

SOLVING THE CURRENT GENERALITY PROBLEM

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ABSTRACT: Many current popular views in epistemology require a belief to be the result of a reliable process (aka ‘method of belief formation’ or ‘cognitive capacity’) in order to count as knowledge. This means that the generality problem rears its head, i.e. the kind of process in question has to be spelt out, and this looks difficult to do without being either over or under-general. In response to this problem, I propose that we should adopt a more fine-grained account of the epistemic basing relation, at which point the generality problem becomes easy to solve.

KEYWORDS: basing relation, generality problem, process reliabilism

1. The Generality Problem

Despite the widely agreed failure of process reliabilism as a theory of justification, process reliabilism is alive and well in contemporary discussions of the theory of knowledge. Although epistemologists may not often refer to themselves as process reliabilists, all of the currently popular positions on the theory of knowledge, from modal epistemologies like safety and sensitivity theories, to virtue reliabilism, include versions of a process reliabilist condition (which is to say that they all consider it a *necessary* condition for a belief to be knowledge that it was formed as the result of a reliable process). They look to how a belief was formed (the relevant ‘method of belief formation’ as modal reliabilists say, or the belief forming ‘capacities’ or ‘abilities’ involved as virtue reliabilists say) and require that beliefs so-formed are reliable (generally modally reliable).

Given this, one well-known problem for traditional justification-centric process reliabilism, ‘the generality problem,’¹ takes on a renewed urgency, since it also applies to many currently popular positions.² In a nutshell, the generality problem is the fact that an instance of belief formation can be described as the

¹ See Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, “The Generality Problem for Reliabilism,” *Philosophical Studies* 89:1 (1998): 1-29.

² This is in addition to the argument made by Bishop, claiming that any plausible account of justification is going to have to face something like the generality problem. See Michael Bishop, “Why the Generality Problem is Everybody’s Problem,” *Philosophical Studies* 151:2 (2010): 285-298.

result of a number of different processes and the process reliabilist needs a principled way of determining which one exactly has to be reliable (in whatever sense of 'reliability' is at play) in order for their process reliability condition to be met. Furthermore, there is a potential trap in store for the unwitting process reliabilist: make the relevant processes too narrow and specific to particular occasions and the condition becomes too easily met (at the limit, the process will be so specific as to be a one-case, unrepeatable, event and so whether a belief is reliably formed will collapse into the question of whether it is actually true or not). On the other hand, make the process too broad and epistemically important features of the way that the belief was actually formed will end up being overlooked. For instance, if we count all the visually based beliefs that I form in fake-barn county in the same way then we have missed out something important, since we have rolled together unreliable beliefs about the presence of barns and perfectly reliable beliefs about the flashing 'check engine' light on my dashboard. The generality problem poses a challenge for process reliabilists then: to give a principled account of the relevant kind of process and to do so in such a way that it avoids the bind of being either too general *or* too specific.

When looking to assess the reliability of some belief, the generality problem demands that we specify which other (actual or counterfactual) cases of believing that *p* have to be accurate in order for the belief under consideration to count as reliable. It may seem that a modal reliability condition, like safety, provides an answer to this question: we need to look at just those beliefs which are formed in nearby possible worlds.³ However, not *all* of the nearby worlds in which one believes that *p* are in fact relevant to the safety of one's belief. This is because the safety of a belief is relativised to the *method* by which it was formed. Roughly put, it does not matter if you might easily have falsely believed that *p*, so long as you wouldn't have done so by forming your belief in the same way as you actually do.

So although *only* nearby worlds are relevant to assessing the reliability of a belief according to safety, not *all* nearby worlds are (only those in which one forms the belief that *p* in the same way as one actually does). So the generality problem is not yet fully solved until we can give an account of the method of belief formation at play in a given case, and of course do so in a way which avoids the bind of being either too general or too specific.

³ Of course, one may worry that this is too vague a notion to do the job required, but let us not dwell on this point.

2. Comesaña's Solution

Juan Comesaña takes up this challenge.⁴ He suggests that the relevant kind of process (the one which needs to be reliable if your belief is to be knowledge)⁵ is forming the belief that you did on *the basis of the evidence* that you did. I think that this focus on epistemic basing and reasons for belief is right: those are exactly the epistemically relevant things (they are exactly the kinds of things that matter for justification too) and so are exactly what we should be looking at. However Comesaña's suggestion involving very narrow processes is misguided; it falls into the trap of being too specific. Comesaña's suggestion is that:

A belief is well-founded iff it is based on evidence E and "the type producing a belief that p based on evidence E is a reliable type."⁶

The problem with this is that if E refers to a very specific body of evidence, then the process is too narrow. For example, consider this twist on a fake barn case:

Red barn⁷

Henry is driving through fake barn county (an area populated with fake barn facades) and (twist 1) Henry *knows* that he is driving through fake barn county. *But* what he doesn't know is that (twist 2) the fake barns in fake barn county are always green, and the real ones always red. He sees a red barn in a field by the road and he believes on the basis of this visual evidence that there is a red barn in the field.

Clearly Henry's belief that there is a red barn isn't justified and it isn't knowledge. The problem is that his belief is formed in an unreliable way (e.g. it isn't safe or sensitive, and as he continues to form beliefs like this as he drives through fake barn county, many of them are false). But given that Henry's evidence E is his visual perception as of a red barn, and the belief that he forms on this basis is that there is a red barn, then Henry's belief forming process is reliable on Comesaña's account. After all, Henry's perceptions as of red barns *do* track the presence of red barns in the actual world as well as relevant counterfactual ones.

