Phil. 159: Epistemology
Apr. 6, 2022

Lecture 20: Introducing Reliabilism

I. The Aspirations of Reliabilism

Goldman's goal: "I want a theory of justified belief to specify in non-epistemic terms when a belief is justified" (p. 333). Moreover, these conditions must be "appropriately deep or revelatory" (p. 334).

Examples of epistemic terms:

- 'justified',
- 'warranted',
- 'has (good) grounds',
- 'has reason (to believe)',
- 'knows that',
- 'apprehends that',
- 'is probable' (in an epistemic or an inductive sense).

Examples of non-epistemic terms:

- 'believes that',
- 'is true',
- 'causes',
- 'it is necessary that',
- 'implies',
- 'is deducible from'
- 'is probable' (in the propensity or the frequency sense).

II. Motivating Reliabilism

The guiding thought behind reliabilism:

> Just as a thermometer is a device for determining the temperature in some region, our belief-forming mechanisms are cognitive devices for acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false ones.
>
> So, just as a thermometer *qualifies as reliable* when it tends (in a suitable range of circumstances) to give the correct temperature, one of our belief-forming mechanisms *qualifies as reliable* when it tends (in a suitable range of circumstances) to yield true beliefs rather than false ones.
>
> Moreover, a particular belief *counts as justified* when it is the outcome of a belief-forming mechanism that *counts as reliable*.

III. Formulating Reliabilism: First Approximation

We're going to restrict our attention to Goldman's version of reliabilism (also known as *process reliabilism*).

At first pass, we can formulate Goldman's reliabilism as follows:

> *process reliabilism (first approximation)*: Subject S's belief in proposition P at time *t* is justified iff the process through which it was formed is reliable.

A belief-forming process counts as *reliable* iff it tends to produce beliefs that are true rather than false.

Examples of *unreliable belief-forming processes*, according to Goldman (p. 338):

- visual beliefs formed as a result of brief and hasty scanning,
- wishful thinking,
- mere hunch or guesswork,
- hasty generalization.

Examples of *reliable belief-forming processes*, according to Goldman (ibid.):

- visual beliefs formed as a result of detailed and leisurely scanning,
- remembering,
- good reasoning,
- introspection.

What is a *process*?

> Goldman's answer: "Let us mean by a 'process' a *functional operation* or procedure, i.e., something that generates a *mapping* from certain states—'inputs'—into other states—'outputs.' The outputs of the present case are states of believing this or that proposition at a given moment" (p. 339).

How reliable does a belief-forming process need to be in order to yield beliefs that are justified?

> Answer: the degree to which the process is reliable corresponds to the degree to which the beliefs it produces are justified.

Reliabilism is a prototypical *externalist theory of justification*: according to reliabilism, the facts about your beliefs that determine whether or not they are justified need not be "internally available" to you—they might be outside of your cognitive grasp or epistemic purview.

In particular, you don't, according to reliabilism, have to *know* or even *be justified in believing* that a given belief of yours was formed via a reliable process in order for it to be justified.

> We need to distinguish between the following:
>
> - Whether a given belief held by a given person *is justified*.
> - Whether that person *can state or give a justification* for that belief (in the form of an argument, defense, or set of reasons that support it).

IV. Formulating Reliabilism: Second Approximation

As formulated above, process reliabilism yields implausible results when some of the inputs to the process by which a given belief is formed are other beliefs.

> For example, consider the process *deductive inference*. Imagine that, for one reason or another, we tend to make deductive inferences from premises that are false. In that case, deductive inference will tend to generate false beliefs more often than not, *even though we're performing those inferences just as we should*. So deductive inference will count as an unreliable process, and all beliefs formed on its basis will count as unjustified.

To avoid this result, Goldman makes the following distinction:

> *belief-independent cognitive processes* = belief-forming processes with no belief-states as inputs,
>
> *belief-dependent cognitive processes* = belief-forming processes with at least some belief-states as inputs.

Moreover, can make an analogous distinction in ways in which a process can be reliable:

> A *belief-independent* cognitive process is *reliable* iff it tends to yield output belief-states that are true rather than false.
>
> A *belief-dependent* cognitive process is *conditionally reliable* iff, when all of its input belief-states are true, it tends to yield output belief-states that are true rather than false.

With these distinctions in mind, we can reformulate reliabilism as follows:

process reliabilism (second approximation):

i. If S's belief in P at *t* results from a *belief-independent* process that is *reliable*, then S's belief in P at *t* is justified.

ii. If S's belief in P at *t* results from a *belief-dependent* process that is *conditionally reliable*, and if the other beliefs on which this process operated are themselves justified, then S's belief in P at *t* is justified.

iii. Otherwise, S's belief in P at time *t* is unjustified.