



Roderick Chisholm on Reliabilism: Implications for Epistemic Indubitability

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the pitfalls of Roderick Chisholm's concept of reliabilism and its implications for epistemic inducibility. Chisholm posits that justified belief depends on what is practically true and right for the knower to believe. He maintains that epistemic justification depends on evidence internally available to the knower and anchored his argument on the fact that we rarely have direct access to the truth of propositions, that is, to reality. Every conclusion about the epistemic status of a belief in this perspective involves a conclusion about the "legitimacy" of its source. Our paper argues that this premium Chisholm's reliabilism places on the knowing subject's ability to acquire knowledge through the right kind of source undermines our quest for epistemic indubitability hence, among the purposes of this study is to examine how the reliability of a belief is dependent on the authenticity of its process of realization. It investigates what constitutes the criteria for a reliable belief and tries to resolve whether reliability is conferred on beliefs by our mere confessions. We find that a reliable belief may not after all be error-free. Also, that reliability invokes the skeptical question of the reliability of human knowledge. Our research which adopts the analytical method of enquiry concludes by underscoring the fact that Chisholm's reliabilism turns the indubitable knowledge quest of philosophy into doubtful probabilities and further into full-blown skepticism.

Keywords: reliabilism, epistemic, indubitability, knowledge, internalism

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Introduction

While epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with the human cognitive process, its basic concerns include such questions as: what is knowledge? How do we come to know? what do we claim to know? How authentic or certain are the things we claim we know?

Precisely put, epistemology examines the question of knowledge, the sources of human knowledge, the process, limits, and nature of human knowledge, and the certainty of what we know, or in a more refined form, what we claim to know.

The problems have been the greatest concern of epistemologists and in a wider sense, philosophers right from the days of Plato. However, in recent times, the question about the certainty of human knowledge has been tailored towards the justification of knowledge. Besides, some philosophers have claimed that knowledge is "justified true belief". This, on its own, raises much greater concern amongst epistemologists with puzzling questions that interrogate the criteria for ascertaining the justification of knowledge and the yardstick with which we may adjudge knowledge claims as justified.

Methodology

This qualitative and exploratory research analytically examines Chisholm's reliabilism documented in the literature and employs the same for comparative purposes. This enabled us to draw the implications thereof.

Results

Roderick Chisholm's reliabilism constituted a notable contribution by its challenge to traditional foundationalism and evidentialism. Being an existentialist epistemic theory, it asserts that a belief's justification is dependent on its ability to produce a reliable cognitive process. Besides this, Chisholm is found to have adopted a casual approach of arguing that justification derives from the process that led to it instead of the examination of subjective factors like evidence or the mental state of the subject. This marked difference elevates reliabilism from traditional internalist theories hence, it focuses on the truth-conduciveness of the formation processes of belief. This study observes that the significance of his theory lies in its potency to explain the pathways by which we acquire knowledge. His reliability-centered focus becomes a criterion for distinguishing justifiable beliefs from unjustifiable ones. This research observes that Chisholm's reliabilism convinces us that reliable processes are more likely to generate true beliefs and this lends support to the legitimacy of epistemological accounts of the externalists. Again, Chisholm's theory addresses the Gettier problem which presents counterexamples to traditional theories of justified true belief. By this shift of emphasis to the reliability of the cognitive process, Chisholm's idea offers humanity a potential solution that may arise from luck or mere coincidence.

The above puzzle had epistemologists like Edmund Gettier, who through his 1963 Essay asked "Is justified true belief knowledge"? Gettier's position was in contradistinction to the notion that knowledge is equivalent to justified true belief if, and only if the three conditions of justification, truth, and belief of a given claim are met. Gettier argued that since there were no yardsticks with which we may admit that knowledge is justified true belief. There could be a case where an individual would hold a claim to a 'justified true belief' regarding a knowledge claim yet fail to know it, because the reason for belief, even when it is justified, may turn out to be false. Among the shortcomings of Chisholm's theory of reliabilism is the concern surrounding the potential limitation of determining the reliability of cognitive processes. It has been found that accurately assessing the reliability of complex mental processes is an arduous and challenging task hence, the lack of a definitive standard for establishing reliability creates the impression that Chisholm's theory lacks the adequate foundation to be held as a comprehensive and reliable epistemology.

This study also finds out that Chisholm's reliabilism fails to account for the internalist aspect of justification. Its' parochial focus on the reliability of cognitive processes neglect the importance of evidence and the mental states of the subjects in justifying beliefs. By so doing, it

reduces its ability to address cases that need evidential backup in order to justify beliefs. In any case, this paper in consequence, contends that reliabilism seems to generate similar problems in epistemology as the question which Gettier tried to resolve. Gettier's argument seems to generate an even greater problem. It argues that for belief to be reliable, it must be the result of a reliable process and this tends not only to big the question but also to raise the question as to what constitutes these processes? The recurring question in this research is namely, what then is the standard or yardstick for a belief to be reliable? Is a belief reliable because it is merely said to be reliable? Some other questions that reliabilism raises may include: Is a reliable belief error free? on closer scrutiny, reliabilism is found to invoke the question of how reliable is human knowledge? This paper therefore examines this empasse concerning the proper analysis of the concept of epistemic justification through Roderick Chisholm's strand of reliabilism. For clarity of thought, the researchers will expose reliabilism as an epistemic theory, examine Chisholm's version of reliabilism before drawing out its implications for epistemic indubitability.

