

Reliabilism and Relativism

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Abstract Process reliabilism says that a belief is justified iff the belief-forming process that produced it is sufficiently reliable. But any token belief-forming process is an instance of a number of different belief-forming process types. The problem of specifying the relevant type is known as the ‘generality problem’ for process reliabilism. This paper proposes a broadly relativist solution to the generality problem. The thought is that the relevant belief-forming process type is relative to the context. While the basic idea behind the solution is from Mark Heller (1995), the solution defended here departs from Heller on a crucial point. Because of this departure, my solution avoids a serious problem with Heller’s solution.

Process reliabilism says that a belief is justified iff the belief-forming process that produced it is sufficiently reliable (see Goldman 1979). But *types* of belief-forming processes are reliable, not token belief-forming processes, and any token belief-forming process is a token of a number of different belief-forming process types. Take my belief that there is an oak tree in front of me. The process by which this belief was produced is a token of the following types: perception of a visual stimulus, perception of a visual stimulus in normal conditions, perception of an object shaped like an oak tree, and so on.¹ Which of these process types is the relevant process type? The question is important because, first, absent an answer to this question process reliabilism is an incomplete theory of justification and, second, it may be that some of the process types are reliable whereas others aren’t. Call this the ‘generality problem’.²

I will propose a broadly relativist solution to the problem. According to this solution, whether a given process type is relevant is relative to the context. This has the consequence that a belief may count as

¹ Adler and Levin (2002, pp. 90-4) argue that these descriptions refer to the same process, but at different levels of generality. I set this aside here, but see Comesaña (2006, pp. 35-7) for criticism.

² While e.g. Goldman (1979, p. 11), recognises the problem, it is most forcefully stated in Conee and Feldman (1998).

reliable and so as justified relative to one context but not relative to another.³ While Mark Heller (1995) defends a similar solution, the solution defended here differs in that it appeals to a far broader notion of context. As we will see, this means my solution avoids a serious problem with Heller's solution. I start by outlining the relativist solution. I then contrast my solution with Heller's. I finish by saying something about relativism in epistemology.

Relativism and Generality

Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (1998) argue that a reliabilist solution to the generality problem must provide a general principle we can use to identify the relevant belief-forming process type instantiated by each belief-forming process token. Consider one of their candidates (which they credit to Alston 1995 and Baergen 1995):

PRINCIPLE: The relevant type for any belief-forming process token t is the psychological kind that is part of the best psychological explanation of the belief that results from t (1998, p. 17).

It is plausible that PRINCIPLE will narrow down the set of relevant belief-forming process types. But, as Conee & Feldman argue, there will almost always be more than one actually operative psychologically real type for each belief-forming process token (p. 12). For instance, the various belief-forming process types instantiated by the process by which I formed my belief that there is an oak tree in front of me - perception of a visual stimulus, perception of a visual stimulus in normal conditions, perception of an object shaped like an oak tree – are all psychologically real. Because all of these types seem good candidates for explaining my belief, PRINCIPLE does not solve the generality problem.

There are two problems with Conee & Feldman's argument here. First, as Heller (1995) emphasises, it is unclear why a reliabilist solution to the generality problem has to provide a general principle. Consider an example from Heller (p. 503). My car is reliable. When I turn the key, it almost always starts. So the process by which my car started this morning is a reliable process. This token process is an instance of any number of process types: starting in normal conditions, starting after the key has been turned, starting in the morning, and so on. Being able to distinguish my car from cars that don't start reliably doesn't require a general principle for determining what the relevant process type is.

³ That is, if we assume that some of the relevant process types are reliable, whereas others aren't.

Similarly, being able to distinguish reliable from non-reliable belief-forming process types doesn't require a general principle for determining what the relevant process type is.

