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Jeffrey Dunn
jeffreydunn@depauw.edu

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A DEFENCE OF EPISTEMIC CONSEQUENTIALISM

By Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij and Jeffrey Dunn¹

Epistemic consequentialists maintain that the epistemically *right* (e.g. the justified) is to be understood in terms of conduciveness to the epistemic *good* (e.g. true belief). Given the wide variety of epistemological approaches that assume some form of epistemic consequentialism, and the controversies surrounding consequentialism in ethics, it is surprising that epistemic consequentialism remains largely uncontested. However, in a recent paper, Selim Berker has provided arguments that allegedly lead to a ‘rejection’ of epistemic consequentialism. In the present paper it is shown that reliabilism—the most prominent form of epistemic consequentialism, and one of Berker’s main targets—survives Berker’s arguments unscathed.

Key words: Epistemic consequentialism, reliabilism, epistemic goods.

1. Introduction

A wide variety of philosophical projects assume some form of *epistemic consequentialism*.² Epistemic consequentialism is the idea that the epistemically *right* (e.g. the justified) is to be understood in terms of conduciveness to the epistemic *good* (e.g. true belief). For all the controversy surrounding consequentialism in ethics, it’s perhaps surprising that epistemic consequentialism remains largely uncontested. However, in a recent paper, Selim Berker (2013) has provided arguments that allegedly lead to a ‘rejection’ of epistemic consequentialism. The problem with epistemic consequentialism, he argues, is exactly that it evaluates beliefs or processes (or what have you) by looking at how well

¹ Author order is alphabetical. Both authors contributed equally to this article.

² See, e.g. Joyce’s (1998, 2009) formal epistemology, Goldman’s (1999) veritistic social epistemology, as well as the reliabilisms of Goldman (1979) and Kornblith (2002). Moreover, large parts of the discussion regarding epistemic value is conducted under the assumption that such value is to be understood in terms of epistemic goals, and as such in consequentialist terms (see, e.g. several of the contributions in Haddock *et al.* 2009).

those beliefs or processes promote what is of non-instrumental epistemic value, such as true belief. According to Berker, this means that epistemically consequentialist theories will be objectionably *forward-looking*:

Consequentialism in ethics is famously forward-looking: it ties an action's, or rule's, or institution's ethical merit to the value of the states of affairs it helps bring about.

Consequentialism in epistemology is also forward-looking (if not temporally, then at least in the order of explanation): it ties a belief's, or process', or character trait's epistemic merit to the value of the states of affairs it helps bring about (whether causally or constitutively or otherwise) (Berker 2013: 377).

Epistemic evaluation, on the other hand, is fundamentally *backward-looking*, according to Berker. It is about responding appropriately to one's situation, not working to promote good consequences in the future. This fact will lead the consequentialist to accept epistemic trade-offs, where a belief is not itself an appropriate response to the situation, even though it leads to good consequences in the future. This is the main thrust of Berker's arguments.

Berker presents his critique through a series of counterexamples to various theories that are committed to epistemic consequentialism. He nevertheless distances himself from the specific counterexamples he gives:

I do not mean my argument to rest too heavily on these particular examples. The important point is not the examples themselves, but rather the structure of the examples. As I see it, my [...] argument against epistemic consequentialism involves not a series of counterexamples, but rather a recipe for generating counterexamples (Berker 2013: 377).

Despite his claim that the specific counterexamples do not matter, we will focus on the examples he gives. This is because we believe that by inspecting his actual examples, one can see that there is nothing like the structural problem Berker imagines there is with epistemic consequentialism. In

particular, we will argue that reliabilism about justification—the most prominent version of epistemic consequentialism—has no problem overcoming the counterexamples that Berker offers. Reliabilism is the view that a belief is justified if and only if it is the direct product of a belief forming process whose direct products tend to be true. (Why focus on *direct* products? We will get to this in Section 3.) There are two reasons for focusing on reliabilism here: its prominence, and the fact that it's one of Berker's explicit targets. By showing that the most prominent version of epistemic consequentialism is unscathed by Berker's examples, we will make clear that a commitment to such consequentialism is by no means the death sentence for a theory that Berker thinks it is.

