

# Reliabilism, Reasons, and Defeat

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# Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 The Classic Reliabilist Account of Defeat
- 3 Problems for the Classic Reliabilist Account
- 4 Pollock's Reasons First Framework
- 5 Limitations of the Reasons First Approach
- 6 Reasons First Reliabilism
- 7 Problems Solved
- 8 Conclusion

## Key Reliabilist Insight

Whether a belief is justified depends on whether it is reliably formed.

- Goldman [1979, 1986, 2012]; Kornblith [2002]; Lyons [2009]

## Major Selling Point

Gives a way of reducing epistemic properties to non-epistemic properties.

## **Threat of Defeat**

Cases where an agent's belief is formed by a reliable process, but the agent has misleading evidence that her belief is not reliably formed.

# The Reasons First Tradition

## Key Reasons First Idea

Whether a belief is justified depends on whether it is supported by adequate reasons.

- Pollock [1987, 1992, 2001]; Pollock & Cruz [1999]

## Pros

- Provides a rigorous framework for explaining defeat

## Cons

- Isn't reductive

## Reasons First Reliabilism

- Whether a belief is justified depends on whether it is supported by adequate reasons
- An agent's reasons to believe something are themselves understood in reliabilist terms (roughly, as the states that serve as inputs to reliable processes)

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## Simple Reliabilism

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



# A Simple Case of Defeat

## 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.

## Two-Factor Reliabilism

- ① An agent's belief is *prima facie* justified iff it is formed by a reliable belief-forming process.
  - ② A's belief is *ultima facie* justified iff it is both:
    - ① *prima facie* justified,
    - ② undefeated.
- 
- Goldman [1979]; Lyons [2009, 2016]

## 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  $p$ .

- Goldman [1979]; Lyons [2009, 2016]; cf. Grundmann [2009]

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## 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 ultimately misleading—testimony that Sal is a compulsive liar.

Intuitively, Anne's testimony reinstates Lori's justification for believing the wall is red.

- Cf. Lyons [2009]: 124

# Second Problem: Threat of Circularity

## Recursive Reliabilism

- 1 If A's belief (i) results from a belief-independent process that is (unconditionally) reliable, and (ii) is undefeated, then it is *ultima facie* justified.
  - 2 If A's belief (i) results from a conditionally reliable belief-dependent process that was applied to inputs that are *ultima facie* justified, and (ii) is undefeated, then it is *ultima facie* justified.
- Goldman [1979]

## Second Problem: Threat of Circularity

According to ARP, it's not just reliable processes that serve as defeaters, conditionally reliable processes do to.

But a conditionally reliable process can't lead you to drop a belief all on their own. They can only do so given certain doxastic inputs.

Presumably, these inputs need to themselves be *ultima facie* justified.

- Fumerton [1988]

# Second Problem: Threat of Circularity

## 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.



## Second Problem: Threat of Circularity

Worry: if we go with ARP Unpacked, Recursive Reliabilism is no longer reductive. After all, the base clause relies on the notion of being undefeated, but ARP explains this in terms of *ultima facie* justification.

### Recursive Reliabilism

- 1 If A's belief (i) results from a belief-independent process that is (unconditionally) reliable, and (ii) is **undefeated**, then it is *ultima facie* justified.
- 2 If A's belief (i) results from a conditionally reliable belief-dependent process that was applied to inputs that are *ultima facie* justified, and (ii) is undefeated, then it is *ultima facie* justified.

