Phil. 159: Epistemology
Apr. 26, 2022

## Lecture 25: Bootstrapping Worries for Externalism (and Internalism)

### I. Externalism and the First-Level Skeptic

In Fumerton's terminology, a *first-level skeptic* denies that we have justified beliefs about some domain.

Fumerton insists that the externalist has an easy answer to the *first-level skeptic about the external world*:

> If we happen to be connected to the external world in the right way (for example: if our beliefs about the external world happen to be the outcome of reliable processes), then we *do* have justified beliefs about the external world.

Thus if externalism is correct, it is not the task of the philosopher, *qua* philosopher, to settle this issue of whether the right external connections obtain between us and the world: "The complex causal conditions that determine the presence or absence of justification for a belief are the subject matter of empirical investigations that would take the philosopher out of the easy chair and into the laboratory" (pp. 400–1).

> *Fumerton's first claim*: If externalism is correct, then skeptical inquiry is not part of philosophy.

Fumerton realizes that this is not yet an argument against externalism:

> "The mere fact that philosophers have been preoccupied with a certain sort of question does not mean that they were qualified to answer it" (p. 401).

### II. Externalism and the Second-Level Skeptic

A *second-level skeptic* denies that we have justified beliefs about the reliability of a faculty or method such as perception, memory, inductive reasoning, etc.

It is tempting to think that externalists can answer the first-level skeptic only at the cost of being unable to answer the second-level skeptic. Fumerton points out that this is not so. The externalist's answer to the *second-level skeptic about perception* is exactly parallel to her answer to the *first-level skeptic about the external world*:

> If we happen to be connected to the external world in the right way (for example: if our beliefs about the reliability of perception happen to be the outcome of reliable processes), then we *do* have justified beliefs about the reliability of perception.

In fact, the externalist need not even go into the lab in order to determine that a given faculty is reliable.

- For example, a reliabilist could argue for the reliability of perception as follows:
    1. I now seem to see a blackboard before me. [*by introspection*]
    2. There is a blackboard before me. [*by perception*]
    3. So, my perceptual faculties were accurate this one time. [*follows from 1 and 2 by deduction*]
    4. I now seem to see a chair before me. [*by introspection*]
    5. There is a chair before me. [*by perception*]
    6. So, my perceptual faculties were accurate a second time. [*follows from 4 and 5 by deduction*]
    ...
    C. Therefore, my perceptual faculties are reliable. [*follows from 3, 6, 9, ... by induction*]

    If introspection and perception happen to be *reliable belief-independent processes*, and if deduction and induction happen to be *conditionally reliable belief-dependent processes*, then the reliabilist must admit that by reasoning in this way I can form a justified belief *that my perceptual faculties are reliable*.

- Similarly, a reliabilist could argue for the reliability of memory as follows:

   1′. At $t_1$, I seem to remember that at $t_2$ it was the case that $p$. [*by introspection at $t_1$*]

   2′. At $t_2$, it was the case that $p$. [*by perception at $t_2$ plus memory*]

   3′. So, my memory was accurate at $t_1$. [*follows from 1′ and 2′ by deduction*]

   4′. At $t_3$, I seem to remember that at $t_4$ it was the case that $q$. [*by introspection at $t_3$*]

   5′. At $t_4$, it was the case that $q$. [*by perception at $t_4$ plus memory*]

   6′. So, my memory was accurate at $t_3$. [*follows from 4′ and 5′ by deduction*]

   ...

   C′. Therefore, my memory is reliable. [*follows from 3′, 6′, 9′, ... by induction*]

   If introspection and perception happen to be *reliable belief-independent processes*, and if deduction, induction, and memory happen to be *conditionally reliable belief-dependent processes*, then the reliabilist must admit that by reasoning in this way I can form a justified belief *that my memory is reliable*.

   > *Fumerton's second claim*:  If externalism is correct, then you can use perception to justify the reliability of perception, you can use memory to justify the reliability of memory, etc.

But now, Fumerton insists, we have an objection to externalism, since clearly we *cannot* use perception to justify the reliability of perception, *cannot* use memory to justify the reliability of memory, and so on:

> "Such attempts to respond to the skeptic's concerns involves blatant, indeed pathetic, circularity. . . . [T]he very ease with which externalists can deal with the skeptical challenge at the next level betrays the ultimate implausibility of externalism as an attempt to explicate concepts that are of *philosophical* interest" (p. 403).

## III. The Problem of Easy Justification for Externalists—and Some Internalists

According to Cohen, the process of "bootstrapping" described by Fumerton is an illegitimate way of gaining (for the first time) a justified belief *that my perceptual faculties are 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 discussion of Fumerton, I've formulated things in terms of justification, so we might call this 'the problem of easy justification'.

This problem arises for *reliabilism* due to its commitment 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 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 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 mediately 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.

## IV. Is Bootstrapping Illegitimate?

In pressing his objection to externalism, 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 = *astrology*.

But what about when X = *a priori reasoning*? In this case Fumerton's principle seems less secure. (How else can we justify the reliability of *a priori* reasoning except via *a priori* reasoning? Are we to use *a posteriori* reasoning instead?) Or what about when X = *all legitimate forms of reasoning*? 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 that we've been considering is an illegitimate way for me to acquire a justified belief *that my perceptual faculties are reliable*. This is enough for us to have an objection to reliabilism and modest foundationalism.

## V. 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*:

> "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" (p. 322).

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

> ". . . 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" (ibid.).

Two pressing objections for this version of holistic coherentism:

i.   Why doesn't it also fall prey to a version of the bootstrapping objection? (For example, why can't I use holistic support to become justified in believing *that holistic support is reliable*?)

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