Epistemology **Spring 2020**

Lecture 14: Theory of Knowledge: Nonevidentialist Theories

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The evidentialist idea of knowledge is that justification is a matter of fitting one's beliefs to one's evidence. Although no decisive objection to evidentialism emerged from our discussion, many contemporary epistemologists reject that view.

No one denies that evidence often matters to justification and no sensible epistemologists urge people to disregard their evidence when forming beliefs. Rather, they think that making one's belief fit one's evidence is only part of the story. The larger story, they think, brings in considerations about the processes that initiate and sustain beliefs. We will look at the causal theory and the truth tracking theory very briefly, and then introduce reliabilism.

14.1 The Causal Theory

The causal theorist's main idea: when a fact in the world leads to a belief in that fact, it is a case of knowledge. When a person has a belief that is not causally connected with the associated fact, there is no knowledge.

> **C**. S knows p iff S's belief in p is caused by the fact p.

Notes:

1. The causal theory retains the TAK's implication that knowledge requires true belief.
2. But the justification condition is replaced by the causal connection requirement.

Goldman's Causal Theory

> **C***. S knows p if and only if the fact p is causally connected in an appropriate way with S's believing p.

The "appropriate way" condition can be illustrated in the following example:

> **The Blow to the Head** Gerald has fallen down the steps and hit his head. The blow to his head scrambles his brain in such a way that he forms a variety of wild beliefs. Among other things, he believes that eating lettuce causes obesity, that the Chicago Cubs will win the World Series, and that he has just fallen down the steps. In fact, he has no recollection of the sensation of having fallen. This belief, like each of the other two just mentioned, is simply a direct result of the blow to the head.

Gerald believes

> (1) I, Gerald, have just fallen down the steps.

Gerald believes (1), and there is a causal connection between the fact that (1) and Gerald's belief that (1). Still, clearly, Gerald does not know (1) if he comes to the belief in this way.

Major problems of the causal theory: Consider knowledge of generalizations such as

> All men are mortal.

The problem is that generalizations do not seem to be causes. There seems to be no causal connection, and thus no appropriate causal connection, between this fact and your belief in it.

A more serious problem is illustrate in the following example:

> **The Trudy/Judy case** Trudy and Judy are identical twins. Smith sees one and, for no good reason, forms the belief that he sees Judy. It is true, and it is a case of perception. He reconstructs the causal chain between Judy's presence and the belief properly. He knows about Trudy, but rashly discounts the possibility that she is the one he sees.

Here, there is a causal connection between a fact and the belief in that fact. Nevertheless, there is no knowledge. And the reason is that the reasons for believing that the causal chain is the way it is are not good ones. The mere existence of a causal connection is not good enough.

There is a dilemma for causal theorists: either they do require "explicit evidence" about the causes of perceptions or they do not. If they do not, then the Trudy/Judy case is a counterexample. If, on the other hand, causal theorists do require explicit evidence about the causes of perception, then the causal theory turns out not to differ significantly from the TAK.

14.2 Reliabilism

Reliabilism is often formulated as a theory of justification, not as a theory of knowledge. Thus, reliabilists can agree that knowledge is justified true belief together with additional components that deal with the Gettier cases.

However, reliabilism deny that justification is largely a matter of having good evidence. Rather, they say that justification depends on the actual accuracy or reliability of the processes or methods used to form the beliefs.

The most influential proponent of reliabilism is Alvin Goldman.

> . . . what kinds of causes confer justifiedness? We can gain insight into this problem by reviewing some faulty processes of belief-formation, i.e., processes whose belief- outputs would be classed as unjustified. Here are some examples: confused reasoning, wishful thinking, reliance on emotional attachment, mere hunch or guesswork, and hasty generalization. What do these faulty processes have in common? They share the feature of unreliability: they tend to produce error a large proportion of the time. By contrast, which species of belief-forming processes are intuidvely justification conferring? They include standard perceptual processes, remembering, good reasoning, and introspection. What these processes seem to have in common is reliability: the beliefs they produce are generally true. My positive proposal, then, is this. The justificational status of a

belief is a function of the reliability of the process or processes that cause it, where (as a first approximation) reliability consists in the tendency of a process to produce beliefs that are true rather than false.

A first formulation of reliabilism:

R. S justifiably believes p if and only if S's belief in p is caused by a reliable process.

However, it is possible that a perfectly good inference leads to a false belief. This can happen when the premises of the inference are false.

Concepts:

- *belief-dependent belief forming processes* the processes that start with some beliefs and yield new beliefs
- *belief-independent belief forming processes* the processes that do not begin with beliefs

An improved formulation of reliabilism:

R*

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 the beliefs the process operates on are themselves justified, then S's belief in p at t is justified.

iii The only way beliefs can be justified is by satisfying the conditions in (i) and (ii).

14.3 Objections to Reliabilism

The Brain in the Vat Brian is a normal person with accurate and well-justified beliefs about the world around him. Brain is Brian's mental duplicate. Brain has experiences just like Brian's. And Brain's beliefs are analogues of Brian's. When Brian believes that he, Brian, is eating a hot fudge sundae, Brain believes that he, Brain, is eating a hot fudge sundae. When Brian believes that he, Brian, is taking a stroll in the park, Brain believes he, Brain, is taking a stroll in the park. When Brian believes that he, Brian, is seeing a bright red object, Brain believes that he, Brain, is seeing a bright red object. Brian is right about each of these things, as he usually is. Poor Brain is wrong every time.

Brian's belief-forming processes are reliable, and thus according to R*, Brian's beliefs are justified. Brain is just as reasonable as Brian. However, the processes that Brain uses to form his beliefs routinely lead to false beliefs. It seems to follow that Brain's processes are not reliable. If so, (R*) has the wrong result here. This case suggests that reliability is not necessary for justification.

Accidental or Unknown Reliability In some cases, a person uses a reliable process but has no reason to think that it is reliable. The belief should seem to the person like a mere hunch.

> **Clairvoyance** Norman, under certain conditions which 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 circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Bonjour thinks that Norman's belief is not justified even though it results from a process that is reliable and Norman has no available defeater process for it. Some philosophers regard this as a serious objection to reliabilism.

Generality Suppose you look out the window one night and see a street light. The process that occurs is a case of forming a belief about what you see on the basis of (i) perception, (ii) vision, (iii) vision at night, (iv) vision of a bright object at night, and so on. These types can vary in reliability.

The reliabilist theory says that a particular belief is justified to the degree that its process is reliable. But there are all these different process types associated with your belief that you see a street light. Which one is the one whose reliability determines how well justified the belief is?

Reliability, as reliabilists understand it, is a property of processes that happen over and over again. The specific process that causes a particular belief happens just once, but it is a kind of process, or an instance of a type of process. Each belief, then, is caused by a single process that falls into many categories or types. Which type do we choose in every concrete example? The critics and defenders of reliabilism are just making up, for each case, a description of the process that gets them the result they want. There is no general theory here.

> i**. If S's belief in p at t results from a belief-independent process token whose relevant type is reliable, then S's belief in p at t is justified.

References

[1] Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*, Pearson Education, Inc., 2003.