

Problems for reliabilism

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Outline

Problem cases for reliabilism

Technical Difficulties

The Range Problem

Regulating Our Beliefs

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Introduction

There are three sorts of counter-examples standardly offered as objections to reliabilist accounts of justification:

1. Brain in a vat
2. Brain tumor
3. Clairvoyance

Brain in a Vat

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Brains in vats seem to be justified in believing things about the external world on the basis of their experiences. (At the very least, we'd want to say that some brains in vats have beliefs that are more reasonable and more justified than other brains' beliefs.) But brains in vats form their beliefs about the external world in a way which is very unreliable. Most of their beliefs about the external world are false. This suggests that it's not necessary, for a belief to be justified, that it be formed in a reliable way.

Brain in a Vat

QUESTION: Can you think of how to reply to this objection to reliabilism?

Brain tumors

Brain tumors

Imagine a rare kind of brain tumor which produces in its subject various unfounded hypochondriac beliefs, including the belief that the subject has a brain tumor. Now, the subject's belief that he has a brain tumor was formed in a very reliable way. (Whenever anyone forms the belief that he has a brain tumor as a causal result of having a brain tumor, his belief will be true.) But absent any further evidence, the subject's belief that he has a brain tumor would seem to be as unjustified as the rest of the hypochondriac beliefs the tumor causes him to have. This suggests that being formed in a reliable way does not suffice to make a belief justified.

Brain Tumors

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The Generality Problem

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- ▶ Any given belief you form was produced by a whole range of processes, of varying degrees of specificity.

The Generality Problem

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 - ▶ the process of forming beliefs on the basis of vision

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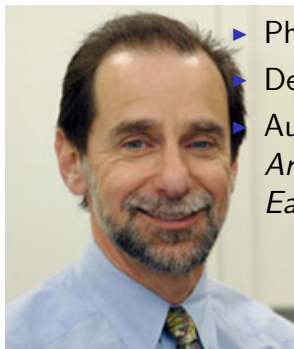
- ▶ For example, if you look out the window and form the belief that it's raining, all of the following are processes responsible for the formation of that belief:
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 - ▶ the process of forming beliefs about the weather on the basis of looking out a window

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 - ▶ the process of forming beliefs on the basis of vision
 - ▶ the process of forming beliefs about the weather on the basis of looking out a window
 - ▶ the process of forming a belief that it's raining on the basis of seeing droplets splashing on the pavement, etc.

Lawrence Bonjour

Cast of Characters



- ▶ Ph.D., University of Massachusetts, 1975
- ▶ Dean of the College, University of Rochester
- ▶ Author of 5 books, including *Reason and Argument* (1993) and *Evidentialism (with Earl Conee)* (2004);

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- ▶ These processes differ in how reliable they are. Which of them should we look at when we're assessing my belief that it's raining?
- ▶ In "Reliability and Justified Belief" Richard Feldman argues that the reliabilist faces two dangers here:
 - ▶ one danger threatens if he chooses too general a process, and
 - ▶ the other danger threatens if he chooses too specific a process.

No distinction worry

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- ▶ The problem here is that the set of beliefs formed on the basis of vision includes beliefs of obviously different epistemic status.
- ▶ For instance, my visually-based belief about the gender of a distant figure seen through a dirty window-pane is obviously less justified than my visually-based belief about the shape of a coin I scrutinize closely in good light.

Single case worry

- ▶ If the reliabilist says that the justification of my belief depends on the reliability of some very specific process, like the process of forming a belief that it's raining on the basis of seeing droplets splashing on the pavement just like that while looking through a window at exactly this angle, etc., then the reliabilist confronts Feldman's "Single Case" worry.

Single case worry

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- ▶ The problem here is that if the process is extremely specific, then in all the history of the world there might have been only one belief formed by it—namely, my current belief that it's raining.

Single case worry

- ▶ Now, when we ask the question Is this process reliable? we're asking whether it tends to produce true beliefs. If the process is so specific that it has only ever produced a single belief, then whether or not it tends to produce true beliefs will just depend on whether or not this single belief is true.

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- ▶ If the belief is true, then the process tends to produce true beliefs, and so it's reliable. If the belief is false, then the process tends to produce false beliefs, and so it's unreliable.

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- ▶ If the belief is true, then the process tends to produce true beliefs, and so it's reliable. If the belief is false, then the process tends to produce false beliefs, and so it's unreliable.
- ▶ Hence, whether or not the process is reliable seems just to depend on whether or not this single belief is true.

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2. We've just seen an argument that, since the process we're considering is so very specific, whether or not that process is reliable depends on whether or not my current belief that it's raining is true.
3. Hence, whether or not my belief is justified depends on whether or not it's true. If my belief is true, it's justified. If my belief is false, then it's unjustified. This seems an unacceptable result.

Outline

Problem cases for reliabilism

Technical Difficulties

The Range Problem

Regulating Our Beliefs

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2. So far, we've been assuming that for a subject S's belief to count as justified, it has to be produced by a process which reliably produces true beliefs in S's environment.
3. But perhaps the reliabilist can say instead that for S's belief to count as justified, it has to be produced by a process which reliably produces true beliefs *in our environment*, the environment we actually occupy.

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2. Then the processes by which we form beliefs are unreliable even in our own environment.
3. So our beliefs wouldn't count as justified. (What's more, if we make our environment the place where a process has to be reliable, in order for the beliefs it produces to count as justified, then none of the beliefs produced by those processes will count as justified. Not even if the beliefs are formed in an environment in which the processes are reliable.)

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4. This doesn't seem a satisfactory result.

Another possible response

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2. In his book *Epistemology and Cognition*, Goldman calls these "normal worlds."
3. One of the general beliefs we have about the world is that we're not brains in vats, so the "normal worlds" will be worlds in which we're not brains in vats. (That might include our actual world, or it might not. It depends on whether we turn out to be brains in vats.)

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2. Unfortunately, there are problems for this proposal, too.

New Problem

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3. Hence, the "normal worlds" should not be required to be worlds in which P is reliable, just because someone somewhere believes that P is reliable.
4. Now, the "normal worlds" are defined to be worlds where our general beliefs about the world are true. So this shows that we ought not to count the belief that P is reliable among those general beliefs, when we're determining which worlds are the "normal" ones. What exactly are our general belief, then?

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4. That suggests that when we're determining which worlds are the "normal worlds," we should restrict our attention to those of our general beliefs which are justified.

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2. The reliabilist needs the notion of a "normal world" in order to define the notion of a justified belief.
3. He's not in any position to say which beliefs are justified before we've settled the question which worlds are the "normal worlds."
4. Consider people in a possible world W who have some extra sixth sense that works extremely well in their world, but which doesn't work reliably in our world nor in the worlds which we count as "normal."

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3. Perhaps the reliabilist can overcome these difficulties. Or perhaps he can abandon the notion of "normal worlds" and offer some different answer to the Range Problem.
4. In any case, it's clear that there are no easy and straightforward answers to this problem.

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The regulative role of justification

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3. This seems to us to be a good way to get true beliefs. If we make sure our beliefs are justified, then those beliefs are likely to be true.

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3. The recipes we follow when deciding what to believe tell us to accept those beliefs which are justified, and to reject those beliefs which are unjustified.
4. But can justification play this regulative or belief-guiding role if an externalist account of justification is right? It's hard to see how it could.

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1. This seems to show that what justifies your belief has to be “internally available,” if justification is going to play the regulative role we’ve described.
2. How might an externalist respond to this criticism?