# Third Problem: Counterexamples

## 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])

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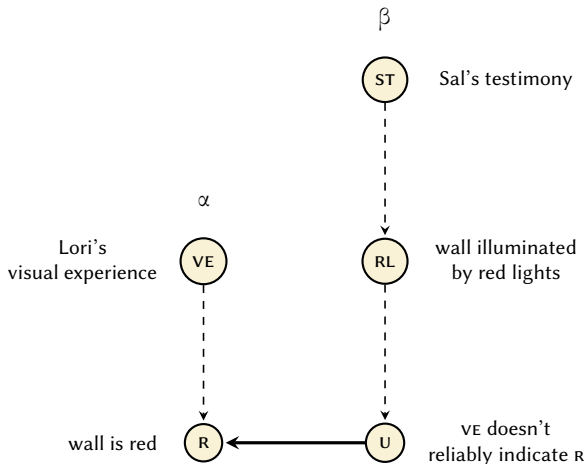
# Pollock's Reasons First Framework

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

- Pollock [1987, 1994, 1995]

Pollock represents reasons relations with *inference graphs*

# Inference Graphs



An inference graph for **Seeing Red**

## Justified Belief as Undefeated Reasoning

An agent's belief is justified iff it is the result of an ultimately undefeated inference branch.

What does it take for an inference branch to be ultimately undefeated?

# Defining Defeat

- A *rebutting defeater* for  $p$  is a *prima facie* reason to believe that  $p$  is false
- An *undercutting defeater* for  $p$  is a *prima facie* reason for believing that the nodes that support  $p$  do not reliably indicate the truth of  $p$  in the agent's present circumstances.

## Branch Defeat

An inference branch  $\alpha$  defeats an inference branch  $\beta$  iff a node of  $\alpha$  defeats a node of  $\beta$ , where a node  $n$  defeats a node  $n'$  iff  $n$  either rebuts or undercuts  $n'$ .

# Ultimately Undefeated Inference Branches

Pollock's account of an *ultimately undefeated inference branch* appeals to a technical notion of *being in at a level*, defined recursively:

## In At A Level

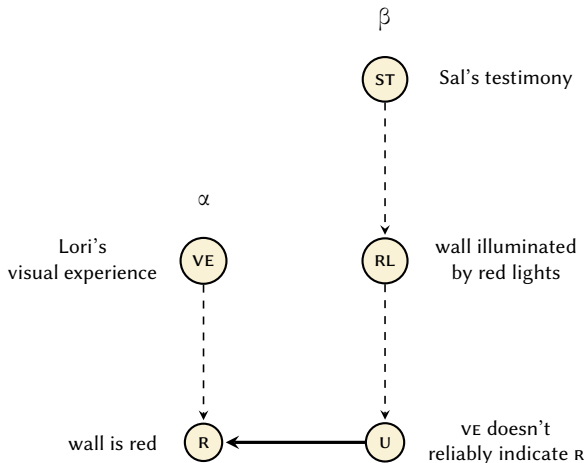
- 1 All inference branches are in at level 0.
- 2 An inference branch  $\alpha$  is in at a level  $n + 1$  iff  $\alpha$  is not defeated by any inference branch that is in at level  $n$ ; otherwise,  $\alpha$  is out at level  $n + 1$ .

## Undefeated Inference Branch

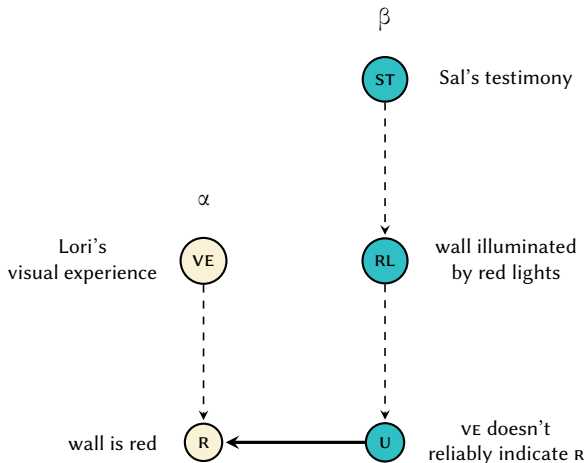
An inference branch  $\alpha$  is ultimately undefeated iff there is a level  $m$  such that for every  $n \geq m$ ,  $\alpha$  is in at level  $n$ .



