

# Bonjour's criticism of reliabilism

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# Outline

The Regress Problem and Externalism

Clairvoyance

Three Stances

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# Lawrence Bonjour

## Cast of Characters



- ▶ PhD Princeton 1969
- ▶ Professor Emeritus, University of Washington.
- ▶ Author of 5 books, including *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (1985) and *Epistemic Justification: Internalism vs. Externalism, Foundations vs. Virtues* (jointly with Ernest Sosa). (2003);

# Introduction to the Regress Problem

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- ▶ Take some belief or yours which purports to be justified. We can ask: what makes it justified?
- ▶ Some beliefs are justified by being based on or inferred from further supporting beliefs. (They’re the beliefs that are formed by processes that take other beliefs as input.) This kind of justification is called **inferential or mediate justification**.

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- ▶ We can raise our question again, about the lower-level beliefs: what makes those beliefs justified?
- ▶ If they in turn are based on or inferred from other beliefs, we ask the question again. And again.

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  - ▶ Or maybe some beliefs B are based on other beliefs, B', but these other beliefs aren't themselves justified. So the chain can stop there.
  - ▶ Or, finally, maybe some beliefs are justified but not by virtue of being based on or inferred from other beliefs.

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- ▶ The **foundationalist** is someone who thinks that only the last way to stop the regress is legitimate.
- ▶ He thinks that if some belief of yours is justified, then its justification has to trace back to some basic, immediately justified belief. Infinite chains and circles and so on won't cut it. Those can't be ways for your beliefs to be justified.

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- ▶ What sort of story should we tell about the basic beliefs B", at the bottom of the picture? What makes them justified?

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- ▶ Another sort of story would be a more **internalist** story about what makes those beliefs justified. Their being justified doesn't depend on factors "external" to you, like reliability and so on. It depends on factors "internal" (accessible) to you.
- ▶ It's just that these factors don't include other supporting beliefs.

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- ▶ What justifies you is just the toothache itself, the way it feels. This is a factor "internal" to you; and it's not a belief.

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- ▶ Many philosophers think that your basic beliefs B” are justified in something like that way.
- ▶ For those basic beliefs, it’s the sensations and experiences you have which do the justificatory work, not other beliefs.
- ▶ When we talk about perceptual experiences, these concern how the world looks and feels to you. These experiences are different from beliefs.

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- ▶ So an Internalist has a way to stop the regress just like an externalist does.
- ▶ Any view, whether Internalist and externalist, that takes there to be basic beliefs is a kind of **foundationalism** about justification.

# Outline

The Regress Problem and Externalism

**Clairvoyance**

Three Stances



# Clairvoyance

Bonjour uses the case of clairvoyance in his objection to externalism:

## Clairvoyance

Mary believes herself to be a reliable clairvoyant. (But she has no good evidence for this.) She has independent evidence that the president is not in NYC (say, she heard from the news that the President is in Washington) but since her clairvoyance tells her he is in NYC, she believes against the evidence, on the basis of her supposed clairvoyance. Intuitively, her belief seems to be unreasonable and unjustified, even if, as a matter of fact, her clairvoyant power is reliable, and the President is in NYC.

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3. The externalist can go along with our intuitions here. Instead of saying that all reliable beliefs are justified, he can say instead that your belief is justified iff that belief was reliably formed and you have no independent evidence that it is false.
4. In this first case, the subject does have independent evidence that the President is not in NYC. So if the reliabilist accepts this modification, his theory will no longer be committed to saying that this subject is justified.

# Clairvoyance

## Clairvoyance, second case

Mary has evidence that she has no clairvoyant faculty, or that clairvoyance is impossible. Despite this, though, she believes on the basis of her apparent clairvoyance that the President is in NYC. In this case, too, it seems to be irresponsible and unreasonable to form beliefs in the way the subject does, and hence, she is not justified in her belief. Even if, as a matter of fact, she does have a reliable clairvoyant faculty and the President is in NYC.

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2. Your belief is justified iff that belief was reliably formed and you have no independent evidence that it is false, and you have no independent evidence that the way you formed the belief was unreliable.



# Responses?

1. The externalist can go along with our intuitions here, too.
2. Your belief is justified iff that belief was reliably formed and you have no independent evidence that it is false, and you have no independent evidence that the way you formed the belief was unreliable.
3. The idea is that reliability by itself is a prima facie source of justification but that justification can be taken away if you get counter-evidence or undermining evidence, evidence that says that your belief was formed unreliably.

