

Process Reliabilism

Goldman's Goals:

Give a conceptual analysis of justification that is both:

- i) Reductive – that is, it does not rely on any epistemic notions in the *analysans*.
- ii) Genuinely explanatory – i.e., it is “appropriately deep or revelatory”

Things to think about:

- On i): What terms exactly are ruled out here? What counts as an epistemic notion?
- On ii): What qualifies as a genuinely explanatory theory? What sorts of theories wouldn't make the cut?

Note: Goldman professes to be engaged in giving an analysis of justification. This might seem like he is looking for a definition of the word, “justification”. Interestingly, Goldman insists that this is not his aim:

The term, ‘justified’, I presume, is an evaluative term, a term of appraisal. Any correct definition or synonym of it would also feature evaluative terms. I assume that such definitions or synonyms might be given, but I am not interested in them. I want a set of substantive conditions that specify when a belief is justified. Compare the moral term ‘right’. This might be defined in other ethical terms or phrases, a task appropriate to metaethics. The task of normative ethics, by contrast, is to state substantive conditions for the rightness of actions. Normative ethics tries to specify non-ethical conditions that determine whether an action is right. A familiar example is act-utilitarianism, which says an action is right if and only if it produces, or would produce, at least as much net happiness as any alternative available to the agent. These necessary and sufficient conditions clearly involve no ethical notions. Analogously, I want a theory of justified belief to specify in non-epistemic terms when a belief is justified. (Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?”, p. 90)

(This distinction between a “substantive” conceptual analysis and non-substantive conceptual analysis will be relevant later in the course, when we discuss versions of ethical expressivism.)

What form will a conceptual analysis take? Goldman formulates his candidate conceptual analyses as recursive definitions, which involve (i) a base clause, (ii) a set (possibly empty) of recursive clauses, and (iii) a closure (or “that’s all”) clause.

Example: Recursive Definition of a Natural Number

- i) 0 is a natural number. (Base Clause)
- ii) If n is a natural number, then $n+1$ is a natural number (Recursive Clause)
- iii) Nothing else is a natural number. (Closure Clause)

Unsuccessful Candidate Base Clauses

A big chunk of Goldman's 1979 paper explores various candidate base clauses of justified belief. A selective overview of some candidates:

Indubitability:

If S believes p at t , and p is indubitable for S at t , then S 's belief in p at t is justified.

Goldman's objection: what sort of indubitability is at issue? If it's just psychological inability to doubt, we can imagine who holds an irrational belief dogmatically, to such a degree that they are unable to doubt the proposition in question. But this wouldn't make the belief justified.

Self-evidence:

If S believes p at t, and p is self-evident at t, then S's belief in p at t is justified.

Goldman's objection: what do you mean by "self-evident"?

- On one use of the phrase, this just means the same thing as "justified". But then clearly we won't have a reductive theory.
- On another use, p is self-evident iff it is logically impossible for someone who understands p to doubt p. But it's not clear that anything passes this standard, since arguably even logical truths can be doubted.

Incorrigibility:

If p is incorrigible for S at t, and S believes p at t, then S's belief that p is justified at t.

- Where a proposition p is incorrigible iff it's necessary that whenever anyone believes p at t, p is true (for them) at t.

Goldman's Objections:

- The case of someone who is in a brain state B that nomologically guarantees that anyone who is in it, believes she or he is in it.
- The case of Humperdink and the disjunction with 40 disjuncts.

General Diagnosis of Where Things Have Gone Wrong:

Why did all of these attempts to state a base clause fail? Goldman's diagnosis is that they left out any reference to *why* the belief is held – i.e. to the belief's basis. For Goldman, this motivates a *causal* or *historical* theory of justifiedness: in order to determine whether a belief is justified, we need to look at that belief's causal history.

So, what sort of processes lead to justified beliefs, and what sort of processes lead to unjustified beliefs? Goldman suggests that one commonality of the processes that typically lead to unjustified beliefs is that they are *unreliable*. And one commonality of the processes that lead to justified beliefs is that they are *reliable*. More generally, Goldman suggests, whether a belief is justified or not is a function of the reliability of the process that produced it.

This leads to Goldman's preferred base clause:

Reliability:

If S's believing p at t results from a reliable belief-forming process (or set of processes), then S's belief in p at t is justified.

Some questions:

- 1) How reliable does the process need to be? Goldman says that this is a vague matter. But this isn't a problem for the theory, because the concept of justification is itself vague.
- 2) What is a process? Goldman says it's a functional operation or procedure that takes you from inputs (e.g., perceptual experiences) to outputs (in this case, beliefs).

