Phil. 159: Epistemology
Apr. 12, 2022

Lecture 21: Problems for Reliabilism

I. The New Evil Demon Problem

One way of objecting to reliabilism is to produce (putative) counterexamples.

An example allegedly showing that reliability is not *necessary* for justification:

> *evil demon victim*: Berker and his internal twin, tricked-Berker, have the same (or, at least, qualitative indistinguishable) beliefs, experiences, etc. However, tricked-Berker is also the victim of an evil demon who has been bombarding his sensory organs with misleading perceptual inputs. Thus tricked-Berker's perceptual belief-forming mechanisms are uniformly unreliable: they almost always result in false beliefs about the external world. (See Cohen, p. 281.)

It seems to follow from reliabilism that tricked-Berker's beliefs about the external world are unjustified. Yet intuitively his external-world beliefs are as justified as Berker's are.

Ways in which a reliabilist might respond:

- Bite the bullet and accept the consequence.

- Insist that what matters is not whether a subject's belief-forming processes are reliable *in that subject's environment*, but rather whether they are reliable *in our environment*. (This is "approved list" reliabilism.)

- Insist, instead, that what matters is whether a subject's belief-forming processes are reliable *in a non-manipulated or 'natural' environment*.

II. The Clairvoyance (or Meta-Incoherence) Problem

An example allegedly showing that reliability is not *sufficient* for justification:

> *Norman the clairvoyant*: "Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under the circumstances in which it is completely reliable" (BonJour, p. 369).

It seems to follow from reliabilism that Norman's belief about the President's whereabouts is justified. Yet intuitively his belief is unjustified.

BonJour's support for the claim that Norman's belief is unjustified:

> "Norman's acceptance of the belief about the President's whereabouts is epistemically irrational and irresponsible, and thereby unjustified, whether or not he believes himself to have clairvoyant power, so long as he has no justification for such a belief [i.e. that he has a clairvoyant power]. Part of one's epistemic duty is to reflect critically upon one's beliefs, and such critical reflection precludes believing things to which one has, to one's knowledge, no reliable means of epistemic access" (p. 370).

What both the Norman and evil demon victim examples are trying to show: "the rationality or justifiability of [a subject]'s belief should be judged from [the subject]'s own perspective, rather than from one that is unavailable to him" (BonJour, p. 371).

> In §III of "What Is Justified Belief?" Goldman anticipates the Norman counterexample and then revises his formulation of reliabilism so that a belief does not count as justified if there is a reliable process waiting in the wings which would have stopped one from forming the belief, had one used it.

> (Feldman offers a counterexample to this revision on the top of p. 166 of his article.)

III. The Generality Problem

Suppose I look out my window one night and form the belief *that it is raining*. What is the relevant process through which that belief was formed? Some candidates:

- The process of forming a belief on the basis of perception.

- The process of forming a belief about the weather on the basis of visual perception in bad lighting conditions.

- The process of forming a belief *that it is raining* on the basis of such-and-such retinal stimulations at 8:02 p.m. on Sunday, April 10, 2022.

Depending on which process we choose as the relevant one to test for reliability, process reliabilism yields different answers as to whether my belief is justified.

> a belief-forming process *token* = a specific, dated sequence of events that results in a specific belief

> a belief-forming process *type* = a kind of belief-forming process

Only process *types* are repeatable, so only process types can be usefully assessed for reliability. Hence we can reformulate our first approximation of process reliabilism as follows:

> *process reliabilism (more precise formulation of first approximation)*: S's belief in P at time *t* is justified iff the specific process through which it was formed is a process token whose relevant process type is reliable.

The generality problem for reliabilism is to determine, in a non-ad-hoc manner, the relevant process type to test for reliability when assessing whether a given belief is justified.

Two related problems that should be kept separate from the generality problem:

- *the problem of extent*: How far back in the causal ancestry of a given belief should we go when determining the *process token* by which it was formed?

    Goldman's solution: "We [should] restrict the extent of belief-forming processes to '*cognitive*' events, i.e., events within the organism's nervous system" (Goldman, p. 340).

- *the problem of range*: When we wish to determine whether, on average, instances of a given *process type* yield beliefs that are mostly true, what range of cases do we consider?

    Goldman's solution: He leaves it open whether we should consider every actual instance of the process type (*actual frequency interpretation*), or whether we should consider all actual instances of the process type plus various instances of it in nearby possible worlds (*propensity interpretation*).

Feldman thinks that a successful solution to the generality problem has to steer a course between *the Scylla of individuating processes too narrowly* (leading, in the limit, to a case in which the relevant process type has only one instance) and *the Charybdis of individuating processes too broadly* (so that beliefs which obviously have a different epistemic status are produced by process tokens of the same relevant process type).

Proposals which individuate the processes too broadly:

- "visual perception" (see Feldman, p. 162);

- "visual perception in such-and-such observation conditions" (see pp. 163–64);

- "visual perception in such-and-such observation conditions resulting in a belief of such-and-such type" (see pp. 164–65).

Proposals which individuate the processes too narrowly:

- restricting the process type so only beliefs with the same content count as outputs (see pp. 168–70).