Paper A: Reliabilism

Reliabilism is a nonevidentialist theory of knowledge that says that we can have knowledge if we have justified true beliefs and are using reliable processes or methods to develop these beliefs. The reliability of these processes used gives us a clear indication of whether or not we will result in knowledge.

Alvin Goldman, the original proponent of reliabilism, starts its explanation by discussing what does not give us knowledge. After describing several processes that cause us to obtain faulty beliefs, Alvin Goldman says, "What do these faulty processes have in common? They share the feature of *unreliability*; they tend to produce *error* a large portion of the time" (1). Goldman explains that we simply cannot trust certain types of processes because experience has shown us that they do not lead us on a path to dependable knowledge.

Goldman then goes on to contrast reliable and unreliable processes used to gain knowledge. He describes certain processes that will usually lead to knowledge and says of them, "What these processes seem to have in common is *reliability*: the beliefs they produce are generally true" (1). These processes have shown themselves to be dependable most of the time and as a result, can be counted on to lead to knowledge. The biggest difference between processes that lead to knowledge and processes that do not is their reliability.

After discussing all of these ideas, Goldman summarizes his theory of reliability by saying, "The justificational status of a belief is a function of the reliability of the process or proceses 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" (1). This is a formal way to say that a reliable process gives us strong justification and an unreliable process does not give us justification. As a result, we can only have knowledge when we use a reliable process and have justification for the belief.

The first case in which knowledge can be obtained deals with belief-independent processes. These processes are not based on other beliefs; an example of this would be seeing a color of a large object in plain view. For belief-independent processes, "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" (1). Essentially, this says that someone can obtain knowledge by using a reliable process that does not depend on any previous beliefs.

The second case deals with belief-dependent processes. These processes use existing beliefs and result in new beliefs that have been extracted from the previous ones; an example of this is using memory to make a judgment on something. In this case, "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" (1). Knowledge in this case comes from 1) using a process that will result in true beliefs if the premises used by this process are true and 2) feeding true premises into this process. An example of this is using sound logical deduction with true premises; sound logical deduction is a reliable process, but only if the premises used are true.

One note that must be made is that determining whether or not a process is reliable often turns out to be very subjective. Although there is no exact way to explain what a reliable process is, generally people will understand whether a certain process is reliable or not. But still it is very hard to understand how many times a process can give

us wrong beliefs before we deem it unreliable. There is no way to determine a percentage of correct beliefs provided by a process for us to compare reliability and set a standard, so people must simply use their reasoning to determine whether or not a process is reliable given all of the evidence throughout their lives. But in the end, this ambiguity is simply part of reliabilism and cannot be avoided due to the lack of quantitative power within this theory of knowledge.

One counterexample to reliabilism follows. Confused has an interesting problem, where every time he sees red, he thinks that he sees green. One day, his neighbor is testing a color-scrambling ray that causes everyone around to think that they are seeing red when in fact they should be seeing green. While his neighbor is testing this ray, Confused's other neighbor walks in with a green shirt. The color-scrambling ray causes Confused's mind to process red colors, which due to his aforementioned problem makes him think that he is seeing green.

This case is a counterexample to reliabilism because it is a reliably formed belief that isn't justified. Although Confused's color detection may not seem as though it is reliable, we know that every time this color scrambling ray is on, he will see green and actually think that it is green. As a result, in this specific case his color detection is 100% reliable. However, this belief clearly isn't justified because of Confused's problem of seeing red and thinking that he sees green. Even though in his mind it may be justified, this justification is clearly mistaken and there is no other justification available. So in this case, Confused obtains knowledge through a reliably formed belief but without the necessary justification.

In order to amend reliabilism to escape this counterexample, it is important that justification simply isn't always necessary to obtain knowledge in reliabilism. That is, using a 100% reliable belief-independent process does not need the normal amount of justification and simply can lead to knowledge directly. Even though this counterexample may not even be a problem to Goldman's reliabilism, it certainly is a problem to our reliabilism because of our assumption that a reliable process is necessary *in addition to* justification. As a result, I would amend the justification clause for belief-independent processes to be: "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. Otherwise, if we are using a 100% reliable process, we can have knowledge without previous justification." This would provide us a back-door to avoid the necessity of justification in hypothetical cases where we can be 100% sure that we are using a reliable process and we gain knowledge, but do not have justification.

Works Cited

1. Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*. (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2003), p. 91, 93.