While reliabilism is often represented as the view that a belief is justified iff it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process, Goldman's official view is a bit more complicated. Goldman's official view draws a distinction between belief-independent and belief-dependent processes:

- Belief-independent process = process that doesn't take other beliefs as input (e.g., perception)
- Belief-dependent process = process that does take other beliefs as input (e.g., reasoning, inference)

Goldman's Official View

- i) If S's belief in p results from a belief-independent process that is unconditionally reliable, S's belief is justified. (**Base Clause**)
- ii) If S's belief in p results from a belief-dependent process that is conditionally reliable, and if the beliefs on which this process operates are themselves justified, then S's belief in p is justified. (**Recursive Clause**)
- iii) No other beliefs are justified. (**Closure Clause**)

Q: Why exactly does Goldman need to add clause ii)? Why isn't clause i) enough?

The Generality Problem

By now, many people have raised objections to process reliabilism. The problem that has gotten the most press in the literature is probably the *generality problem*.

- Type/token distinction:
 - A process token a concrete particular, it occurs only once on a single occasion.
 - A process type is repeatable; it is multiply instantiated
- Presumably, we are interested in assessing process types for reliability, not process tokens.

The generality problem arises because we can regard any particular belief token as the result of various different process types, and these process types might differ in their level of reliability. Conee and Feldman give the following example:

Smith looks out of a house window one sunny afternoon and sees a nearby maple tree. As a result, she forms the belief: *There is a maple tree near the house.*

How should we type the process responsible for Smith's belief? Some candidates:

- forming a belief on the basis of perception
- forming a belief on the basis of vision
- forming a belief on the basis of vision operating on a sunny day
- forming a belief about a tree on the basis of a visual experience of a tree
- forming a belief about a maple tree on the basis of a visual experience of a tree
- forming a belief about a maple tree at 2pm on a Tuesday on the basis of a visual experience of a maple tree at 2pm on Tuesday
- forming a belief on the basis of vision while wearing brown socks

We can readily imagine these differ in their levels of reliability. So which is the right one to use when evaluating Smith's belief for its level of justifiedness?

C&F lay out three adequacy conditions on any solution to the generality problem:

- a) It must be principled – i.e., it should not proceed on an ad hoc, case by case basis
- b) It must make defensible classifications – shouldn't make obviously unjustified beliefs come out as justified, or vice versa

- c) It must remain “true to the spirit of reliabilism”. In particular, it must be reductive – it must not rely on any unanalyzed epistemic terms

Why solving the generality problem is difficult...

- If you type processes too broadly, you miss out on some important epistemological distinctions (e.g., some has very good vision, but terrible hearing. If we classify their vision and hearing based beliefs as the product of “perception”, we miss out on this distinction)
- If you type processes too narrowly, the process will only be applicable to a single instance of belief formation (e.g., forming a belief about such-and-such a tree on the basis of such-and-such a visual experience formed in such-and-such circumstances at some very particular time). But then the process will either be completely reliable or completely unreliable.

Some attempts at a solution:

Psychological realism (Alston): On any given instance of belief formation, only one process is actually psychologically activated. Which process is it? We’ll leave this to cognitive science/psychology to figure out.

C&F reply: Why assume there’s a *unique* process always involved in any instance of belief formation? Perhaps multiple process types are involved. If so, we’ll still need some criterion for picking among them.

Common-sense typing (Goldman, Olsson, Jönsson): Ordinary people are more disposed to type belief-forming processes in some ways than in others. For example, if asked, “How did Smith form her belief?”, we’ll be inclined to say “vision” rather than “vision while wearing brown socks”. And so we should type processes the “common-sense” way – that is, in accordance with ordinary people’s everyday dispositions.

C&F reply: There are too many “common-sense” ways of typing processes. In many circumstances, “perception”, “vision”, and “quick and hasty scanning” would all be equally appropriate, equally common-sensical ways of typing someone’s belief-forming process. More generally, C&F argue, there is insufficient convergence among our ordinary typing-dispositions to give us a unique process type.

- Some have taken issue with this reply. Olsson (2016) draws a connection with Eleanor Rosch’s work on ordinary people’s dispositions to type various objects and animals that fall under different categories (e.g., *Labrador* vs. *dog* vs. *animal* vs. *living thing*). Rosch found a high rate of convergence on “intermediate level” concepts (e.g., *dog*). In one study, found that out of 540 respondents, 5230 to 533 converged on the same word. Perhaps something similar goes on with our patterns of typing beliefs? In support of this, Jönsson (2013) showed participants video clips in which characters arrived at various conclusions. Found participants converged on their choice of verbs for describing the belief-forming task.

The Generality Problem is Everybody’s Problem (e.g., Comesaña): Another response is to admit that the generality problem is a problem, but to insist that it is one that everyone faces. One way of motivating this: any adequate theory of justified belief is going to need to make reference to the belief’s *basis*. But there are many different ways of specifying a belief’s basis – indeed, this is just the generality problem all over again.