

RELIABILISM, REASONS, AND DEFEAT

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The Project

Reliabilists say that the justificatory status of a belief depends on whether it is reliably formed.

- Explains justification in non-epistemic terms ☺
- Has trouble accounting for defeat ☹

Reasons Firsters say that the justificatory status of a belief depends on whether it is supported by adequate reasons.

- Handles defeat ☺
- Isn't reductive/naturalistically respectable ☹

Goal Develop a synthesis of reliabilism and the Reasons First approach—a synthesis that inherits the benefits of both approaches while avoiding their respective problems.

Reliabilism & Defeat

Simple Reliabilism An agent A's belief is justified iff it is formed by a reliable belief-forming process.

Simple Reliabilism runs into trouble when it comes to cases like:

Seeing Red Lori is gazing at a building, the exterior of which appears red. Consequently, she comes to believe RED: *The wall is red*. Just then, a generally reliable acquaintance, Sal, mentions to Lori that the architect decided to install hidden red lights angled towards the building's facade.¹

¹Chisholm (1966); Lasonen-Aarnio (2010).

Standard reliabilist response:

- Convert Simple Reliabilism into an account of *prima facie* justification
- Insist that in order to be *ultima facie* justified, a belief also needs to satisfy a 'no defeaters' condition²

But how to cash out defeat in reductive—and, in particular, reliabilist—terms? Standard answer:

Alternative Reliable Process Account (ARP) A's belief that *p* is defeated iff there is some alternative reliable or conditionally reliable belief-forming process available to A which, if it had been used in addition to the process actually used, would have resulted in A's not believing *p*.³

Problems for ARP

First problem: Yields the wrong results in cases where defeaters are defeated, e.g.:

Two-Testimony Seeing Red As before, Lori believes the wall is red, based on its appearance. And as before, Sal comes along and mentions that the architect installed hidden red lights angled at the building's exterior. But now another reliable acquaintance, Anne, comes along and provides compelling—though misleading—testimony that Sal is a compulsive liar.

²As Goldman (1986) notes, adding a 'no defeaters' clause may also help reliabilism deal with Bonjour's (1985) case of Norman.

³Goldman (1979); Lyons (2009, 2016). See also Grundmann (2009) for an approach that bears certain important similarities.

Second problem: ? raises the worry that, when properly unpacked, ARP will be circular.

- ARP allows that *conditionally reliable* process can serve as defeaters. But a conditionally reliable process cannot get you to abandon a belief all by themselves, but only given certain input beliefs.
- What epistemic status—if any—should we require of the input beliefs? Fumerton argues that they should themselves be *ultima facie* justified in order to serve as defeaters.⁴

ARP Unpacked A's belief *B* is defeated iff either:

1. There is some reliable belief-independent process that A could have used, which would have resulted in A not holding *B*, or
2. There is some conditionally reliable belief-dependent process that A could have used to process *ultima facie* justified inputs, which would have resulted in A not holding *B*.

But ARP Unpacked relies on the notion of *ultima facie* justification in its analysis of defeat.

Third problem: Yields the wrong results in cases where an agent has a reliable process available to them that they *shouldn't* use, e.g.:

Thinking About Unger Harry sees a tree in front of him; he consequently believes TREE: *There is a tree in front of me*. Harry happens to be very good at forming beliefs about what Peter Unger's 1975 time-slice would advise him to believe in any situation. Moreover, Harry has a high opinion of Unger's 1975 time-slice. Consequently, were he to realize that Unger would advise him to suspend judgment on *p*, this would lead him to suspend judgment on *p*. So if Harry had used his 'Unger Predictor', he would have come to suspend judgment regarding TREE. (Beddor 2015)

Pollock's Reasons First Framework

Core idea: A justified belief is based on undefeated reasons that support it.

⁴Cf. Goldman (1979), who argues that conditionally reliable processes only get to provide justification if they are applied to input beliefs that are *ultima facie* justified.