2. Why Reliabilism is both Forward- and Backward-looking

Berker's first example is a version of a scenario originally put forward by Roderick Firth (1981):

John Doe is a brilliant set theory [*sic*] who is on the cusp of proving the Continuum Hypothesis: all he needs is six more months. But, alas, poor John is suffering from a serious illness that, according to his doctors, will almost certainly kill him in two months' time. John stubbornly clings to a belief that he will recover from his illness, and not only does this belief comfort him, but—let us suppose—it in fact significantly raises the chances that he will live for the six months that he needs both to complete his proof and to derive from it a variety of consequences for the rest of set theory. In other words, John's belief that he will recover is a causal means to his procuring a large number of true set-theoretic beliefs sometime in the future. But is John's belief epistemically justified? Is it the kind of belief that, from a purely epistemic perspective, he should be holding? (Berker 2013: 369)

Berker suggests that the epistemic consequentialist would have to answer 'yes':

[...] because the epistemic pay-off, in terms of future true beliefs, of John's belief is so great, that belief will have such a high overall epistemic value that, given almost any plausible way of directly assigning deontic properties to beliefs on the basis of their overall evaluative properties,

it will follow that John is epistemically justified in believing that he will recover (Berker 2013: 370).

The reliabilist can handle this case easily. The reason can be put in terms of Berker's own forward-looking/backward-looking distinction. Reliabilism is forward-looking when it comes to the evaluation of *processes* of belief formation. To determine whether a process is one that yields justification we ask ourselves whether the process will directly yield beliefs with a high truth-ratio. But reliabilism is *backward-looking* when determining what *beliefs* are justified. To determine this we ask ourselves what process the belief originated from. Indeed, it's not for nothing that Alvin Goldman (1979), referred to his theory as '*historical reliabilism*'. For this reason, the John Doe case doesn't cause any problems for the reliabilist: it's true that forming the belief that he will recover would be epistemically beneficial (forward-looking), but it remains the case that the process by way of which that belief is formed (backward-looking) is unreliable and as such unjustified, assuming (as seems reasonable) that stubbornly clinging to a belief about one's health in the face of contrary testimony from medical professionals is not a reliable way to form, or to maintain, beliefs.³

3. Why Reliabilism is both Direct and Indirect

One might think that reliabilism escapes the John Doe case simply because it is an *indirect deontic theory*, as Berker calls it: we evaluate processes in a consequentialist fashion, and then evaluate beliefs in terms of processes. Berker offers a modification to the John Doe case meant to block this kind of move:

[...] if we tweak our story a bit, the same result holds even if our epistemic consequentialist embraces an indirect deontic theory: all we need to do is make situations like the one John

³ The very same point can be made about Berker's (2013: 373) tea leaf reader example: The belief is formed by way of an unreliable belief-forming process (backward-looking), and is therefore unjustified, even if it leads to a great many true beliefs (forward-looking).

faces sufficiently common in his world that a general practice of stubbornly believing that one will recover from an illness tends, on average, to greatly promote the acquisition of true beliefs (Berker 2013: 370).

But this doesn't lead to any problems for reliabilism either. Reliabilism assesses the reliability of a process based on the truth-ratio of the beliefs *directly* produced by the process. Reliabilism is thus an indirect deontic theory in one sense—it evaluates beliefs indirectly in terms of the processes that produced them. But reliabilism is direct in another sense—it evaluates processes in terms of the beliefs the process directly produces. In this case, the process that John uses to form his belief that he gets better is not reliable with respect to the belief directly produced, 'I will get better'. It is merely the case that such a belief in turn yields many other true beliefs. But reliabilists do not see that as relevant to the evaluation of the process itself.

This move might seem *ad hoc*. Why restrict the relevant doxastic consequences to those *directly* produced by the process? Because this is something that the reliabilist has good reason to do, quite independently of Berker's critique. To see why, consider a visual-perceptual process *PI*. By relying on that process, I can identify a range of objects in my surrounding, such as books in my bookshelf. It might, moreover, be a consequence of me forming certain beliefs by way of that process, e.g. 'There's that book I've been looking for', that I start to read the book in question, and come to form several further true beliefs as a result. But those true beliefs don't count towards the reliability of *PI*. The perceptual process involved in *locating* the book is sufficiently different from the processes involved in *processing* the book's content—for one thing, the latter will involve high-level semantic and intellectual processing—for it to be plausible that any merits on the part of the latter should transfer to the former.