Second, whether a candidate explanation of some phenomenon is the best explanation of that phenomenon is plausibly a context-relative matter.⁴ To see why, consider a mundane example.⁵ A car has crashed at a roundabout. The driver of the car was fed up waiting for his chance to move, and got impatient. This isn't an isolated incident. Due to bad traffic, a lot of cars crash at this roundabout. Here are two candidate explanations of the crash. First, the car crashed because of the impatience of the driver. Second, the car crashed because of bad traffic. Both candidates are explanations of the crash - it would be true to say both that the crash was caused by the impatience of the driver and that it was caused by bad traffic. In general, a myriad of factors can be cited as 'the' explanation of any given event. So the key question is which of the two candidates is the *best* explanation. And, to answer this question, we need to know what the explanation is *for*. Take a jury that has been charged with determining who was responsible for the crash. While the bad traffic conditions may play a role in their deliberations - e.g. by mitigating the severity of the offence - it seems clear that, for their purposes, the driver's reckless behaviour is far more important than the traffic conditions. Now take someone charged with improving transport in the city who is investigating why a number of crashes, including this one, happened. Here, it seems clear that, for these purposes, the bad traffic conditions are more important than the reckless behaviour of individual drivers. So, which of our explanations is best depends on the context, and in particular on the purpose for which the explanation is required.

I want to emphasise three features of the sorts of contexts I have in mind. I will call contexts with these three features 'broad contexts'.

The first feature is that these contexts are objective. What is at issue is whether a candidate explanation really is the best given the purposes for which it is needed, not whether anyone thinks it is the best. This is important because we can be wrong about which candidate explanation is best. This is most obvious in cases where we are unaware of various candidate explanations. Imagine that the jury is unaware that the driver behaved recklessly because this didn't come to light during the court case.

⁴ For the view that causal explanation talk is generally context-relative see Lewis (1986).

⁵ This example is from Greco (2008, p. 420), who appeals to it in a related context, although not in the context of discussing the generality problem.

Whether the jury is aware of it or not, the best explanation of the crash given their purposes is his reckless driving. (If the jury were to later become aware that the driver was reckless we would say that they have “realised” that this is the best explanation, which suggests it always was the best explanation, given their purposes).⁶

The second feature is that broad contexts will not give us a complicated general principle which says, for each context, what the best explanation is in that context. If contexts were to give us such principles, it would have to be possible to identify some sort of ‘function’ from features of the context to the best explanation. Perhaps this can be done in simple cases, like our case of the car crash. But there is no reason to think it can be done in more complicated cases. Consider the financial crash in 2008. Whether a candidate explanation of why the financial crash happened is the best explanation depends on the context. In some contexts, an explanation that involves subprime mortgages will be the best. In other contexts, an explanation that involves the boom and bust cycles in contemporary capitalist economies will be the best. But it would be foolhardy to think there is always a way of computing a function that will tell us which explanations will be best in which contexts. To say that the best explanation depends on the context is to say that debate about which explanation is the best can legitimately involve citing factors of our present context, such as the purposes for which the explanation is required. It is not to say that the facts about explanation are somehow already ‘contained in’ the context.

The third feature is that broad contexts differ from what is called the ‘context of utterance’ or the ‘conversational context’.⁷ We can think of a conversational context as a conversational situation in which the participants make various conversational moves - they assert things, challenge assertions, and retract their assertions if necessary. The theoretical role of such contexts is to provide the referents for context-sensitive terms of natural languages (see Kaplan 1989 and Lewis 1979). For instance, expressions like “I”, “tall” and maybe “justified” are context-sensitive: the contribution they make to

⁶ While more could be said about the notion of ‘being best given one’s purposes’, I assume it is sufficiently intuitive to be useful.

⁷ Strictly speaking, there are two options here. The first is to distinguish broad contexts from conversational contexts, as in the main body of the text. The second is to subsume conversational contexts under broad contexts. I favour the first option because (as I argue below) conversational contexts aren’t usually taken to be objective, unlike my broad contexts (but see Gauker 1998).

the propositions expressed by sentences containing them depends on the context. If I say “I am tired” I express the proposition *XX is tired*.⁸ If you say “I am tired” you express the proposition *YY is tired*. But my broad contexts are not intended to play (or, at least, to primarily play) this theoretical role. Rather, broad contexts are what we need to determine which candidate explanation of a phenomenon is the best explanation in any given case. For any given phenomenon we have a large number of candidate explanations, and which one of these candidates has the property of being the best explanation depends on the purposes for which the explanation is needed, i.e. on the broad context. In different contexts different explanations will have this property.

