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[13] Evolution and Epistemology

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DARWIN IN PHILOSOPHY

0. Outline

1. Introduction
2. Reliabilism
3. The problem of 'accidental reliability'

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DARWIN IN PHILOSOPHY

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1. Introduction

- In the last lecture:
 - Introduction of the ‘proper functionalist’ approach to warrant/knowledge:

Warrant/knowledge requires, *inter alia*, production of belief by faculties operating in accordance with the way they were ‘designed’ to operate (by an intelligent designer or by natural-selection).
 - We noted:
 - This view is generally framed in terms of *biological function* (requirement of production of belief in accordance with the biological function of the relevant cognitive faculties).

1. Introduction

- In view of the debate over how to define biological function (e.g. dispositions vs etiologies), best frame the debate *directly* in terms of design.
- Indeed, the examples cited by Plantinga/Millikan in motivating the account turn out to hinge specifically on matters concerning the *etiologies* of various cognitive faculties.
- Furthermore:
 - I also told you that ‘proper functionalism’ is externalist, foundationalist and somewhat akin to reliabilism.
 - So the best way to introduce the view: to introduce it as an attempt to patch up reliabilism (or provide satisfactory version thereof).

2. Reliabilism

- Reliabilism (in a fairly broad sense):
 - An attempt to analyse a subject S 's having knowledge of P or warranted belief that P in terms of S 's being likely to believe the truth regarding whether or not P , conditional on the truth of certain relevant propositions.
- This formulation should be broad enough to subsume quite a number accounts found in the literature (including some counterfactual-based accounts in the style of Nozick [1981]).
- So we have *two* somewhat different reliabilist projects:
 - analysing *knowledge* (e.g. Nozick [1981])
 - analysing *warrant/justification* (e.g. Goldman [1979])

2. Reliabilism

- Generic format for reliabilist accounts of *warrant*:
 - $W_S(P)$ (= ' S is warranted in believing that P ') iff (i) $B_S(P)$ (= ' S believes that P '), (ii) the probability of S forming a true belief regarding whether or not P is high, conditional on the truth of certain relevant propositions.
- Different versions of reliabilism can then be generated by varying the interpretation of 'relevant propositions'.
- For example (from Goldman [1979]): $W_S(P)$ iff (i) $B_S(P)$, (ii) the probability of S forming a true belief as to whether or not P is high, conditional on that belief (a) being formed by a process of the same cognitive type as the process that formed S 's belief that P , and (b) being formed in an environment of the same type as the environment in which S 's belief that P was formed.

2. Reliabilism

- Note: this analysis is *history-involving*, making warrant hinge on features of the etiology of the belief (features of the process that generated *S*'s actual belief that *P*). This is a common feature of many accounts of warrant.
- Some general selling points of reliabilist analyses of warrant:
 - They seem to provide a straightforward *account of why we value warranted belief* (assuming we positively value true belief): having warrant makes true belief (conditionally) probable.
 - Arguably, (i) they provide the only principled account of *moderate foundationalism* available on the market and (ii) moderate foundationalism is itself the most attractive view of the structure of justification available on the market.

2. Reliabilism

- Recap of the ('regress') argument for *foundationalism*:
 - Foundationalism is often motivated by noting that the following set of propositions is inconsistent (with the conjunction of (1)-(4) entailing the falsity of (5)):
 - (1) There are warranted beliefs.
 - (2) Every warranted belief derives its warrant from some warranted belief(s).
 - (3) No belief derives its warrant from itself.
 - (4) If a belief *x* confers warrant on *y*, and *y* confers warrant on *z*, then *x* confers warrant on *z*.
 - (5) There is no infinite sequence of beliefs each of which obtains its warrant from its predecessor.

2. Reliabilism

- Something has to go: denying (1) (i.e. embracing justificatory skepticism) is unpopular, as are denying (3) (i.e. embracing circular coherentism) or (5) (i.e. embracing infinitism). Furthermore, (4) seems ok as well.
- Conclusion: we should deny (2) and hold that some beliefs (aka ‘basic’ beliefs) do not derive their warrant from the warrant of some belief.
- Recap of the argument for *moderate foundationalism*:
 - Problem: if some beliefs have this non-derivative warrant, *what is it about them* by virtue of which they enjoy that status?

2. Reliabilism

- Suggestion (aka ‘classical’ foundationalism): basic beliefs are non-derivatively warranted because they are infallible –e.g. the holding of a basic belief entails its truth.
- Problem: aside from such exceptional cases as introspective beliefs and the like, classical foundationalism will provide us with too few basic beliefs to be able to confer warrant on the rest of the beliefs that we intuitively take to be warranted.
- Suggestion (reliabilist foundationalism): relax the infallibilist requirement and simply require that basic beliefs be such that they are likely to be true, perhaps conditional on the truth of some further propositions.

2. Reliabilism

- Finally, high vs low conditional probability of true opinion seems to square with our division of our epistemic evaluations of beliefs into good vs bad:
 - Former: beliefs produced by rigorous scientific methodology, visual beliefs formed in optimal weather conditions, introspective beliefs, etc.
 - Latter: beliefs produced by wishful thinking or under the influence of alcohol/drugs, visual beliefs formed in poor weather conditions, etc.
- Ok, let's move on to reliabilist accounts of knowledge...

