

Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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Geoff Pynn

Handout 6: Reliabilism

Reliabilism an alternative to evidentialism. It gives a different answer to the question: what is justified belief? Here is the simple version of the reliabilist's answer:

(R) S's belief that p is justified = S's belief that p was caused by a reliable process

A reliable belief-forming process is one that tends to lead to true beliefs.

Reliability comes in degrees. Justified belief does not require perfect reliability.

Reliabilism yields a non-evidentialist version of JTB theory: knowledge that p = true belief that p caused by a reliable process.

Question to think about: Does reliabilism solve the Gettier problem?

Reliabilism fits our intuitions about justified belief in many cases:

perception, introspection, testimony, introspection
deductive, inductive, abductive reasoning

Some complications: conditional reliability, belief-dependent processes:

A process is *conditionally reliable* = if the inputs are true, the process is reliable
A *belief-dependent* process takes beliefs as inputs

The official theory:

(R) S has a justified belief that p =
(i) S's belief that p was formed by a reliable belief-independent process or
(ii) S's belief that p was formed by a conditionally reliable belief-dependent process whose input beliefs were justified.

Three Potential Problems for Reliabilism

1. Accidental / unknown reliability. Clairvoyance (Feldman 95), True Temp.

2. Brain-in-a-vat (also called the "new evil demon problem").

My brain-in-a-vat twin's perceptual beliefs are all based on completely unreliable processes. So they're not justified, according to the reliabilist. But that seems wrong

3. The generality problem. Any process is an instance of many distinct types; whether it's reliable is a matter of whether other instances of that process-type lead to true beliefs. But what are the relevant process types? (Streetlight example, Feldman 97-98)