At this point, it might be objected that the claim that the process involved in perceptually *locating* the book is different from the process involved in *processing* the book's content raises the generality problem, relating to the absence of any systematic criteria for the individuation of process

types.⁴ We will not be concerned with this problem here. The reason is two-fold. First, Berker sets out to reject reliabilism on account of its commitment to consequentialism, not on account of running into the generality problem (assuming that reliabilism does indeed run into the generality problem). Second, to the extent that the generality problem is a problem in epistemology, it's neither a problem owing to the consequentialism of reliabilism, nor a problem unique to reliabilism, which is why it may be safely ignored here.⁵

4. Reliabilism on Factivity, Simplicity, Statistical Information and Defeasibility

Berker (2013: 374) acknowledges that the move made in the previous section is available to the reliabilist, but offers two more cases meant to show that the forward-looking aspect of reliabilism leads to trouble. Here is the first:

Suppose the following is true of me: whenever I contemplate whether a given natural number is prime, I form a belief that it is not. "Is 25 prime? No, it is not." "Is 604 prime? No, it is not." "Is 7 prime? No, it is not." [...] Since the ratio of prime to composite numbers less than n approaches 0 as n approaches infinity, my belief-forming process tends to yield a ratio of true to false beliefs that approaches 1. Therefore process reliabilists are forced to say that, because my belief-forming process is almost perfectly reliable, any belief formed on its basis is justified. But that's crazy! When I form a belief that 7 is not prime, it is simply not correct to say that, although that belief is false, it is epistemically redeemed by the truth of the other beliefs which would be formed via the process that led to it (Berker 2013: 374-5).

Berker claims that the process utilized is reliable, but that remains to be established. After all, Berker hasn't defined the process in question. What we have been told is that whenever he considers whether

⁴ See, e.g. Feldman (1993) and Conee and Feldman (1998).

⁵ See, e.g. Bishop (2010) and Comesaña (2006) for a set of arguments suggesting that the generality problem, if it is a problem, is a problem for everyone, and not just for the reliabilist.

a natural number is prime, he forms the belief that it is not prime. But many different processes could have this feature. One such process is a process that issues verdicts about all sorts of mathematical properties of natural numbers and behaves the way Berker has described only in the situation in which the query is whether a number is prime. Nothing about the density of primes establishes that this process is reliable, since the scope of its application is far wider than domain of prime-hood.

Presumably, what Berker wants is to define a process that is *dedicated* to forming beliefs about primes. For only if the process in question concerns, and only concerns, the ascription of prime-hood does the density of non-primes in the interval from 0 to infinity tell us anything about the reliability of the relevant process. It seems psychologically questionable whether there are such narrowly defined mental processes, but let us grant Berker the assumption that there are, if only to be maximally charitable to Berker in the characterisation and individuation of processes. This also speaks to worries about the generality problem, if understood as the problem that, in the absence of systematic criteria for process individuation, each epistemologist who defines justification partly in terms of processes will type processes in ways that has her theory generate the ‘correct’ verdict.⁶ Since we are here granting Berker exactly the individuation that generates the verdict he takes to be problematic for the reliabilist, we may—yet again—safely ignore that problem here.

In other words, let us assume that (a) there are processes dedicated to generating beliefs about prime-hood, (b) Berker is relying on such a dedicated process—let us refer to it as *P2*—in the scenario imagined, and (c) it is also the case that, for any number queried, *P2* generates the output that it is not prime. Under those assumptions, it seems correct to say that *P2* is reliable, provided it is equally likely that any natural number is queried. And if so, reliabilism must say that the belief *that 7 is not prime*, generated by way of *P2*, is justified.

Nevertheless, it is not obvious that it is counter-intuitive that the belief *that 7 is not prime* is justified under these assumptions. In fact, we would like to suggest that reliabilism generates the correct verdict here: the belief *that 7 is not prime* is justified, if formed by way of *P2* under the conditions imagined. To see why, it helps to consider the three most plausible candidate explanations

⁶ See, e.g. Feldman (1993: 42).

for why that belief should be deemed *unjustified*, as well as why they fail:

First, perhaps the fact that the belief *that 7 is not prime is false* rules out that belief being justified. However, that can't be it, and for two reasons. First, most theories of justification are non-factive, in that they allow for justified false beliefs. In other words, on most theories of justification, it would not follow from a belief being false that it's not justified. We say 'most theories' because some epistemologists have indeed argued that justification is factive.⁷ This brings us to our second point: even if all non-factive theories of justification turned out to be implausible, it's not clear why that would be relevant to Berker's 'rejection' of consequentialism. Berker sets out to reject reliabilism about justification with reference to its *consequentialism*, not its non-factivity.

