



QUESTIONING RELIABILISM AS THE BASIS OF SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY THROUGH A CASE STUDY

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Objectives

1. To show how much social epistemology is based on process reliabilism.
2. To question this relationship with... a case study about Wikipedia.
3. And to make some remarks about how we could develop a social epistemology with the help of virtue epistemology instead of only process reliabilism.

Outline

Definitions and relationships

Reliabilism

Social epistemology

Relationships between the two

The case study: the epistemic model of Wikipedia

What is an epistemic model?

What could be (but isn't) Wikipedia's model?

What is the real epistemic model of Wikipedia?

What does it matter for our issue?

Conclusive remarks: Virtue epistemology as a possible solution

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Reliabilism

Early developments

Ramsey (1931)

Belief is knowledge if it is (1.) true, (2.) certain and (3) *obtained by a reliable process*.

Unger (1968)

S knows that P just in case it is not at all accidental that S is right about its being the case that P .

Drestske (1971)

S knows that P just in case S believes that P because of reasons that would not obtain unless P is true.

Nozick (1981)

- (1) if P were not true, then S would not believe that P .
- (2) if P were true, then S would believe that P .

⇒ Reliabilism seems to be more a fuzzy category than a precise theory.

Reliabilism

Definition

Reliability Theory of Knowledge

A reliable process is a process that should likely conduct us to endorse a true belief (truth-conduciveness condition).

Process Reliabilism about Justification (as in Goldman 1979)

Belief's justifiedness is fixed by the reliability of processes that causes it.

- Externalist theory : $\diamond \neg (J \rightarrow JJ)$.
- Historical theory : implies a chain of (past) reliable processes terminated by the justification of one's belief.
- Causal theory.

Problems of Reliabilism

Many problems, just a taste:

Zagzebski (2003)

The value problem

Sosa (2007)

A belief is accurate if it manifests epistemic virtue or competence, not only if it is from reliable processes.

Plantinga (1993)

What determines whether the output of a process has warrant is not simply... truth ratio. We should add proper function.

Greco (1999)

The problem of strange and fleeting processes (simple reliabilism is too weak).

Social Epistemology

Goldman (1999)'s Framework

Starting points

- The too individualistic nature of classical epistemology.
↳ We have to abandon the excessive focus on individual justification and take into account of 1. interactions, 2. groups and 3. institutions.
- The need to develop a (social) epistemology which will include social aspects of knowledge and their roles.

Relationship between Social Epistemology and Reliabilism

The Novice/experts Example (Goldman 2007)

Problem

How can a layperson could make up his mind on a subject if his two (or more) expert advisers are in disagreement?

4 solutions

1. The debate → No
2. Meta-experts → No
3. Popularity → No
4. *Experts' track-records* → Restricted to verifiabilist knowledge.

Reliabilism and Social Epistemology

Goldman's social epistemology wants to:

- identify the different possible actions for someone, in a given situation,
- determine which action or practice could (more likely than the other ones) lead an individual to a true belief.
- Ex: If the recommendations of an expert were wrong 8 times on 12 decision calls in the past, this expert has a reliability ratio of 0.33. If another expert has a better ratio, we should listen to him.

The evaluation of epistemic processes (wanted by the social epistemology) needs the reliabilism framework in order to identify good or bad practices.

Reliabilism and Social Epistemology

- Process reliabilism is a base for the development of a social epistemology.
- And there are many theoretical criticisms of reliabilism.

Questions

Is process reliabilism a good basis for social epistemology?

What's next?

In the following, I will try to develop a case study (in the spirit of Coady's applied epistemology) which (hopefully) provides some reasons to believe simple process reliabilism is not sufficient to explain concrete epistemic interactions.

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The case study: Wikipedia

- The free online encyclopedia is:
- an epistemic community;
- which works (that is to say: Wikipedia succeeded to be a (very) popular source of knowledge);
- which has **five pillars** (fundamental principles), **policies**, **guidelines** and an **arbitration committee** we can study;
- which is the place of **social epistemic practices** and **interactions** we can study.

Wikipistemology

The wikipistemology (Fallis 2008) aims to use the framework of social epistemology to study Wikipedia.

Epistemic model

Definition

Epistemic model

An epistemic model is a set of implicit or explicit behaviors, practices and ideas.

Explicit model of WP: The way of contributing and using Wikipedia defended by the five pillars, the policies and guidelines of Wikipedia.

Implicit model of WP: The actual way users and contributors use Wikipedia. The implicit model can corroborate the explicit one (users act as expected) or not (users do not respect recommendations either by ignorance or by choice).

Wikipedia in the Reliabilist World

The (Reliabilist) explicit model of Wikipedia

What is the epistemic model behind the free online encyclopedia?

