

Module 6: Reliabilism

1. Introduction

We have somewhat of an intuitive understanding of the *belief-formation processes* that are reliable and those that are unreliable. Beliefs formed on the basis of *perception* and *good reasoning* are thought to be more reliable than those formed beliefs formed on the basis of *loose reasoning* and *mere guesswork*. The former process has a characteristic that the latter does not. It is **reliable** insofar as the former is less likely to produce error than the latter. Theories that use the reliability of a belief-formation process to say whether *S*'s belief that *p* is epistemically justified are called reliabilistic theories of epistemic justification.

2. The Theory

Consider the most basic version of reliabilism.

p is epistemically justified for *S* = Df. (1) *S* believes that *p* and (2) *p* is formed by a belief-formation process that generally produces (or tends to produce) true beliefs rather than false beliefs.¹

There are a couple advantages to this theory.

- (i) Unlike **classical foundationalism**, it is not necessary that *p* be infallible or derived from an infallible belief in order to be epistemically justified. Such a requirement is *too strong*.
- (ii) Unlike **coherentism** it takes into account the role of both *non-doxastic* and *doxastic* beliefs as a source of justification. Reasoning and appealing to other relevant beliefs is a form of doxastic justification, yet *perception* is a form of non-doxastic justification.
- (iii) The theory gives us a **straightforward account** of what it means for a belief to be epistemically justified. A belief is *epistemically justified* provided it is formed on the basis of a reliable belief-formation processes. It is not justified if it is formed on the basis of unreliable belief-formation processes.

¹ In order for a belief to be reliable, it is not necessary that I know that it is reliable or that I know that it is formed by a reliable process. **All that is necessary is that the belief actually is formed by a reliable process.** For example, after carefully and extensively examining a particular liquid, running it through countless of known tests, and guarding the specimen day and night, I determine that it is H₂O. This belief is justified because it was formed by a reliable belief-formation process but this does not mean that I know that the process is reliable. I may be unsure about some of the tests, and have not extensively studied all of the tests that confirm that the liquid is H₂O. Nevertheless, since the belief *was* formed by a reliable process, my belief that 'this liquid is H₂O' is justified.

(iv) Belief-formation processes are thought to have an important relation to (or conducive of) true beliefs, where reliable formation processes produce true beliefs and unreliable beliefs produce false beliefs.

Consider two cases.

Case #1: John goes for a walk during the day. He is in park. Right before his eyes, he sees a man run up to a woman. The man shoves her to the ground, and then runs off with her purse. John runs after the man, sees the man rummage through her purse, grab a handful of money, and throw the purse in the trash. Based upon his perception, his reasoning, and his memory over the sequence of time in which the events took place, John believes that he has witnessed a robbery. Later, the mugger is caught and confesses to the crime.

Case #2: John is in a good mood. Yesterday, he met with a fortune-teller who said that he would win a million dollars today. He forms that belief that he'll be rich by the end of the day. Around lunchtime, he decides to get a bite to eat but is unsure if he has enough money. He guesses that he has over ten dollars in his pocket, but he isn't really sure. Later, John goes home, not having won a million dollars and hungry.

In case #1, we think perception, memory, and good reasoning are *reliable* processes, and say that a subject *S* has epistemic justification if and only if his/her belief was formed on the basis of these processes. In addition, we think that beliefs formed on the basis of these processes turn out to be true (more often than not).

In case #2, we think the unlikely testimony of fortune-tellers and guesses to be *unreliable* processes, and say that subject *S* does not have epistemic justification if his or her formed by said process. Beliefs formed on the basis of these processes more often than not turn out to be false (more often than not).

3. Revision the Basic Account

Our basic account of the reliability theory reads as follows:

p is epistemically justified for *S* = Df. (1) *S* believes that *p* and (2) *p* is formed by a belief-formation process that generally produces true beliefs rather than false beliefs.

This is not sufficient because we can imagine a case where (1) *S* believes that *p* and (2) *p* is formed by a belief-formation process that generally produces true beliefs, yet (3) *S*'s belief in *p* is **not epistemically justified**.

