I. The Problem of Easy Justification: Bootstrapping

Suppose one day I wonder whether my color vision is reliable. So Said and I perform an experiment: we set up a slide show in which the screen will change colors every few seconds, and I then reason as follows:

1. I now have a visual experience as of a red screen. [*by introspection*]
2. The screen is now red. [*by perception*]
3. So, my color vision was accurate this one time. [*from 1 and 2 by deduction*]
4. I now have a visual experience as of a blue screen. [*by introspection*]
5. The screen is now blue. [*by perception*]
6. So, my color vision was accurate a second time. [*from 4 and 5 by deduction*]
...
C. Therefore, my color vision is reliable. [*from 3, 6, 9, ... by induction*]

According to Cohen, this process of “bootstrapping” is an illegitimate way of gaining (for the first time) a justified belief that my color vision is reliable.

(Because Cohen formulates his argument in terms of knowledge, he calls this ‘the problem of easy knowledge’; however, to keep things consistent with our previous discussion, I’ve formulated things in terms of justification, so we might call this ‘the problem of easy justification’.)

This is a problem for reliabilism, since it appears to be committed to the following claims:

- Since *introspection* is a reliable belief-independent process, I’m justified in believing 1, 4, 7, ...
- Since *perception* is a reliable belief-independent process, I’m justified in believing 2, 5, 8, ...
- Since *deduction* is a conditionally reliable belief-dependent process, I’m justified in believing 3, 6, 9, ...
- Since *induction* is a conditionally reliable belief-dependent process, I’m justified in believing C.

Cohen points out there’s also a worry here for modest foundationalism, since it seems committed to the following:

- Since 1, 4, 7, ... are a proper response to my introspective experiences, and since I have no defeating evidence, I’m immediately justified in believing 1, 4, 7, ...
- Since 2, 5, 8, ... are a proper response to my perceptual experiences, and since I have no defeating evidence, I’m immediately justified in believing 2, 5, 8, ...
- Since 3, 6, 9, ... follow by deduction from things I’m justified in believing, I’m mediatly justified in believing 3, 6, 9, ...
- Since C follows by induction from things I’m justified in believing, I’m also mediately justified in believing C.

II. Is Bootstrapping Illegitimate?

According to Fumerton, bootstrapping “involves blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity” (p. 403), and he insists that “there is no philosophically interesting concept of justification or knowledge that would allow us to use a kind of reasoning to justify the legitimacy of using that reasoning” (p. 405).

In pressing this objection, Fumerton seems to be appealing to the following principle:

*Fumerton’s principle*: For any faculty, process, or method of reasoning $X$, you cannot use $X$ to justify (in a philosophically interesting sense) the reliability of $X$.

As Fumerton points out, his principle looks plausible when $X = \text{astrology}$. 
But what about when \( X = a \text{ priori reasoning} \)? In this case Fumerton’s principle seems less secure. How else could we justify the reliability of \( a \text{ priori} \) reasoning except via \( a \text{ priori} \) reasoning? (Are we to use \( a \text{ posteriori} \) reasoning instead?)

Or what about when \( X = \text{all legitimate methods of belief formation} \)? Again, the principle is less clear in this case.

*Cohen’s point* (p. 319): Even if Fumerton’s principle doesn’t hold in general, we might still think that the particular bootstrapping argument we’ve been considering is an illegitimate way for me to acquire a justified belief *that my color vision is reliable*. This is enough for us to have an objection to reliabilism and modest foundationalism.

**III. The Problem of Easy Justification: Closure**

Cohen mentions another way in which both modest foundationalism and reliabilism appear to allow us to too easily acquire knowledge/justification:

Suppose Cohen is at a store looking for a red table to buy his son. He has an experience as of a red table being before him, and he then reasons as follows:

a. This table is red.

b. So, it’s not the case that this table is white but illuminated by red lights.

According to both *reliabilism* and *modest foundationalism*, Cohen is justified in believing (a).

And given that justification is closed under competent deduction (or in other words, given the claim that we called ‘the Justified Deduction Principle’ during our discussion of Gettier’s original article), it follows that Cohen is justified in believing (b).

Cohen, however, insists that it’s implausible to think that he could acquire a justified belief in (b) in this way. So he concludes that reliabilism and modest foundationalism must be wrong.

**IV. Back to Coherentism?**

Cohen thinks the reason that reliabilism and modest foundationalism fall prey to the problem of easy knowledge/justification is that they deny the following principle:

*Cohen’s principle*: A potential source of knowledge [or justification] \( K \) can yield knowledge [or justification] for \( S \) only if \( S \) knows [or is justified in believing] that \( K \) is reliable.

Cohen concludes that, in light of the problem of easy knowledge/justification, we must accept his principle.

How, then, can we ever be justified in believing (or ever come to know) that a particular faculty, process, or method is reliable? Cohen thinks the best bet is to endorse a version of *holistic coherentism* (p. 322):

According to this view, in the initial stages of cognitive development, our perceptual beliefs do not count as knowledge, nor does any belief we may have regarding the reliability of our faculties. Gradually, as we acquire more and more sensory evidence, thereby accumulating a relatively large and coherent set of beliefs, those beliefs, including the belief that our cognitive faculties (perception, memory, reasoning) are reliable, become knowledge.

Note, though, that Cohen is proposing a non-standard version of holistic coherentism (ibid.):

...unlike a pure coherence theory, the mutual support relations among beliefs are not by themselves sufficient for those beliefs to be knowledge. In order to be knowledge these beliefs in the coherent set must be supported by sensory evidence.

Two pressing objections for this version of holistic coherentism:

i. Why doesn’t it also fall prey to a version of the bootstrapping objection?

ii. Must it implausibly deny that small children and animals have perceptual knowledge/justified belief?