## Bonjour's Moral

*External or objective reliability is not enough to offset subjective irrationality. If the acceptance of a belief is seriously unreasonable or unwarranted from the believer's own standpoint, then the mere fact that unbeknownst to the believer [...it was reliably formed...] will not suffice to render the belief epistemically justified... (p. 61)*

# The Case of Norman

## Normal, central case

Like the other subjects, Norman has a reliable clairvoyant faculty but he doesn't know this or have independent evidence for believing it. Norman believes that the President is in NYC on the basis of his reliable clairvoyant faculty, and he has no other evidence concerning the President's whereabouts, or concerning whether or not he has a reliable clairvoyant faculty. Is Norman's belief that the President is in NYC justified?

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3. Hence, by the general moral he extracted from the previous cases, it would follow that Norman's belief is not justified. So reliabilism would be incorrect.

# Responses?

1. Bonjour wants to argue that, just like the subjects in the earlier examples, Norman's belief is also "subjectively irrational."
2. From Norman's own standpoint, Bonjour thinks, it is unreasonable for him to be accepting this belief.
3. Hence, by the general moral he extracted from the previous cases, it would follow that Norman's belief is not justified. So reliabilism would be incorrect.
4. Why does Bonjour think that Norman's belief is unreasonable, from Norman's own standpoint?

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  - ▶ If Norman believes that he has a reliable clairvoyant faculty, then it seems like this belief would have to be irrational and unjustified. (Remember, Norman has no evidence bearing on the question whether or not he has a reliable clairvoyant faculty.) And how can an unjustified belief that he has a reliable clairvoyant faculty confer justification on the beliefs Norman forms by clairvoyance? Bonjour claims that it can't. So if Norman's belief about the President is justified, its justification can't come from the fact that Norman believes that his clairvoyant faculty is reliable.

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  - ▶ Next, suppose Norman doesn't believe that he has a reliable clairvoyant faculty. (Perhaps he's agnostic.) In this case, Bonjour asks, why does Norman accept the belief that the President is in NYC? What does Norman think is going on? From his own standpoint, there is apparently no way he could know the President's whereabouts. There is no way, as far as he knows or believes, for him to have obtained that information. This is why Bonjour thinks it is unreasonable for Norman to believe as he does. Norman should classify his belief as an unfounded hunch and cease to accept it.

## Bonjour's argument

*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 the clairvoyant power, so long as he has no justification for such a belief [that is, the belief that he has a reliable clairvoyant power]. Part of one's epistemic duty is to reflect critically upon one's belief, and such critical reflection precludes believing things to which one has, to one's knowledge, no reliable means of epistemic access. (p. 63)*

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# Internalism versus externalism

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2. If you are an externalist, you think that what makes a subject's belief an epistemically good belief might be, for example, the fact that it was caused by their visual system, and as a matter of fact the human visual system is very reliable. The subject need not be aware of factors like that.

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1. If you are an internalist, you think that a subject needs to be internally aware of the factors that make his belief likely to be true, so that he can appeal to those factors when challenged.
2. If you are an externalist, you think that what makes a subject's belief an epistemically good belief might be, for example, the fact that it was caused by their visual system, and as a matter of fact the human visual system is very reliable. The subject need not be aware of factors like that.
3. But here is a second way of understanding the disagreement between the internalist and the externalist.

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- ▶ If you say yes to that question, then you’re some sort of internalist.

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- ▶ We ask: Are epistemic properties (like justification) shared between all “internal duplicates”?
- ▶ If two subjects are the same “on the inside,” does that entail that they’re equally reasonable in believing as they do?
- ▶ If you say yes to that question, then you’re some sort of internalist.
- ▶ But internalism in this second sense is much weaker than internalism in the first sense. Internalism in this second sense does not entail that whenever your beliefs are reasonable or justified, you will always be able to “justify” them, or defend them in argument.

## Conservatism versus liberalism

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- ▶ A much more **liberal** stance says that, so long as you lack evidence that D, you can be justified in believing P. If you do acquire evidence that D, that will defeat your justification for believing P. But in the absence of evidence that D, you can go on justifiably believing P.



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- ▶ A much more **liberal** stance says that, so long as you lack evidence that D, you can be justified in believing P. If you do acquire evidence that D, that will defeat your justification for believing P. But in the absence of evidence that D, you can go on justifiably believing P.
- ▶ Your beliefs are presumed innocent until we get evidence that they're guilty. You don't have to seek out independent confirmation that not-D.