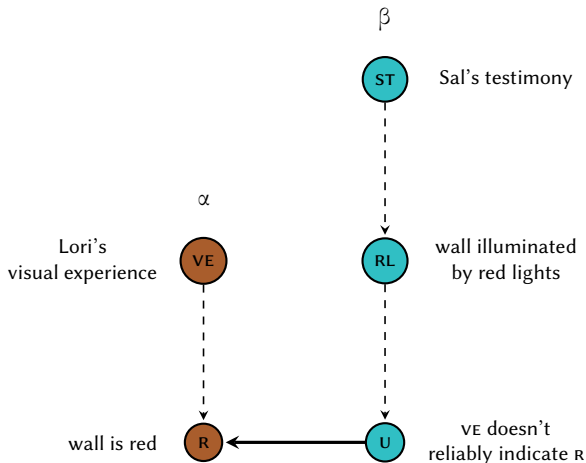
# Applied to Seeing Red



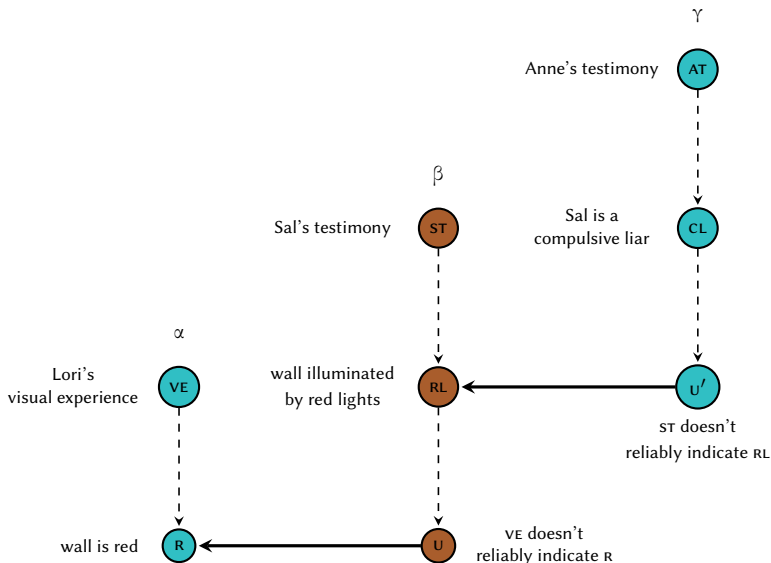
# Applied to Seeing Red



# Applied to Seeing Red



# Applied to Two-Testimony Seeing Red



Distinctive feature of Pollock's approach:

- Explains both justification and defeat in terms of a sole normative primitive: the notion of a *prima facie* reason for belief.

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## Major Drawback of Pollock's Account

Isn't reductive — explains justification in terms of the notion of *prima facie* reason for belief, which is an epistemic notion.

## Further Worry

Moreover, without some substantive story about reasons for belief—reductive or not—we won't have a genuinely *predictive* account of justification or defeat.



# Reason to Want More

**Possible Reply:** Pollock does make some remarks about the source of reasons for belief, e.g.:

- perceptual appearances
- memory
- statistical syllogism
- deduction and induction

– Pollock [1987]: 486-490

Perhaps these remarks could be used to furnish a substantive story of *prima facie* reasons for belief?

# Reason to Want More

**Worry:** This looks more like a list of *prima facie* reasons. We want a theory that explains what all *prima facie* reasons have in common.

# Looking Forward

The path ahead: Give a reliabilist account of *prima facie* reasons for belief.

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## Reliabilist Reasons

- 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  $p$ .

**Reasons First Reliabilism** = Justified Belief as Undefeated Reasoning + Reliabilist Reasons

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# Advantages over a 'Pure' Reasons First View

Reasons First Reliabilism preserves the main reliabilist selling point:

- Gives a way of reducing epistemic properties to non-epistemic properties.

