

RELIABILISM AND THE GENERALITY PROBLEM

By Sam Sedaei

One of the most well-known ways of responding to Gattier's challenge¹ to the traditional analysis of knowledge is *reliabilism*. Not only reliabilism offers a response to Gattier's ideas and examples, it is an influential view beyond the question of how to revise the justified true belief analysis. Reliabilism, however, is no exception in being criticized by other epistemologists. The most famous objection against reliabilism is the *generality problem*, pursued by Richard Feldman. Feldman states that it is a substantial issue as to just how broadly or narrowly reliabilism is to be interpreted.² That is, depending on our understanding of the reliable cognitive process, all or none of the beliefs might appear as the output of a reliable cognitive process. However, based on the premises that construct reliabilism, and reliabilists' response to the Generality Problem, reliabilism is to a great extent defensible against many objections proposed by epistemologists such as Feldman.

Reliabilism is an extension of causal theories. Therefore, the belief is appropriate if it is causally connected to features in an environment. For instance I know that there is water in the glass because there is a causal connection between my belief and the water in the glass. Reliabilism makes a precise connection between justification and truth. There are two versions of reliabilism. In the case of water and glass, assuming that there really is a glass of water on the table, it is clear that there is no accident that someone believes that there is. This observation refers to a version of reliabilism known as the *reliable indicator view*. In this version, perceptual beliefs count as knowledge. The second

¹ Gattier's challenge: one can have justified belief without that belief necessarily being knowledge.

² P 76, Crumley, Jack, *An introduction to epistemology*, 1998.

version of reliabilism is called the *reliable process theory*. This version views perception as a reliable belief-forming process. In other words, beliefs are formed as a result of process of perception, such as vision, which is considered reliable.

Even though reliabilism is popular among many theorists, it has faced significant criticism over three major issues specifically; The first one has to do with generality problem; The second one involves the necessity of reliability for justification; and the third one concerns the question of whether reliability in a process is sufficient for justification.³ The latter two problems reflect the idea that reliability is not the source of epistemic justification. Generality Problem, however, has always been a major criticism against reliabilism which concerns reliabilism theorists.

Generality Problem questions the method by which one classify different processes as being reliable. For instance the reliabilist wants us to count processes such as memory and vision as reliable. But it is not exactly clear what cognitive processes have been used to decide the reliability of the processes mentioned above. Everything needs to be an instance or a type of something. For instance we can imagine a basketball. It's a ball; it's a sport equipment; it's spherical; it is a type of thing that is made out of synthetic; and it's a type of thing that belongs to it's owner. In other words, basketball is an example of a token of a type, or anything that has the specified characteristics. The Generality Problem arises because every belief is like a token, which means it is formed by different types of processes. The reliabilists need to provide a means by which we would be able to distinguish between types of processes by which different beliefs have been formed. The reason is that the only way we can determine whether a belief is

³ P 75, Crumley, Jack, *An introduction to epistemology*, 1998.

justified or not is by knowing the type of process that forms the belief.

An example would be useful in demonstrating the idea. Let's assume I spot someone on the other side of the street whom I think is my friend. What type of process helped me produce this belief? It could have been my perception or my vision. Or, one of these types: my vision in rainy weather; vision on a Friday afternoon; vision across a street with many cars in it. Theorists that ask the Generality Problem need the reliabilists to tell them how specific the processes should be described.

Reliabilists take the Generality Problem criticism seriously and have offered responses, which involved revisions to reliabilism in some cases. Goldman attempts to identify relevant process types by responding to the Generality problem in different steps. First, he asks what is meant by a property being "causally operative." The idea is that the property's difference makes a difference to the outcome of a causal process.⁴ For instance if I am trying to learn how to ride a bike, wearing my Hard Rock Café T-shirt would be irrelevant to my success. However if it is a rainy day, I would have a harder time in learning how to ride. So then we might think of causally operative properties as those that are causally relevant to the belief that one has. Recall the example mentioned in the last paragraph about me seeing my friend in the street. The properties of my seeing my friend on a Friday afternoon does not seem causally relevant to my consequent belief. But the properties of my seeing my friend across a street full of cars might be causally relevant. Going back to riding a bike example, in order to know whether the color of my shirt is causally relevant, we first need to know what it is that I am doing. For instance if I am trying to learn how to ride a bike, then we would naturally count the color of my shirt as irrelevant. But if I am trying to impress the girl across the

⁴ P 88, Crumley, Jack, *An introduction to epistemology*, 1998.

street with my stylish Hard Rock Café T-shirt, then my shirt's properties would eventually be unsuccessful. One might also say that the rainy weather may be relevant to my visual that a specific person is my friend. But the same rainy weather would be irrelevant to my belief that a certain person is my friend.

Reliabilism's main idea is that our epistemic successes are connected to our actual cognitive successes in copying with the world around us.⁵ The criticism surrounding reliabilism come from the way in which reliabilism develops, since this development occurs in an externalist manner. Generality Problem presents a different kind of issue comparing to other criticisms. Even though at some points, it even seems to threaten the coherency of reliabilism, there is some reason to think that the problem might be solvable to some extent. But one aspect of reliabilism is certain and that is the connection between truth and justification cannot be ignored.

⁵ P 89, Crumley, Jack, *An introduction to epistemology*, 1998.