Second, perhaps the fact that *P2* is extremely *simple* (*too simple*, we might think) rules out it generating justified belief. After all, whatever the number queried, *P2* generates only one output: a belief that the number is not prime. That, however, does not seem a good reason to deny *P2* any justificatory power. Consider the research program of psychologist Gerd Gigerenzer and colleagues, who have made a career out of identifying extremely simple yet highly reliable heuristics.⁸ Gigerenzer is not claiming that simplicity always makes for reliability, of course. That would be as facile as claiming that simplicity *never* makes for reliability. The upshot is simply that the simplicity of a process is not a guide to its epistemic credentials. In matters epistemic, like elsewhere, less is sometimes more.

Third, one might think that the belief *that 7 is not prime* is unjustified because the reliability of the process is guaranteed solely on the basis of a specific sort of statistical fact: the relative scarcity of primes in the natural numbers. One might think that no belief can be justified if the process is reliable solely on the basis of this sort of statistical fact. But this, too, is implausible. I can be justified in believing that my car hasn't been stolen last night solely on the basis of statistics about auto theft in our area; I can be justified that it won't rain in southern California today solely on the basis of meteorological statistics about the scarcity of rain there. It may be that certain propositions—for

⁷ See, e.g. Littlejohn (2012).

⁸ See, e.g. Gigerenzer *et al.* (1999).

instance, the proposition that a given lottery ticket will lose—cannot be *known* on the basis of purely statistical information. But it does not follow from this that such propositions cannot thereby be *justified* on such a basis.⁹ So, this is not a promising way to argue that the belief *that 7 is not prime* is unjustified either.

In other words, the belief *that 7 is not prime* may be false, the process by way of which we arrive at it very simple, and it may be based on purely statistical information, but that does not preclude justification. But perhaps we may create some problems for the reliabilist by expanding on Berker's case somewhat. Consider the following:

Assume that, in the scenario imagined, Berker is using *P2* to form the belief *that 7 is not prime* while being confident that (a) 7 is divisible only by itself and 1, and moreover that (b) such divisibility defines primes. In that case, one might claim that the belief *that 7 is not prime* is not justified. However, notice that this is a common case of a person having a belief that is defeated by another belief. For example, waking up in the morning, I might form the belief that it is raining because I overhear someone on the radio talking about it now raining in my neighbourhood. Looking out, I then realise it's not raining, and form the belief that it's not. Both beliefs were, intuitively, justified at the time of their formation. Am I now justified in believing a contradiction? No, because we can tell a story about the latter belief defeating the former. Moreover, there is nothing anti-consequentialist about defeaters. To the contrary, the most straightforward rationale for being sensitive to defeaters—i.e. to considerations speaking against your beliefs—is that being sensitive thus will make it easier for you to form true belief and avoid forming false ones.

What, then, should we say about the prime number case? As the case is given we should say that the belief *that 7 is not prime*, generated by way of *P2*, is justified. The belief may be false, the process by way of which we arrive at it very simple, and it may be based on purely statistical information, but that does not rule out the belief being justified. As we have just seen, Berker's case may be modified so that it involves a defeater, rendering the belief *that 7 is not prime* unjustified. But that raises no

⁹ See, e.g. Hawthorne (2004): '[...] lottery propositions that we claim not to know may be both true and well justified.'

problems for the consequentialist since defeasibility conditions can be given straightforwardly consequentialist rationales. Thus, we do not have in this case a challenge to reliabilism.

5. Reliabilism on Externalism and Beliefs that Tend to Make Their Content True

Berker has one final example meant to evince the flaws in epistemic consequentialism:

[L]et us consider John's cousin, Jane Doe, who is a brilliant chess master six months away from playing the most important tournament of her life. But, alas, poor Jane has been diagnosed with the same illness as John (apparently it is congenital), and her doctors also give her only two months to live. Like John, Jane stubbornly clings to a belief that she will recover from her illness, and, as in John's case, let us suppose that this belief in fact significantly raises the chances that she will live long enough to play in her tournament six months from now (Berker 2013: 376).

Unlike in the case of John, however, Jane's stubborn beliefs do not increase the chances of some true beliefs in the future (e.g. about set theory), but rather of the truth of the stubbornly held belief itself:

Jane's belief that she will recover promotes her being in a cognitive state which (according to advocates of veritism [who believe that true belief is the sole epistemic goal]) has final epistemic value, where this cognitive state has the same propositional content as the state that promotes it. But, I insist, Jane's belief is not for that reason epistemically justified. This last claim is most obvious when we consider a version of the Jane case in which she is not aware of the fact that her belief increases the likelihood of its own truth. So let us suppose that she is not aware of this, and, to fix on some numbers, let us suppose that she has a 10% of recovering if she does not believe she will recover and a 90% of recovering if she does believe she will recover (where, moreover, the relevant percentages are *caused* by her being in the relevant doxastic state, not merely *correlated* with her so being) (Berker 2013: 376; emphasis in original).

