoted Wieland as endorsing the commonsense observation that infinite regress argumentation can in principle be put to constructive or destructive argumentative ends. Unfortunately, he does not inform us schematically how to do this. Finding a *paradox* is one way of arguing *failure* of a purported solution, and the only sort of *failure* that Wieland attributions to the implication of an infinite regress is that of supporting unspecified unarticulated *paradox*.

The paradoxes in question, one supposes, must generally arise against the background assumption that Wieland nowhere investigates or so much as mentions, that infinite regresses, at least of certain kinds of things, mathematical entities among others excepted, are in some again regrettably unspecified sense, supposed to be impossible. Why this should be the case, if an argument for such sweeping metaphysics can be made, is a topic that Wieland does not examine. Despite Wieland's neglect of the problem, the implication of there existing this or that infinite regress is absolutely essential to his taxonomy of infinite regress arguments, and as such to the theoretical structure he wants to impose on the data of instances of the relevant inference forms. This is why the guard regress and so-called regressive problem of the criterion do not enlist the reader's sympathy, because they are too easily answered as weak arguments.

To have demonstrated what an infinite regress argument can and cannot do in any of these two introductory examples, Wieland in the applications would have needed to explain what follows after the alleged identification of an infinite regress in the chain of unreliable guards with always a new and different guard guarding the previously hired guard. The assumptions that take us to this point in the example are so unbelievable, and the way out of the problem is so easily seen, to a degree that takes away any interest either in arguing in this fashion or in bothering to prepare defenses against this kind of argument, in the highly unlikely event that there should

ever be a confrontation. There is no paradox, and that is just the failure, but it is the failure of Wieland's example of infinite regress reasoning, not of the outcome of any particular species of infinite regress inference.

A slender book on infinite regress arguments is a desired addition to the argumentation literature. There are unfortunately so many difficulties in the consideration of infinite regress reasoning offered here, that is hard in good conscience to recommend the book to students or professional researchers in argumentation theory. There are disconcerting omissions of topics without which one cannot understand whether or not there is anything common to infinite regress reasoning, whether or not all regress reasoning is absurd, and if so in what sense of any of these terms such categorizations are intended, difficulties in the conception and execution of the author's blueprint for the book, or even what in many instances the author is trying to say, a confusing cross-hatching of distinctions among kinds of infinite regress arguments, before it has even been explained exactly what kind of logical structure an infinite regress argument is supposed to have, a clarification for which the reader waits in vain.