Unit 3: The Analysis of Justification

PART 2: RELIABILISM

Our Question

- What is justification? What is the difference between a justified belief and an unjustified belief?

Evidentialism (Recap)

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- *Advantages:*
- Explains intuitions about pairs of cases (e.g., Detective Careful vs. Detective Careless)
- Explains why evidence seems to matter to epistemology

Challenges for evidentialism

- The objection from practical reasons

- The objection from forgotten evidence

Forgotten Evidence

It seems that I am currently justified in believing e.g., Mt Everest is the tallest mountain in the world, even though I've forgotten the evidence in favor of it.

Possible Fix

- **Modified Evidentialism:** S's belief that p is justified at time t iff S's evidence at t_o supports believing p,
- where t_o = the original time of belief formation

A residual challenge: new evidence

- Suppose Denise the detective is investigating a crime. On Monday, she gathers lots of evidence indicating the butler committed the crime: a witness testifies that they saw the butler commit it; the butler's fingerprints are found on the weapon, etc. So on Monday Denise forms the belief the butler committed the crime. Moreover, on Monday, Denise's total evidence supports believing the butler committed the crime.

A residual challenge: new evidence

- Suppose Denise the detective is investigating a crime. On Monday, she gathers lots of evidence indicating the butler committed the crime: the chef testifies that they saw the butler commit it; the butler's fingerprints are found on the weapon, etc. So on Monday Denise forms the belief the butler committed the crime. Moreover, on Monday, Denise's total evidence supports believing the butler committed the crime.

- But now suppose that on Tuesday Denise gets new evidence that exonerates the butler: for example, video surveillance shows the chef committing the crime and framing the butler. On Tuesday, it seems that Denise is no longer justified in believing the butler committed the crime.

A dilemma

- So we face a dilemma: on the one hand, cases of forgotten evidence push us towards Modified Evidentialism. On the other hand, cases of new evidence seem to count against Modified Evidentialism…

- A question to consider: is there any way of modifying evidentialism that successfully handles this dilemma?

A different approach…

Reliabilism

Introducing Reliabilism

- The key idea behind reliabilism is that we can explain justification in terms of *reliability*:

- **Justified beliefs are beliefs that are *reliably formed*.**

Formulating Reliabilism

- One way of making this more precise:

- **Reliabilism:** S's belief is justified iff it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.

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- **Reliabilism:** S's belief is justified iff it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.

- Clarifications: What is a process? According to Goldman, it's a functional operation or procedure that takes you from inputs to outputs.

- For example, perception might be understood as a procedure that takes you from the perceptual experiences (*inputs*) to beliefs about your surroundings (*outputs*).

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Reliabilism Clarified

- One way of making this more precise:

- **Reliabilism:** S's belief is justified iff it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.

- Clarifications: What does it mean for a process to be reliable? One answer: a reliable process is one that produces a high ratio of true to false beliefs.

- In other words, a process is reliable iff it *usually* produces true beliefs rather than false beliefs.

Reliabilism vs. the causal theory of knowledge

- Reliabilism bears some close resemblances to the causal theory of knowledge.

- In particular, both are causal analyses.

  - After all, reliabilism says that S's belief is justified iff it is the result of a reliable belief-forming process.

Reliabilism vs. the causal theory of knowledge

- However, there are some important differences.

- First, they are theories of different things: one is a theory of knowledge, the other is a theory of justification.

- Second, the causal theory of knowledge entails that you can only know p if p is true, whereas reliabilism allows you to have false justified beliefs.

Reliabilism vs. the causal theory of knowledge

- Second, the causal theory of knowledge entails that you can only know p if p is true, whereas reliabilism allows you to have false justified beliefs.

- After all, to say a process is reliable is to say that it usually leads you to true beliefs, but "usually" isn't the same as "always"

Reliabilism vs. the causal theory of knowledge

- Third, reliabilism allows you to have justified beliefs in paradigmatic Gettier cases, whereas the Causal Theory of Knowledge is intended to exclude knowledge in Gettier cases.

- For example, in the sheep in the field case, your belief that there is a sheep in the field is formed by a reliable process (*visual perception*). So reliabilism says your belief is justified, even though your belief does not amount to knowledge.

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Advantages of Reliabilism

- 1) Seems to make the right predictions about many examples of justified and unjustified beliefs

- Justified Beliefs:
- - Beliefs about nearby objects formed via good vision in good lighting conditions   reliable
- - Beliefs about math/logic formed via careful mathematical/logical reasoning   reliable
- - beliefs about one's own past which are held on the basis of good memory   reliable

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- 1) Seems to make the right predictions about many examples of justified and unjustified beliefs

- Unjustified Beliefs:
- - Beliefs about distant objects formed via bad vision in bad lighting conditions
- - Beliefs formed via wishful thinking
- - Beliefs held on the basis of bias or prejudice
- - Beliefs held on the basis of careless, slipshod reasoning

Advantages of Reliabilism

- 1) Seems to make the right predictions about many examples of justified and unjustified beliefs

- Unjustified Beliefs:
- - Beliefs about distant objects formed via bad vision in bad lighting conditions   unreliable
- - Beliefs formed via wishful thinking unreliable
- - Beliefs held on the basis of bias or prejudice   unreliable
- - Beliefs held on the basis of careless, slipshod reasoning   unreliable

Advantages of Reliabilism

- 2) Reliabilism seems to avoid problems with forgotten evidence.

