Frame Text:

Problems for Process Reliabilism

A number of problems for process reliabilism were identified in its own initial formulation or shortly thereafter. One type of problem is that its conditions seem too weak for justifiedness. Does it suffice for a belief's justifiedness that it be caused by a reliable process? Mustn't it also meet a meta-justification condition, for example, a "J→JJJ→JJ" condition, according to which if one's belief in p is justified, then one also justifiedly believes that one justifiedly believes p? Explicit use in a theory of the JJ principle itself, of course, would violate the constraints for a reductive account of justification. An account of justification (or at least a "base-clause" component of such an account) should not feature the very notion of justification itself. All right, but maybe one could add a requirement that the agent have a reliably-caused higher-order belief that his/her first-order belief is reliably caused. This proposal, unfortunately, is both too strong and too weak. It is too strong because agents do not constantly monitor their first-order beliefs for reliability and form higher-order beliefs about them. To require such continual monitoring as a condition of first-order justifiedness would be excessive. Too few beliefs would qualify as justified. Second, if one feels the need for higher-level requirements, why should they stop at the second level? Why not require a third-order reliably formed belief, and a fourth-order one, etc.? Here looms the threat of an infinite regress. Third, why should a critic who regards simple reliable causation as insufficient for justification be satisfied with any higher-order requirements? If simple reliable causation at the first level is insufficient, why should justification be guaranteed by reliability at any higher level? Some reliabilists will be inclined to strengthen the requirement for justification by adding a negative requirement, namely, that the agent not believe that her first-order belief is unreliably caused (or—what is arguably more in keeping with the spirit of reliabilism—that the agent not reliably believe that her first-order belief is so-caused).

A second problem for process reliabilism is the "new evil-demon problem" (Cohen 1984; Pollock 1984; Feldman 1985; Foley 1985). Imagine a world where an evil demon creates non-veridical perceptions of physical objects in everybody's minds. All of these perceptions are qualitatively identical to ours, but are false in the world in question. Hence, their perceptual belief-forming processes (as judged by the facts in that world) are unreliable; and their beliefs so caused are unjustified. But since their perceptual experiences—hence evidence—are

qualitatively identical to ours, shouldn't those beliefs in the demon world be justified? Evidently, then, reliabilism must deliver the wrong verdict in this case.

One line of response to this problem is to argue that it doesn't follow from the low truth-ratio of processes in the demon world that the beliefs must be categorized as unjustified according to reliabilism, because reliabilism need not use the processes' truth-ratios in the world of the example as the standard of evaluation. That this is the standard was assumed in posing the objection; but it wasn't clearly so stated in the formulation of reliabilism. It is open to reliabilists to chart a different course, to choose a different standard of process reliability. Perhaps the appropriate domain or standard is the truth-ratio of the processes in the actual world. However, the plausibility or rationale for such an alternative standard is not obvious. We return to this issue in section 4 and again in sub-section 5.2.

A third objection to reliabilism, which also surfaced early on, argues that reliability isn't sufficient for justification. The principle example here is due to Laurence BonJour (1980). His strongest example describes a subject, Norman, who has a perfectly reliable clairvoyance faculty, but no evidence or reasons for or against the general possibility of a clairvoyant power or for or against his possessing one. One day Norman's clairvoyance faculty produces in him a belief that the President is in New York City, but with no accompanying perception-like experience, just the belief. Intuitively, says BonJour, he isn't justified in holding this belief; but reliabilism implies that he is. Similar examples were offered by Keith Lehrer (1990) and Alvin Plantinga (1993). We will re-visit these cases in section 4.

A fourth problem for reliabilism—perhaps the most discussed problem—is the generality problem. Originally formulated by Goldman in "What Is Justified Belief?", it has been pressed more systematically by Feldman (1985) and Conee and Feldman (1998). Any particular belief is the product of a token causal process in the subject's mind/brain, which occurs at a particular time and place. Such a process token can be "typed", however, in many broader or narrower ways. Each type will have its own associated level of reliability, commonly distinct from the levels of reliability of other types it instantiates. Which repeatable type should be selected for purposes of assigning a reliability number to the process token? If no (unique) type can be selected, what establishes the justificational status of the resulting belief? Conee and Feldman (1998) lay down three requirements for a solution to the generality problem. First, the solution must be "principled" rather than ad hoc. Second, the type selected should have a reliability plausibly correlated with the justificational status of the ensuing belief. Third, the solution must

remain true to the spirit of reliabilism. They argue, however, that prospects for finding such a solution are bleak.

A fifth problem, the problem of bootstrapping (or "easy knowledge"), is due to Jonathan Vogel (2000) and Stewart Cohen (2002). Roxanne is a driver who believes whatever her gas gauge "says" about the state of her fuel tank, although she has no antecedent reasons to believe it is reliable. Roxanne often looks at the gauge and arrives at beliefs like the following: "On this occasion the gauge reads 'F' and F", where the second conjunct implies that the tank is full. Since the perceptual process by which she arrives at the belief that the gauge reads 'F' is reliable, and so is the process by which she arrives at the belief that the tank is full (given that the gauge functions completely properly). According to reliabilism, therefore, her belief in the indicated conjunction should be justified. Now Roxanne deduces the proposition, "On this occasion, the gauge is reading accurately." And from (multiple examples of) this she induces "The gauge is reliable (in general)". Finally, with a little more deduction she concludes she is justified in believing that her gas tank is full. Since deduction and induction are reliable processes, Roxanne must also be justified in believing that her gas gauge is full. Suppose Roxanne does this repeatedly, without ever getting independent information about the gauge's reliability. Is she really justified in this? Definitely not, say Vogel and Cohen, because such bootstrapping amounts to epistemic circularity; it sanctions its own legitimacy (no matter what). So reliabilism gets this wrong.

A final problem (for present purposes) is the so-called "value problem". Plato claimed that knowledge is more valuable than true belief, and many authors concur with his suggestion. This raises the puzzle of why this should be so. What extra value does knowledge have as compared with true belief? Focusing on process reliabilism, the question is whether reliabilism can explain this value difference. (Although our present topic is justification, not knowledge, this organizational matter will be ignored.) Reliabilism's answer, it would seem, is that causation by a reliable process confers extra value on a belief so as to make it justified and/or knowledge. This suggestion is criticized by several philosophers: Jones (1997), Swinburne (1999), Zagzebski (1996, 2003), Riggs (2002), and Kvanvig (2003). Zagzebski's example brings the point home. Consider a cup of espresso, she says, that is produced by a reliable espresso machine.

[T]he reliability of the source [the expresso machine] does not … give the product an additional boost of value. If the espresso tastes good, it makes no difference if it comes from an unreliable machine. (2003: 13)

Similarly, the epistemic value of a belief cannot be raised by the reliability of the source.