

Vicious Infinite Regress

A vicious infinite regress occurs when an explanation is offered to solve some problem (e.g. in philosophy) and the very same problem recurs within the proposed explanation (though, at first, this defect might not be obvious). If one then tries to solve the recurrence of the problem by means of another iteration of the same explanation, the problem, obviously, will recur yet again. If one tries to continue along the same lines, the initial problem will recur infinitely and will never be solved. Thus, if an explanation leads to a vicious infinite regress, it is a failed explanation.

An example of a philosopher attacking a proposed explanation because it leads to a vicious infinite regress occurs in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein was attacking a kind of explanation sometimes offered in philosophy of language and philosophy of mind. He writes:

A: How is he to know what color he is to pick out when he hears "red"?

B: Quite simple: he is to take the color whose image occurs to him when he hears the word.

A: But how is he to know which color it is "whose image occurs to him"? Is a further criterion needed for that?[†]

A great deal is implied in this compressed dialogue, so I shall attempt to make the reasoning and the ultimate point behind it more explicit.

To begin, we note that we normally have no problem identifying those things to which we can correctly apply the word "red". That is, we can apply this word or concept with little difficulty. But a philosopher might ask *how* we are able to identify those things to which the concept "red" properly applies.[‡]

Some philosophers (such as *B* in the dialogue above) might be tempted to say that we have a sort of mental picture of the color red that serves as a kind of authoritative "sample" to which we can compare objects in the world in order to see if the term "red" can be properly applied to them. The idea is that one checks to see if the object in the physical world "matches up" with the canonical "sample" of redness in one's mind—just as one might compare a swatch of fabric with a bolt of cloth to see if they match up. Thus, if an object matches the color of the mental image of red, it is red; if it does not, then it is not.

While this kind of explanation might initially seem promising, Wittgenstein shows that if we press the explanation it leads to a vicious infinite regress. For *B* has tried to explain how one can identify objects to which the word "red" applies by claiming that one can make use of a mental image as a guide, as one's criterion for picking out red things. But then the same problem reemerges with respect to this explanation. For we can ask: How can one know that that "mental color sample" is the color to which the word "red" refers? Thus, we are stuck with the same problem all over again, so we don't yet have a good explanation. Yet if we try to remedy this situation by coming up with some further criterion in relation to which we can assess our "mental color sample" the same question will obviously arise a third time—i.e. in relation to this new criterion. It seems we are embarked on a vicious infinite regress. Thus, Wittgenstein concludes, the proposed explanation doesn't do any work, it doesn't explain anything.

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[†] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, §239 (3rd ed. 1958) (I have modified the quotation slightly—i.e. by formatting the sentences as a dialogue between two persons (i.e. *A* and *B*) and using the American spelling for the word "color").

[‡] The problem here has nothing to do with questions about the biological mechanism of color perception or the impairment of that mechanism in, say, cases of color blindness. Nor does the issue have to do with problematic observation conditions, such as poor lighting. Rather, the problem is a general philosophical one and presupposes that none of these more mundane problems is in play.