Applying this to the generality problem, the tentative solution is that the belief-forming process type instantiated by a given belief-forming process token is relative to the context. So, in each context, there will be a single belief-forming process type that is the best explanation of the relevant belief token, and which type this is will depend on the purposes of whoever is evaluating whether a token belief is justified or not. Take a concrete belief, e.g. Ravonda’s belief that a postal worker is outside her front door. The belief-forming process type relevant for evaluating whether Ravonda’s belief is justified depends on the purpose of the evaluator. This leads us to Heller, who defends a solution to the generality problem along these lines.⁹

Heller’s Solution

Imagine Ravonda is looking through a window when she forms the belief that a postal worker is outside her front door (Heller 1995, p. 509). Ravonda’s belief-forming process instantiates a range of psychologically real belief-forming process types. What these types are depend on a combination of

⁸ I use italics for propositions here.

⁹ The cognoscenti will wonder whether this solution is ‘contextualist’ or ‘relativist’. The usual way of distinguishing contextualism and relativism is at the level of semantics (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, Ch. 1, Ch. 3), but I prefer to distinguish the views at the level of metaphysics. The contextualist version would say, roughly, that there is no such thing as being the best explanation of a token belief *simpliciter*. Rather, explanations can only have the relational property of being best relative to this-or-that context. The upshot is that token beliefs can only have the relational property of being justified relative to this-or-that context. The relativist version would say that the property of being the best explanation of a token belief is a genuinely relative property. The upshot is that token beliefs have the non-relational property of being justified in some contexts, and lack that property in other contexts. While making sense of genuinely relative properties takes some work, for a spirited attempt see Einheuser (2008). For my purposes here I stay neutral between these two views.

her internal mental processes and her external environment. For instance, if Ravonda is in normal conditions, her belief forming process instantiates the type ‘visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in normal conditions’. The reliabilist says that whether Ravonda’s belief is justified depends on whether *the* belief forming process type that produced her belief is a reliable process. Heller points out that definite description phrases like “the belief-forming process type” are, in general, context-sensitive (p. 505). If I say “the cat is on the mat”, the context in which I say this – the context of utterance or conversational context – determines which cat I am referring to. So Heller’s view is that whether Ravonda’s belief is justified depends on whether the belief-forming process type that is picked out by the context-sensitive phrase “the belief-forming process type” is reliable.

This strongly suggests that Heller’s proposal is best understood in terms of conversational contexts, not broad contexts.¹⁰ Recall that conversational contexts provide us with ‘parameters’ that we use to determine the referents of context-sensitive expressions. If the participants in a conversation about whether Ravonda’s belief is justified agree to focus on a particular belief-forming process, then that process will be one of the parameters we can read off this conversational context. For instance, if the participants agree that Ravonda is in normal conditions, they may settle on the belief-forming process type ‘visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in normal conditions’. If this happens, then the phrase “the belief forming process that caused Ravonda’s belief” refers to this belief-forming process type.

Unlike broad contexts, conversational contexts are usually taken to involve a mix of objective and ‘intention-sensitive’ or subjective features.¹¹ Some of the parameters that settle the reference of context-sensitive terms are clearly objective. For instance, if Saskia utters the sentence “I am tired”, her context provides a ‘speaker parameter’ that determines the referent of “I” as Saskia (see Kaplan 1989). This doesn’t change if Saskia is confused about her identity. In this sense, the speaker parameter is objective - it doesn’t depend on Saskia’s beliefs about her identity, her referential intentions, or anything like that. However, other parameters are clearly intention-sensitive/subjective. For instance, consider a context where one of the speakers says “the cat is on the mat”. Their context will provide

¹⁰ While Heller often says that definite description phrases are “richly context-sensitive”, he still seems to understand them as sensitive to the conversational context, as opposed to what I’m calling the broad context (e.g. 1995, pp. 502-4).

¹¹ Again, Gauker (1998) is an exception. Unfortunately I lack the space to deal with this issue here.

a parameter that determines the referent of “the cat”, but which cat this is will depend on things like the referential intentions of the speaker, her beliefs about which cats are around, and so on.¹²

Returning to Ravonda, her belief-forming process instantiates various belief-forming process types that are psychologically real. Now imagine a conversational context in which the participants have a lot of false beliefs about how Ravonda formed her belief. While Ravonda is in normal conditions and has normally functioning perception, they take her to be in abnormal conditions, and to not have perceptual abilities that are suited to these abnormal conditions. Because of their false beliefs, the participants agree to focus on a belief-forming process type – say, ‘visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in abnormal conditions’ – that is not instantiated by Ravonda’s actual belief-forming process. If Heller’s view is that the conversational context settles which belief-forming process type is relevant, he seems forced to say that the context provides a ‘belief-forming process parameter’ that determines the referent of “the belief-forming process that produced Ravonda’s belief” as ‘visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in abnormal conditions’.¹³ This is because it is the belief-forming process type that is relevant given the referential intentions and (false) beliefs that the conversational participants have about how Ravonda formed her belief. But Heller’s view surely gets the wrong result here. What we want to say is that the context selects one of the belief-forming process types actually instantiated by Ravonda’s belief-forming process. But, if we focus on conversational contexts, we can’t say that.¹⁴