# Advantages over a 'Pure' Reasons First View

Reasons First Reliabilism also provides a genuinely explanatory account of *prima facie* reasons—one that tells us what they all have in common.



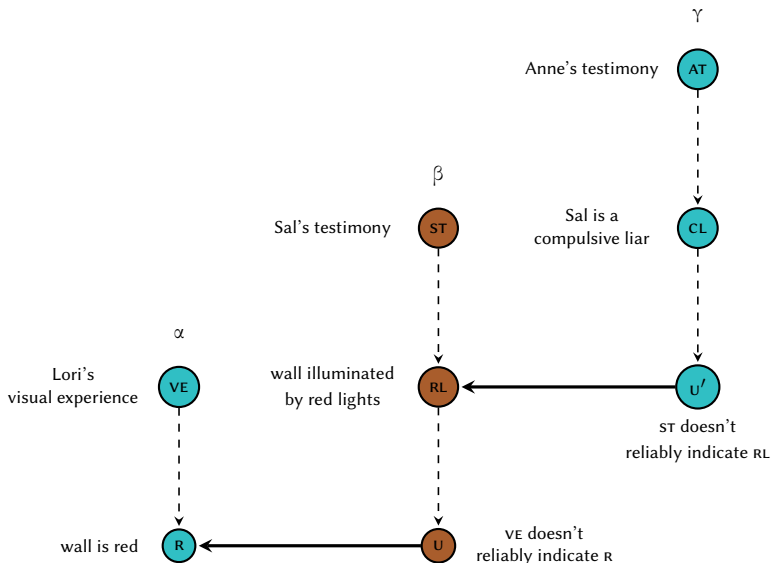
A better treatment of defeat...

Our first problem for ARP was that it delivers the wrong results in cases where defeaters are themselves defeated (e.g., **Two-Testimony Seeing Red**).

Pollock's definition of an ultimately undefeated inference branch was tailored to handle such cases.

Since Reasons First Reliabilism embraces this definition, it can enjoy the fruits of Pollock's labor.

# Defeater Defeaters

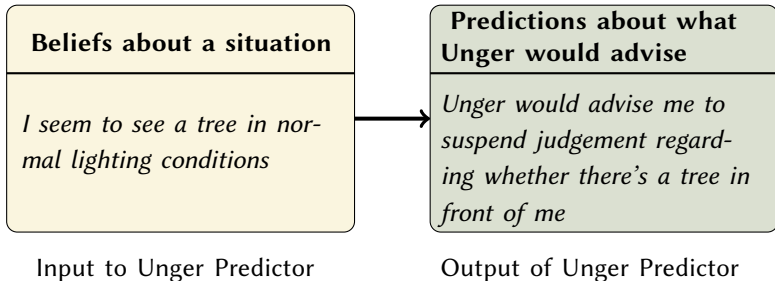


The second problem for ARP was that it seems to smuggle the notion of *ultima facie* justification into the account of defeat, and hence into the base clause for *ultima facie* justification.

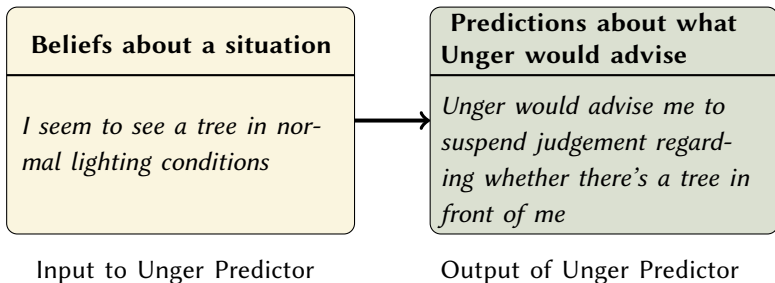
Reasons First Reliabilism avoids this worry:

- We define *ultima facie* justification in terms of *prima facie* reasons
- Reliabilist Reasons gives us a recursive definition of *prima facie* reasons
  - Crucially, the base clause of Reliabilist Reasons does not itself rely on the notion of defeat, or any other epistemic notions for that matter

# Dealing with Counterexamples



# Dealing with Counterexamples



Output of Unger Predictor is *not* either:

- 1 A belief that  $\neg$ TREE
- 2 A belief that *My visual experiences do not reliably indicate the truth of TREE in my present circumstances*

So Reasons First Reliabilism predicts Harry does not have either a rebutting or an undercutting defeater.

# Further Advantages of Reasons First Reliabilism

Historically, reliabilism has had little to say about *reasons for belief*.

But clearly there are reasons for belief, and any complete epistemology should have something to say about them.

Reliabilist Reasons is a natural way to bring them into the reliabilist fold.

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# Conclusion

I've advocated a synthesis of reliabilism with a Reasons First theory.

The resulting synthesis retains the major virtues of both approaches, while avoiding their problems:

- It is fully reductive
- It overcomes reliabilism's difficulties involving defeat

THE END

Recently, a number of authors have proposed syntheses of reliabilism and evidentialism.

- Comesaña [2010]; Goldman [2011]; Tang [2016]; Miller [2018]

How does Reasons First Reliabilism differ from these syntheses?

Answer: the distinctive structure of Reasons First Reliabilism enables it to explain defeat in a way that extant hybrid approaches do not.

## Evidentialist Reliabilism

A's belief that  $p$  is justified iff:

- ① A has evidence  $e$ ,
- ② The belief that  $p$  is based on  $e$ ; and either
  - ①  $e$  doesn't include any belief and the type *producing a belief that  $p$  based on evidence  $e$*  is reliable; or
  - ②  $e$  includes other beliefs of A, all of those beliefs are justified and the type *producing a belief that  $p$  based on evidence  $e$*  is conditionally reliable.

Doesn't help with **Seeing Red**:

- Lori's belief in RED is based on evidence (her visual experience), and the type *producing a belief that RED based on this visual experience* is reliable.

A better hybrid approach:

## Two-Component Hybrid Approach

A's belief that  $p$  is *ultima facie* justified iff both:

- 1 A's belief that  $p$  is the result of a reliable belief-forming process,
  - 2 The probability of  $p$  conditional on A's total evidence is sufficiently high.
- Goldman [2011]; cf. Miller [2018]

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Worry: still has trouble with cases where the agent's evidence (or the entailments thereof) is itself defeated. By contrast, Reasons First Reliabilism allows that all reasons are defeasible.

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## Job Opening

Masha tells Clarence that her department will have a job opening in the fall (HIRING). Clarence believes Masha. Sometime later, Clarence speaks with the head of Masha's department, Victor, who informs him that the job search was canceled due to budget constraints. Now, Clarence harbors a deep-seated hatred of Victor that causes him to disbelieve everything that Victor says; what's more, no amount of rational reflection would rid Clarence of this inveterate distrust. Consequently, he continues to believe HIRING.

Intuitively, Clarence's belief in HIRING is defeated. However, ARP predicts that it isn't.

- Beddor [2015]



## Bonus Slides: Further Counterexamples to ARP

Reliabilist Reasons, unlike ARP, is couched in dispositions talk:

We don't require that there is some process that *would* produce a belief in  $\neg$ HIRING, only that there's some process that is *disposed* to do so.

# Bonus Slides: Further Counterexamples to ARP

Dispositions can be *masked*.

- Johnston [1992]

E.g., fragile vase protected by a sorcerer.



## Proposal

- Clarence has a *testimony-believer* process available to him.
- And this process is disposed to produce a belief in  $\neg$ HIRING, when given Victor's testimony as input.
- However, this disposition is masked by Clarence's hatred of Victor.