- Suppose I currently retain the belief that Mt Everest is the tallest mountain, but I've forgotten my evidence in favor of this belief. According to reliabilism, what matters is whether my current belief is the result of a reliable process. If so, the belief is justified – I don't need to have any *evidence* for this belief.

Objections to reliabilism

Objecting to the Necessity of Reliability

Demon Worlds

- Consider a world where everyone is systematically deceived by an evil demon. At this demon world, perception is systematically unreliable: if someone thinks they see a tree, this is only a hallucination induced by the demon. However, no one at this world has any evidence that they are being deceived by a demon.

Demon Worlds

- Suppose Valerie is one of the unfortunate inhabitants of this demon world. She forms beliefs carefully, and only after considering all of the evidence. One day she has the perceptual experience of sitting in front of her computer; consequently, she forms the belief that she is sitting in front of her computer. It turns out this is just another hallucination caused by the demon.

Demon Worlds

- **Intuition**: Valerie's belief that she is in front of a computer is justified.

- But Valerie's belief that she is front of a computer is formed by perception, which is unreliable at her world (thanks the demon's interventions).

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- This is sometimes called the "New Evil Demon Problem" for reliabilism.

A Possible Reply

- There is an ambiguity in the notion of reliability: a process such as perception might be reliable at one world w_1, but unreliable at another world w_2.

- So which world should we use when evaluating whether a process is reliable?

A Possible Reply

- The objection presupposes that when we are evaluating Valerie's belief-forming process for reliability, we should determine reliability relative to her world. But perhaps we should instead use our own world to determine what counts as reliable. Since perception is reliable at *our* world, her belief does count as reliably formed after all (assuming we are not ourselves in a demon world!).

Objecting to the Sufficiency of Reliability

Norman the Clairvoyant

- Bryan has a perfectly reliable clairvoyant ability. However, he has no particular evidence that he has this ability. One day, his clairvoyance leads him to believe, *The US President is in New York right now.*

- - adapted from Bonjour (1985)

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- **Intuition:** Bryan's belief that the US President is in New York is not justified.

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- Bryan has a perfectly reliable clairvoyant ability. However, he has no particular evidence that he has this ability. One day, his clairvoyance leads him to believe, *The US President is in New York right now*.

- **Intuition:** Bryan's belief that the US President is in New York is not justified.

- But this seems inconsistent with reliabilism, since we've stipulated that Bryan's belief-forming process is perfectly reliable.

- Similar cases have been proposed to illustrate the same basic point…

The Tempucomp

- Bremen undergoes brain surgery by an experimental surgeon who invents a device called a "Tempucomp", which she implants in Bremen's brain. The device is an extremely accurate thermometer, which is connected to a computational device capable of generating beliefs. The surgeon does not tell Bremen about her little experiment. After leaving the hospital, Bremen finds himself believing that it is exactly 30.5 degrees outside.   - Adapted from Lehrer (1990)

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- **Intuition:** Bremen's belief that it is exactly 30.5 degrees outside is not justified.
- But this seems inconsistent with reliabilism, since we've stipulated that his belief-forming process (the Tempucomp) is perfectly reliable.

The Generality Problem

- Celestine looks out of a window one sunny afternoon and sees a nearby rain tree. As a result, she forms the belief: *There is a rain tree outside.*

- The generality problem arises from asking: *which process is responsible for Celestine's belief?*

The Generality Problem

Which process is responsible for Celestine'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 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 rain tree at 2pm on a Tuesday on the basis of a visual experience of a rain tree at 2pm on a Tuesday

These may differ in their level of reliability. So which is the right one to use when evaluating Celestine's belief for justification?

The Generality Problem

The generality problem is the problem of specifying some non-arbitrary for determining which is the "right" way of characterizing someone's belief-forming process on a given occasion.

Taking Stock

- Today we started by reviewing evidentialism, and some of the challenges it faces
- We then met the reliabilist, who proposes an alternative theory of justification
- We then considered some advantages of reliabilism
- We then turned to consider three problems for reliabilism:
  - Objections to the idea that reliability is necessary for justification (New Evil Demon)
  - Objections to the idea that reliability is sufficient for justification (Clairvoyance and Tempucomp cases)
  - The Generality Problem

Discussion Questions

1) We've discussed three objections to reliabilism (the New Evil Demon, Clairvoyance/Tempucomp cases, and the Generality Problem). Can you think of any way of defending reliabilism from these objections?

2) Which theory of justification – reliabilism or evidentialism – should we prefer, and why?