¹² This example is taken from Stanley (2005, pp. 26-7), who uses it in the context of articulating and defending the ‘intention sensitive’ view defended here.

¹³ Heller gives the impression that he doesn’t want to give this verdict about this sort of case. He says that it is “important not to overemphasize the context’s contribution at the expense of the world’s, because if we do we will end up making our accounts of reliability and knowledge too subjective” (1995, p. 506). The problem, though, is that he doesn’t want to overemphasise the world’s contribution either. In his view, objective facts such as facts about Ravonda’s psychology are insufficient to determine a single belief-forming process type; subjective facts are required to fill the gap. But in Ravonda’s case there are no subjective facts we can use to single out *any* psychologically real belief-forming process types. If Heller insists that the subjective facts don’t fix the relevant type as ‘visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in abnormal conditions’ here, then it is unclear what does fix the relevant type (it can’t be objective facts). Thus, the generality problem would remain unsolved.

¹⁴ This objection is similar to Conee & Feldman’s (1998, pp. 20-4) objection to Heller, although I have phrased it rather differently.

This problem disappears if we replace Heller's conversational contexts with my broad contexts. Given their purposes (evaluating Ravonda's belief), the best explanation why she has her belief is that she has had a visual perception of a postal worker-shaped object in normal conditions. That the conversational participants aren't aware that this is the best explanation is beside the point. The relevant belief-forming process type is the type the participants should be considering, given their purposes, not the type they actually consider. So the way to modify Heller's view to get the right results is to replace conversational contexts with broad contexts.

Relativism in Epistemology

In contemporary epistemology a number of proposals that are 'relativist' in the broad sense meant here have been defended on the basis of a range of linguistic data (see e.g. Brogaard 2008, DeRose 2009 and MacFarlane 2014). This paper has taken a somewhat different tack. Defending reliabilism in epistemology requires solving the generality problem, and we can solve the generality problem if we adopt a sort of epistemic relativism. But there are other problems for reliabilism. For instance, defending reliabilism requires, first, specifying how reliable a belief-forming process type has to be in order to yield justification and knowledge and, second, doing so in a non-ad hoc way. Laurence BonJour (2010) has called this the 'threshold problem'. An initially attractive idea is that, while we can perhaps rule out especially low and high levels of reliability, the precise level is going to have to depend on features of what I have called broad contexts, such as purposes. So relativism gives us some hope of solving the threshold problem too. (Of course, a good deal more would need to be said here).

While linguistic data may provide some motivation for relativism in epistemology, it is my view that the case for relativism is better made by appealing to difficulties in what we might call the metaphysics of epistemic properties like justification and knowledge. If the reliabilist wants to defend a view on which a belief has the property of being justified iff it is produced by a reliable belief-forming process then she faces a number of questions. What is the relevant process? How reliable does a process need to be, and why? If we think that answering these questions requires bringing in contexts, then we have good reason to adopt relativism, and this reason is independent of any linguistic considerations.¹⁵

¹⁵ While I would be hesitant to go quite so far, one might hold that the relativist need not take on any commitments about the semantics of "justification" and "knowledge" ascriptions - her view is

Summing Up

I have argued that the generality problem can be solved if we say that which belief-forming process type is the best explanation of a token belief depends on the context. On the assumption that some candidate processes are reliable whereas others aren't, it follows that the belief may be reliable, and so justified, relative to one context, but not relative to another. Thus, this paper has provided an indirect argument for a sort of epistemic relativism on which whether a belief has the property of being justified is relative to the context. Insofar as process reliabilism is the best theory of justification, and insofar as this relativist solution is the best solution to the generality problem, we have reason to adopt this sort of epistemic relativism, and we have this reason independently of linguistic considerations for or against epistemic relativism.¹⁶

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about the property of being justified or the knowledge relation, not the words "justification" and "knowledge".

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