Does this case pose a problem for reliabilism? Notice that, as in the prime number case, Berker hasn't specified a process. He has merely told us that, when it comes to Jane forming beliefs about her recovery, she will tend to be right. But this doesn't imply that any belief she forms on the matter will be reliably formed. For example, Jane might be forming beliefs about her recovery through *wishful thinking*. Or she might, as Berker himself suggests, be forming (or rather retaining) her beliefs on the matter by *stubbornly holding on to her beliefs, come what may*. In either case, the beliefs formed are not justified and the reliabilist has a simple response for why it is not. Although the process of wishful thinking or stubbornly clinging to one's beliefs is likely to get her to the truth *this time*, it is not in general a reliable process. After all, as the case is set up, it is not true *in general* that Jane's beliefs tend to make their content true.

This gets to an unarticulated assumption: In order for Berker's case to tell us anything about the process utilised, we need to assume that (a) there is a process dedicated to forming beliefs about one's recovery, and that (b) Jane is relying on that process in forming her beliefs. That process will be reliable, given how Berker spells out the scenario. We are a bit sceptical about there being such narrowly defined processes. Moreover, if there are no such narrowly defined processes, it's not clear that we can draw any conclusions regarding reliabilism from the case, since it then remains obscure what the process involved in Jane's belief-formation is. However, for the sake of argument—and, again, in order to avoid any charge of individuating processes in a way that unfairly benefits the reliabilist—we will grant Berker the assumption that there are such processes. More specifically, suppose that Jane forms her belief via the following process: *believing things about my recovering from my illness*. This process (assuming that it's a genuine process) is reliable, as the case is described. When she believes that she will recover by way of that process, that will tend to be true; when she believes she will not recover by way of that process, that will tend to be true.

In that case, however, we would like to question the claim that Jane's belief is not thereby justified. The case imagined is simply an unusual instance of a general type of case involving belief-states that are such that being in those state tends to make their content true. Consider the judge believing that some particular person will be sentenced, or the priest believing that some particular

couple will be wed. Here, too, the judge or priest being in the relevant belief-states will tend to make their contents true, in so far as the judge is the one handing down the sentence and the priest the one wedding the couple. As such, they will both be in a situation analogous to Jane: When they believe that the relevant person will be sentenced or that the couple will be wed, that will (barring interference) tend to be true; when they believe that the relevant person will not be sentenced and the couple not be wed, that will (barring over-determination) tend to be true. Consequently, assuming (as in the case of Jane) that the judge and the priest are relying on processes dedicated to forming beliefs about their sentencings and wedding ceremonies, those processes will be reliable, and make for justified belief.

One might worry that the three cases aren't analogues because, unlike the judge and the priest, Jane is not aware of her role in bringing about the relevant matters of fact. Remember, according to Berker, the claim that Jane's belief isn't justified is most obvious 'when we consider a version of the Jane case in which she is not aware of the fact that her belief increases the likelihood of its own truth' (2013: 376). But if *that's* the worry, then it is nothing about epistemic consequentialism that drives the worry; in that case, we are dealing with a worry about reliabilism's externalist commitments. If we put these quibbles about externalism to the side, then it is hard to see why Jane's belief would not be justified. One might certainly have reservations about the existence of the kind of narrowly defined processes required for Berker's scenario to work, but that's a problem for Berker, not for the reliabilist. Setting aside that worry, as well as any reservations one might have about externalism, we see no good reason to deny Jane's belief justification.

6. Conclusion

Berker argues that epistemic consequentialism should be rejected. Ultimately, this is because it countenances epistemic trade-offs. Once one sees this, he says, one will see that there is a simple recipe for generating counterexamples to any theory committed to epistemic consequentialism. If that were true, one should expect that it would be no problem for Berker to provide such a counterexample to reliabilism—one of Berker's main targets, and the most prominent form of epistemic consequentialism. However, as we've argued, it doesn't seem that any of Berker's examples show a

problem with reliabilism, and certainly no problem that stems from its commitment to epistemic consequentialism. This strongly suggests that we have been given no good reason to reject reliabilism, nor its commitment to epistemic consequentialism.¹⁰

University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

DePauw University, USA

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