1. Circularity

In what follows, I shall tell a story of circularity. It pertains to a central hypothesis in Dead Sea Scrolls research, known as the Qumran-Essene hypothesis. My concern is with the explanatory power and value of circular explanations. In particular, I shall ask whether explanatory circles must be “vicious”; might not a circle, under certain conditions, be “benign,” or even charmed?

The circle I shall examine combines three distinct sets of sources:

(1) The corpus of the Dead Sea scrolls—primary textual source.
(2) The archaeological site of Qumran—material source.
(3) Contemporary historical testimony, namely the writings of Philo, Pliny the Elder and Flavius Josephus—secondary textual source.

Given the context, participants and audience of the present volume, I shall consider myself exempt from the need to provide background information about these three sources. Let me therefore plunge straight in, with a passage from Roland De Vaux’s book (1973):

If the writings of Qumran exhibit certain points of resemblance to what is known from other sources about the Essenes, and if the ruins of Qumran correspond to what Pliny tells us about the dwelling-place of the Essenes, his evidence can be accepted as true. And this evidence in its turn serves to confirm that the community was Essene in character.

Reading this passage more than once can make you giddy. If you sniff circularity here, consider De Vaux’s own comment on the passage just

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1 The material here presented is based on my book, Out of the Cave: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Dead Sea Scrolls (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006).
quoted: “This is no vicious circle, but rather an argument by convergence, culminating in that kind of certitude with which the historian of ancient times often has to content himself.”

Compare De Vaux’s assertion with what Flusser said, more recently: “In the early days of scroll research, Josephus served as a guide to understanding the scrolls, but nowadays the scrolls help us understand what Josephus says about the Essenes.” Lawrence Schiffman is more blunt: “Scholars used the material from Philo, Josephus, and Pliny as a means of interpreting the scrolls and vice versa, thus giving rise to a circular process.” Some scholars write as if the three ancient sources can be “both supplemented and corrected by recourse to the texts discovered in the Qumran caves.”

The move these scholars describe seems to be roughly the following:

1. We believe what the first century historians tell us about the Essenes;
2. We notice striking points of surface similarity between what the historians tell us, on the one hand, and the contents of some of the scrolls (mostly, but not only, the Rule of the Community), on the other;
3. On the basis of this similarity we surmise that the scrolls are Essene;
4. We then begin to notice some discrepancies between the two sets of texts (as well as within each corpus) and we conclude that the historians might not be entirely accurate;
5. Finally, we complement the historical writings and correct them, in light of the scrolls.

Are we in wonderland? Is the situation inherently circular? And if it is, can we tell whether it involves a vicious, or illegitimate circle, or perhaps a benign one? In order to be in a better position to respond to these questions, we had better examine the logic of De Vaux’s “argu-

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1 De Vaux, ibid.