## An Intermediate view

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- ▶ The **intermediate** stance says that, to be justified in believing P, it just has to be true that your beliefs lack the defect D. You don't also have to have some independent evidence that they lack the defect.
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## An Intermediate view

- ▶ The **intermediate** stance says that, to be justified in believing P, it just has to be true that your beliefs lack the defect D. You don't also have to have some independent evidence that they lack the defect.
- ▶ If you acquire evidence that D, though, this will defeat your justification for believing P (even if D is actually false).
- ▶ The **intermediate** stance differs from the liberal view in that the intermediate view says that it has to be true that your beliefs lack the defect, for those beliefs to be justified. So brains in vats, and subjects who formed their beliefs unreliably, do not have justified beliefs, on the intermediate view.

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## An Intermediate view

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2. If the question is: "For your belief to be justified, do you have to have evidence that would enable you to demonstrate that your belief lacks all these defects?" the conservative says yes, but the intermediate view and the liberal view say no.
3. If the question is: "Will epistemic properties be shared between all internal duplicates," then the intermediate view says no, the conservative and the liberal, on the other hand, can say yes here.

## Back to Norman

1. Recall when we were asking whether Norman was “subjectively irrational,” whether from his own standpoint, it was unreasonable for him to be accepting his clairvoyant belief. Bonjour said that if Norman had no beliefs about whether or not he had a reliable clairvoyant faculty, then from Norman’s standpoint, there is no way he could know the President’s whereabouts. But this is tricky. We need to distinguish:



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  - 1.1 Norman has evidence that there is no reliable way for him to know the President’s whereabouts
  - 1.2 Norman lacks evidence that there is a reliable way for him to know the President’s whereabouts

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  - 1.1 getting evidence that your partner was unfaithful
  - 1.2 failing to get evidence that your partner was faithful
2. To illustrate, suppose one of the other contestants on your side of the island gets evidence that their partner has been especially faithful. You don't get any such evidence. This bums you out. However, by itself that wouldn't be enough to justify you in cheating, would it? Perhaps your partner has also been faithful, too.

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- ▶ If the belief was reliably formed, then you're unlikely to go wrong in accepting it, and in a sense it's not an accident that this is so.
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- ▶ If the belief was reliably formed, then you're unlikely to go wrong in accepting it, and in a sense it's not an accident that this is so.
- ▶ From your subjective perspective, however, it would seem an accident if your belief turned out to be true, since you have no evidence in support of the belief.
- ▶ But the rationality or justifiability of your belief should be judged from your own perspective, rather than from a perspective unavailable to you.

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- ▶ Hence, from your subjective perspective, it would seem an accident if your belief turned out to be true.
- ▶ Hence, your belief is unjustified.

# Problems with Bonjour's argument against externalism

The problem with Bonjour's argument is that there's no clear interpretation of the second premise where it both follows from the first and obviously supports the conclusion.

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- ▶ We can interpret “from your perspective, it would seem an accident if your belief turned out to be true” to mean: you have good reason to believe that your belief was formed in an unreliable way. If that's true, then your belief is unjustified.
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- ▶ We can interpret “from your perspective, it would seem an accident if your belief turned out to be true” to mean: you have good reason to believe that your belief was formed in an unreliable way. If that's true, then your belief is unjustified.
- ▶ So this interpretation of the second premise supports the conclusion.
- ▶ But on this interpretation of it, the second premise doesn't follow from the first.

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- ▶ On the other hand, there are other interpretations of the second premise where it clearly does follow from the first premise.
- ▶ We can interpret it to mean: you lack any good reason to believe that your belief was formed reliably. On this interpretation, it does follow from the first premise.

# Problems with Bonjour's argument against externalism

- ▶ However, we haven't yet seen any argument that beliefs which are "accidental" in this sense are unjustified. The rhetorical talk of "luck" and "accidents" may tempt us to conclude that beliefs of this sort are unjustified.



# Problems with Bonjour's argument against externalism

- ▶ However, we haven't yet seen any argument that beliefs which are "accidental" in this sense are unjustified. The rhetorical talk of "luck" and "accidents" may tempt us to conclude that beliefs of this sort are unjustified.
- ▶ But Bonjour hasn't given us any argument to back up the rhetoric.

# Relevant Questions

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1. One thing we haven't spoken much about is how clairvoyance is supposed to work, exactly. How does it feel from the inside?
2. Does it have its own peculiar sensory quality, like vision and touch do? Or is it more like having a hunch pop into your head at the race track?
3. If clairvoyance feels just like a hunch, if the beliefs just come "out of thin air," then Bonjour may be right that Norman's beliefs would not be justified.

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2. Suppose that Norman's clairvoyance feels from the inside just like a sixth sense.
3. If that's how we're supposed to think of the case, then perhaps Norman is justified.
4. We think the sighted person's visual beliefs would be justified, don't we? Why should we regard Norman any differently?