Fleshing this out:

Pollock represents agent's reasons with an *inference graph*: a directed graph whose nodes correspond to reasons and conclusion, and whose directed edges correspond to support relations. An *inference branch* is an ordered sequence of nodes.

Justified Belief as Undefeated Reasoning An agent's belief is *ultima facie* justified iff it is the result of an ultimately undefeated inference branch.

Q: What is it for an inference branch to be ultimately undefeated?

- A *rebutting defeater* for *p* is a *prima facie* reason to believe that *p* is false
- A *undercutting defeater* for *p* is a *prima facie* reason to believe that the nodes that support *p* do not reliably indicate the truth of *p*
- A node *n* defeats a node *n'* iff *n* either rebuts or undercuts *n'*.
- An inference branch α defeats an inference branch β iff a node of α defeats a node of β .

This gives us an account of what it takes for an inference branch to defeat another. But what we want is an account of what it is for an inference branch to be ultimately undefeated. Pollock's (1987) proposal appeals to a technical notion of *being in at a level*, defined recursively as follows:

1. All inference branches are in at level 0.
2. An inference branch α is in at a level $n + 1$ iff α is not defeated by any inference branch that is in at level n ; otherwise, α is out at level $n + 1$.

Undefeated Inference Branch An inference branch α is ultimately undefeated iff there is a level m such that for every $n \geq m$, α is in at level n .

Scorecard for Pollock's Framework

- Handles cases of defeater defeat ☹
- Isn't reductive ☹
- Without some independent story about *prima facie* reasons, the account is not predictive ☹

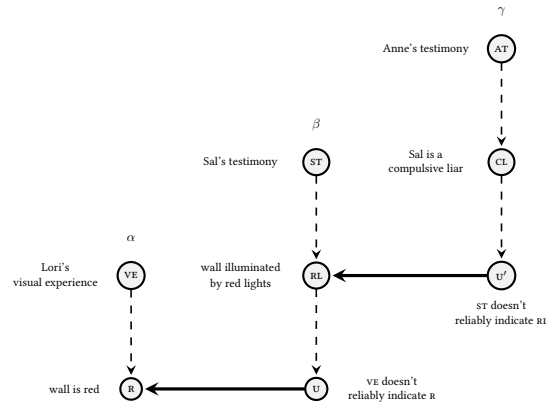


Figure 1: Two-Testimony Seeing Red

Reasons First Reliabilism

Proposal: Supplement Pollock's framework (in particular, Justified Belief as Undefeated Reasoning) with a reliabilist account of *prima facie* reasons. The account is recursive:

1. If s is a non-doxastic state of the agent A , and there is a reliable process available to A which, when given s as input, is disposed to produce a belief in p , then s is a *prima facie* reason for A to believe p .
2. If A has a *prima facie* reason to believe q , and there is some conditionally reliable process available to A which, given a belief in q as input, is disposed to produce a belief in p , then q is a *prima facie* reason for A to believe p .
3. Nothing else is a *prima facie* reason for A to believe p .

Problems Solved

Defeater Defeaters:

- Pollock's definition of an ultimately undefeated inference branch was tailored to handle cases of defeater defeat, such as **Two-Testimony Seeing Red**.

- Since Reasons First Reliabilism embraces Pollock's definition of an ultimately undefeated inference branch, it enjoys the same advantages.

Thinking about Unger:

Output of Unger Predictor is a belief about what Unger would advise Harry to believe. It's not a belief in either:

- \neg TREE
- *My (Harry's) tree-experiences do not reliably indicate the truth of TREE.*

So Output of Unger Predictor is neither a rebutting nor an undercutting defeater for Harry's belief in TREE.

Job Opening:

Unlike ARP, Reliabilist Reasons is couched in terms of *disposition* talk. But dispositions can be masked (Johnston 1992).

Suggestion: Clarence has a *testimony-believer* process available to him. This process is disposed to produce a belief in \neg HIRING, when given Victor's testimony as input. It's just that this disposition is masked by Clarence's hatred of Victor. Since masked dispositions are still dispositions, Victor's testimony provides a rebutting defeater for Clarence's belief in HIRING.

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