To avoid this problem, Comesaña's account needs to broaden the conception of the relevant evidence E, so that it refers not to a specific body of

⁴ Juan Comesaña, "A Well-Founded Solution to the Generality Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 129:1 (2006): 27-47.

⁵ Or, in the context that he approaches the challenge, justification.

⁶ Juan Comesaña, "A Well-Founded Solution," 38.

⁷ Kripke used a similar red barn case, but where Henry was not aware that he was in red barn country, and in relation to a point about knowledge. See Saul Kripke, *Philosophical Troubles: Collected Papers Vol I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 186.

evidence, but to a more general kind of evidence. Only in this way will the relevant method of belief formation be applicable to a suitably wide range of cases. He needs to give an account of what *kinds* of beliefs, formed on the basis of what *kind* of evidence, need to be reliable in order for a given belief count as knowledge. In other words, we have to say in which possible worlds does a belief that *p* count as being formed via the same method. But this is just an epicycle of the generality problem: the challenge remains to specify what kind of process is the relevant one, the one that has to be reliable.

3. A Novel Solution

My suggestion is that we should work with a more fine-grained conception of the roles that reasons play in belief formation, conceiving of them in a more psychologically plausible way. The usual method employed in epistemology involves attempting to capture the process of belief formation and the nature of reasons in terms of a picture on which a body of evidence stands in a causal and rationalising relation to a particular propositional belief. It seems to me that this is too coarse-grained a picture of what goes on to capture everything of epistemic interest. Once we have a more fine-grained alternative in view, the generality problem will not look so problematic.

Consider an example:

In the morning you see £200 on the kitchen table and over breakfast Tina tells you that she is buying something off of a friend today. Later on you see Tina's friend Sam coming up to the house with an interestingly shaped box and a little while later you hear the sound of an electric guitar coming from Tina's room. On the basis of everything that you have seen and heard that day, you believe that Tina has bought an electric guitar from Sam for £200.

In this case, a simple picture accounting for what happens is that you have a certain body of perceptions as of certain events, this body of evidence constitutes a reason for you to form some belief, and so you form that belief. In other words, the sum of everything that you have seen and heard gives you sufficient reason to believe that Tina has bought an electric guitar from Sam for £200, and you form that belief on this basis. While this is doubtless true, this coarse-grained description fails to capture some of the important facts about the reasons you have for your believing as you do and the way that you form your belief as a result.

If you had not seen the £200 on the kitchen table then you would not have had reason to believe that Tina has bought an electric guitar from Sam for £200, you just would have had reason to believe that Tina has bought an electric guitar from Sam. Relatedly, if you had seen £400, not £200, on the kitchen table then

you would have had reason to believe that Tina has bought an electric guitar from Sam for £400, not £200. (One natural way of expressing what these considerations show is to say that your reason for believing that Tina bought a guitar from Sam *for £200* is your seeing that amount of money on the kitchen table.)

Reflection on this case seems to show that you have reason to believe as you do because various of the particular things that you have seen and heard give you reason to endorse different fine-grained aspects of the content of the proposition that Tina bought a guitar from Sam for £200. The reasons for which you believe are not all reasons for you to believe the whole of that particular proposition. They do not all give you some small degree of indiscriminate evidence for the whole proposition. Instead, each of the things that you have seen and heard gives you compelling evidence for some *particular aspect* of the content of the proposition: the who, the what, the how much, etc.

On this view, the epistemic reason-relation can relate quite specific features of one's body of evidence to fine-grained elements of the content of a given belief. More generally, this is an example of the fact that reasons are combinatorial and so the fact that some evidence base provides reason for a particular belief owes to the combinatorial effect of a complex of contributory reasons. (Which can be much more complicated than the toy example I have given.)

(The claim that some kind of combinatorial structure applies to the kinds of reasons that ordinary human thought engages with – even if the details do not exactly match up with the rough sketch that I have employed here, which has focused on a simple compositional case – can be argued for on the basis of the systematicity and productivity of our responsiveness to reasons. This indicates that combinatorial structure is at work in even seemingly simple cases like direct perceptual beliefs.)

With this alternative understanding of the structure of reasons as productively and systematically combinatorial, solving the generality problem becomes simple. Comesaña was along the right lines in thinking that process reliabilists should be focusing on the reasons which a subject is responding to in forming a particular belief. But we must then note that the reasons which a subject is responding to have a complex, combinatorial, structure. There is not just one kind of reason contributing to a given belief; there are many, all making individual contributions to *what* exactly there is overall reason to believe. Given this picture, a process reliabilist should maintain that *all* of these need to be reliable in order for a belief to be knowledge. This avoids both of the traps mentioned earlier: by requiring the reliability of *all* of these kinds of reasons responsiveness, nothing of epistemic importance is left out; but we do not consider

anything *too highly specific* since each of the individual kinds of reasons responsiveness involved can and would apply to many other beliefs as well and their overall reliability will therefore depend on their truth-conduciveness in these other cases too.

For instance, in the red barn case Henry believes that there is a red *barn* because of the barn-like quality of his perception, but this is not a reliable way of forming beliefs since it would easily lead him to have false beliefs about green barns.

4. Conclusion

The generality problem poses a question to process reliabilists: how should we understand the ‘process’ in process reliabilism; *what exactly* has to be reliable in order for a belief to be knowledge? I have argued that the answer we should give is that the *processes*, plural, relevant to this epistemic evaluation are *all* of the *many* kinds of reasons responsiveness which are involved in the formation of that belief, in accordance with an understanding of the structure of reasons as complex and combinatorial. This gives us a principled solution to the generality problem.