Some features of WP:

1. bottom-up (Sanger 2009)
2. wide open (freedom to edit)
 - *The wisdom of crowds* (Surowiecki 2004).
 - No distinction between contributors (“the free encyclopedia that **anyone** can edit”).
 - ↔ No special place for experts.
 - “So Wikipedia is both celebrated and reviled as embodying an egalitarian epistemological revolution.” (Sanger 2009)

Wikipedia rules

Wikipedia has some “rules” which are “best-known practices” accepted by the community.

Wikipedia's core content policies

1. “**Neutral point of view** – All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view, representing significant views fairly, proportionately and without bias” (second pillar)
2. “**Verifiability** – In Wikipedia, verifiability means that people reading and editing the encyclopedia can check that information comes from a **reliable source**.”
3. “**No original research** – Wikipedia does not publish original thought: all material in Wikipedia must be attributable to a **reliable, published source**.”

Wikipedia in the Reliabilist World

Common and Explicit Wikipedia Model

- Wikipedia is built as a reliabilist system:
- No matter who contributes, only the way of contributing is important.
- An information in Wikipedia is considered as knowledge iff it comes out of a reliable process (according to the Wikipedia standard: sourced, published, ...)

⇒ It is a process-centered model

⇒ Anonymity

Wikipedia's implicit model?

- Does the implicit model of WP corroborate the explicit one?
- Example of an editing dispute.

Editing Dispute

What is happening when two contributors disagree?

Conditions of the disagreement

- The issue is complex or technical.
- The two protagonists believe each to know the truth and are in disagreement.
- They both seem to have strong arguments/reasons to believe.

The Novice/experts Example (Goldman 2007)

A framework to study the case of an edition dispute

Problem

How can a layperson could make up his mind on a subject if his two (or more) expert advisers are in disagreement?

the 4th solutions

1. The debate
2. Meta-experts
3. Popularity
4. *Experts' track-records*

Wikipedia

1. Talk tab
2. Arbitration committee
3. Ask the community (pool)
4. ?

Experts' track-records solution applied on Wikipedia

In the editing dispute case, there is another Wikipedia tool that can offer a solution: **the revision history tab**.

- The revision history tab allows someone to see all the contributions of a user.
 - It could be useful to detect expert's track-records in a reliabilist framework.
 - ↔ Ex: in the case of a mathematical dispute between *A* and *B*, the revision history could show, for example, that (1.) *A* used to contribute on mathematical page, (2.) his contributions are accepted and (3.) *B* does not usually contribute on mathematical subject. Therefore, *A* will more likely be right than *B*.
 - But wikipedia users contribute often on various subjects. Therefore, detecting an expertise is not the main point of the revision history.
 - This tool is more likely used to a more general purpose: detecting contributors **virtues** or **vices** and building reputation.

Virtues and Vices of Wikipedia Contributors

- A user did relevant, well-writing, ... contributions.
- He developed then dispositions or competences which we can call **epistemic virtues**.
- These virtues have an important role in the decision making of the “editing dispute” case.

Consequence

- We get out of the reliabilist framework. → Wikipedia's rules do not recommend such practices (to gather information about one contributor in order to solve a debate).

Implicit model of WP

The reality of usages of Wikipedia (implicit model) does not fit into the simple process reliabilism framework. We need to extend this basis to take into account *epistemic virtues* which matter WP's case.

Conclusion about Wikipedia

The argumentation

1. Wikipedia seems to work on a processes reliabilism model.
 - Indeed, there is (1.) anonymity and (2.) editing rules that identify and recommend precise editing processes declared as reliable.
2. **Problem:** in our case example (the “editing dispute” or “experts/novice” case), users do not react as expected by reliabilist WP rules.
 - Basically, they use the revision history to see what kind of person is taking part of the debate.

Reliabilist understanding of Wikipedia

The reliabilist model cannot render properly the “editing dispute” problem alone.

3. Therefore, we should either reject processes reliabilism or expand it if we want to understand correctly Wikipedia.

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General Conclusion

- Applied to social epistemology, reliabilism allows us to compare different social processes in terms of truth-getting or truth-indicating properties.
- However, the simple process reliabilism framework fails to take into account some epistemic practices such as the reputation evaluation, authority, trust, ... between Wikipedia users.
- Virtue epistemology allows us to understand Wikipedia's way of functioning better than simple reliabilism.

Scope

This presentation is not ambitious. The purpose was only to show by a concrete case that we need to refocus externalist theories of knowledge (such as social epistemology) on the epistemic agent. It could be done inside (an extended version of) reliabilism (for example: Greco's agent reliabilism) or a stronger theory.

The End

Thank you

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