2. Reliabilism

- Generic format for reliabilist accounts of *knowledge*:
 $K_S(P)$ (= 'S knows that P') iff (i) $B_S(P)$, (ii) P and (iii) the probability of S forming a true belief regarding whether or not P is high, conditional on the truth of certain relevant propositions.
- Here again: different interpretations of 'relevant propositions' lead to different versions of reliabilism.
- For example, consider a (slightly stronger) variation on one of Nozick's [1981] suggestions:
 $K_S(P)$ iff (i) $B_S(P)$, (ii) P , (iii) $\neg P \square \rightarrow B_S(\neg P)$ (iv) $P \square \rightarrow B_S(P)$.

2. Reliabilism

- Note: on Nozick's reading of counterfactuals, here, $P \square \rightarrow B_S(P)$ iff $B_S(P)$ throughout a certain range of nearby P -worlds.
- This proposal can be easily translated into our 'generic' format (not so for the weaker, original version, but nevermind).
- Let W denote the proposition that is true in, and only in, the closest $\neg P$ -world.
- Let W^* denote the proposition that is true in, and only in, the relevant range of nearby P -worlds.
- Assuming that $\Pr(W), \Pr(W^*) \neq 0$, the conjunction of (iii) and (iv) is then equivalent to: the probability of forming a true belief as to whether or not P conditional on $W \vee W^* = 1$.

2. Reliabilism

- The main selling point of reliabilist analyses of knowledge: they seem to handle some classic Gettier cases. E.g.:
Brown in Boston: Smith tells Jones he owns a Ford. From this, Jones infers that Smith owns a Ford and then that either Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston. But it turns out that Smith has lied. However, it also happens that, unbeknownst to Jones, Brown has just gone to Boston for the weekend. Jones doesn't know that Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston.
- On the Nozickian account, for instance, Jones fails to know because:
In the nearest possible world in which neither Smith owns a Ford nor Brown goes to Boston, Jones still falsely believes that Smith owns a Ford or Brown is in Boston.

3. The problem of ‘accidental reliability’

- In spite of these appealing features, Plantinga [1988] argues that reliabilist analyses of both warrant and knowledge face a straightforward objection (others have made similar points):

The analyses provided are too liberal – they make both warrant and knowledge *too easy to come by*.

- The relevant counterexamples are sometimes known as ‘accidental reliability’ cases.
- Plantinga [1988] (i.e. the set reading for today) provides quite a catalogue of these.
- I’ll just give you just one...

3. The problem of ‘accidental reliability’

Fruit: Mr Popov’s mother was exposed to abnormally high levels of radiation during pregnancy. As a result of a freak genetic mutation brought about by this exposure, Popov has been blessed by an unusual gift: he has a strange talent for forming true beliefs as to whether fruit is ripe or not. Indeed, the mutation has simultaneously (i) rendered his visual system unusually sensitive to UV radiations and (ii) wired his brain in such a way that, upon detecting a high level of UV radiation emanating from a fruit he unwittingly forms the belief that it is ripe. As it so happens, high levels of UV radiation are in fact a reliable indicator of ripeness in fruit.

3. The problem of 'accidental reliability'

- Intuitions (do you agree?): Mr Popov doesn't have warranted belief regarding - or knowledge of - fruit ripeness.

The truth of his beliefs about the matter is *entirely down to chance* (it is pot luck that the mutation wired up his brain in the right way).
- Plantinga argues that if this intuition is correct, Goldman/Nozick-style reliabilist accounts have a problem. For example:
 - According to the Goldman-style account of warrant mentioned above, Mr Popov has warranted beliefs wrt the ripeness of fruit (his beliefs were produced by a process of a type such that beliefs produced in that fashion, in a normal environment, are likely to be true).

3. The problem of 'accidental reliability'

- According to the Nozick-style account of knowledge mentioned above, he has knowledge wrt the ripeness of fruit ((a) in nearby worlds in which a given fruit is ripe, he still believes that it is and (b) in the nearest world in which it isn't, he believes that it isn't).
- The reliabilist seems to have three options here in response to these cases:
 - (i) Deny that the subjects lack knowledge/warrant and hang on to the analysis as it is.
 - (ii) Grant that the subjects lack knowledge/warrant, but hang on to the core reliabilist intuition whilst supplementing it with an additional requirement.

3. The problem of 'accidental reliability'

(iii) Grant that the subjects lack knowledge/warrant, get rid of the core reliabilist intuition altogether and start afresh.

- Plantinga takes option (ii): 'Reliability is not sufficient for positive epistemic status. An extra condition is needed' (Plantinga [1988:31])
- His suggestion:
 - (i) Beliefs that would be, if true, only true by *pure accident* neither have warrant nor can qualify as knowledge.
 - (i) The only kind of beliefs that wouldn't be, if true, only true by pure accident, are those beliefs that were formed *in accordance with the way the organism was designed to function*.

Reference

- Goldman, A. [1979]: 'What Is Justified Belief?', in G. Pappas (ed.) *Justification and Knowledge*. D. Reidel, 1-23. Reprinted in E. Sosa & J. Kim (eds.) [2000] *Epistemology, An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 340-353.
- Nozick, R. [1981]: *Philosophical Explanation*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Plantinga, A. [1988]: 'Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function', *Philosophical Perspectives* Vol 2: Epistemology. Pp 1-50.

Next lecture: Evolution & Epistemology (ctd.)

- Reading: try to cover some more Plantinga material from the Moodle.