Consider a case where *S*'s belief were formed by a reliable process but there was a *more reliable process available*. For example, consider two individuals John and Mary, and they are staring at the same object. John believes the following three things:

- (i) I see a furry cat in front of me.
- (ii) I am allergic to furry cats.
- (iii) I am sneezing.

Now suppose that John did not see a cat but what he really saw was a furry collection of cat hair in the shape of a cat (gross!). Also suppose that Mary believes (ii) and (iii) but does not believe (i) since she believes:

- (iv) I see a collection of cat hair that looks like a cat in front of me.

Suppose that Mary believes (iv) because she tried to pet the object and discovered that it was just a collection of cat hair. She tells John that the object he sees is not a cat, but John ignores her claim.

On the first formulation of reliabilism, John's belief is justified since it was formed by a set of reliable processes. But, we might think that John's belief is not epistemically justified since his belief could have been formed by a *more reliable process*.

The above theory needs to be strengthened in order to make S's justification that *p* not merely depend upon the belief-formation process by which *p* was actually formed but by a particular belief process by which *p* **could be (or should)** formed.² Here is a new formulation of reliabilism:

p is epistemically justified for *S* = Df. (1) *S* believes that *p*, (2) *p* is formed by a belief-formation process *R* that generally produces true beliefs rather than false beliefs, (3) there is no other, more reliable belief-formation process *Q*, such that if *Q* was available to *S*, then *S* would believe *not-p*.

On this account, John is no longer justified in (i) because there is a more reliable belief process (trying to touch the cat) such that John if John employed this process, then John would no longer believe (i).

4. Two Objections

Let's consider some objections to the reliabilist theory and see whether or not any replies are forthcoming.

4.1 Brains in Vats and the Evil Demon Again

One objection to reliabilism is that we can imagine a situation where *S* believes *p*, *p* is formed by a belief-formation regarded as reliable, and that there is no other more reliable belief-process available to *S*, **yet *p* is not epistemically justified for *S***. This would mean that reliabilism is too weak.

Here are two, related examples. Imagine that *S* forms his/her beliefs on the basis of perception and good reasoning. However, the bulk of *S*'s experience is produced by an evil demon. Thus, *S*'s belief that, for example, her puppy exists is, while formed by a

² Goldman, Alvin. What is JB?, p.20

reliable process, not epistemically justified since it is false. In fact, *nearly* all of *S*'s beliefs are false because they are grounded on the view that they are not simulated by an evil demon. Likewise, *S* may simply be a brain in a vat of chemicals such that all of his/her perceptual experiences are simulated by electro-chemical processes. In such a case, *S* believes that *p*, *p* is formed by a reliable process, and there is no other more reliable process available to *S*, yet *S* is not epistemically justified about the source of his/her beliefs.

4.2. Unknown Reliable Processes

What if it were the case that you had a reliable belief-formation process that you didn't know about? For example, suppose that you had psychic powers or were able to communicate with an infallible being (e.g. god). Laurence Bonjour writes,

Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable (Structure of Emp. Know, p.41).

The above case is an example meets all three conditions for epistemic justification but Bonjour claims that without any evidence for or against the existence of a clairvoyant faculty, then we should not say that Norman has epistemic justification for his beliefs (even if they are reliably produced).

4.2.1 Responses

A reliabilist might argue that Norman **is justified**. Consider, for example, an alien by the name of Abnorman who has clairvoyant and heightened perceptual powers. We might say that Abnorman is justified in believing a proposition *p* about the future because of these powers. But, if Abnorman is justified, then so is Norman.

A reliabilist might also argue that Norman is **not justified**. Consider that there are a number of beliefs about *how beliefs should be formed*. Let's call these **meta-reliabilist-beliefs**. A meta-reliabilist-belief is justified just like any other belief, namely whether it is formed by a reliable process. Now consider Norman's situation. We might argue that Norman has the following meta-reliabilist-belief: I don't believe anything that I cannot somehow produce evidence for. We might say that this meta-reliabilist-belief makes Norman's belief that "the President is in New York City" unjustified because there is a more reliable belief-formation process *Q* (the meta-reliabilist-belief), such that if *Q* was available to *S*, then *S* would believe *not-p*.