Reliabilism as an Epistemic Theory

According to Alvin Goldman and his fellow proponents of the reliability theory of epistemic justification, "the justificational status of a belief is a direct function of the reliability of the process or processes that cause it, where [roughly] reliability consists in the tendency of a process to produce beliefs that are true rather than false." (cited in Moser 1985, p. 236). Let us call such a general view *epistemic reliabilism*, and its proponents *reliabilists*. Nowadays, epistemic reliabilism comes in many different forms, due mainly to the ways the details of the theory are developed. Reliabilism has become a contending issue in epistemological dialogue. Epistemologists have showed great concern on the thought and have poured out volumes about it. This discussion encompasses a broad range of epistemological theories that try to explain knowledge or justification in terms of the truth-conduciveness of the process by which an agent forms a true belief. An aspect of reliabilism is process reliabilism, which is the most common type of reliabilism. It holds that knowledge of some proposition *p* implies that agent *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* believes that *p*, *p* is true, and *S*'s belief that *p* is formed by a reliable process. A truth-conducive or reliable process is sometimes described as a belief-forming process that produces either mostly true beliefs or a high ratio of true to false beliefs. Process reliabilism regarding justification, rather than knowledge, says that *S*'s belief that *p* is justified if and only if *S*'s belief that *p* is formed by a reliable process.

Philosophers from Plato have held that knowledge is justified true belief. In spite of the fact that, it is contestable whether Plato's 'logos', which is often translated as account, corresponds to the contemporary idea of justification, and if Plato himself found the true belief with the logos explication of knowledge wanting. Although the nature of justification is a matter that is subject to much debate. A central idea that is still clear is that when a belief is justified it is far likelier to be true than when it is not justified. On this ground, apologists of reliabilism have put the notion of truth-conduciveness at the front-and-center in their accounts of justification and knowledge. However, Ramsey (1931) is often credited with the first articulation of a reliabilist account of knowledge. Ramsay claims that knowledge is true belief as long as it is obtained through a reliable process. This idea was left dormant until the 1960s, when reliabilist theories emerged in earnest. A crucial development occurred when Edmund Gettier (1963) demonstrated that even justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge. Gettier's argument revealed that an agent can obtain true beliefs with very solid grounds and yet the agent could still easily have been wrong.

Gettier maintained that it is only by sheer luck or coincidence that the agent's source of justification may lead to true belief. Thus, the agent's true belief is infected by knowledge-precluding "epistemic luck." It is difficult to say just how much and to what extent Gettier's paper motivated reliabilist accounts of justification and knowledge. It is nonetheless clear that Gettier's counterexamples led to fresh thinking about the knowledge-constituting link between belief and

truth, and that process reliabilism emerged as a theory-type from some of the responses to Gettier. Goldberg argues that "a belief is reliably formed when it is formed (and sustained) through a reliable belief-forming method". Thus, "A belief-forming method is reliable only if it produces a preponderance of true beliefs, relative to the class of all beliefs it produces, when employed by a normally functioning individual in... normal circumstances"(2008, p. 1). Thus, Goldberg has maintained that there must be a "belief-forming method", a process which ultimately becomes a criterion, a yardstick or standard before which the belief can be said to be reliable. The vast majority of externalists reject the claim that all epistemic principles are necessary truths. The reliabilist, for example, is clearly committed to the view that once we leave deduction the legitimacy of an inference is a matter of contingent fact. The question at this junction is; should such an epistemologist embrace particularism or methodism?

Alvin Goldman is perhaps the most influential proponent of reliabilism. In his response to Gettier, Goldman (1967) argued that knowledge is true belief caused in an appropriate way. He had left the notion of "appropriate" open-ended, awaiting scientific discovery of causal mechanisms that reliably yield true belief. He was of the view that causal theory still permitted knowledge-precluding epistemic luck (Goldman, 1976). Goldman proposes the discrimination theory where he makes reference to the notion of a relevant alternative, which is now a major concept of epistemological theorizing. Using his discriminatory theory, Goldman argues that an agent knows that p because she can distinguish the state of affairs where p is true from possibilities where p is false-she can "rule out" those other possibilities. He gives the example, S knows that the cat is on the mat when she sees that it is, because if the cat were not on the mat, she would see that it is not and would not believe that the cat is on the mat. For the sake of this paper. Let us call such a general view *epistemic reliabilism*, and its proponents *reliabilists*. However, in spite of the diverse views of reliabilism, our primary focus is on Roderick Chisholm's view of reliabilism.

Roderick Chisholm On Reliabilism

In his work *Theory of Knowledge* (1989), a subsection of chapter eight expresses his theory of reliabilism. Chisholm began the chapter by admitting that the challenge inherent in the discourse of epistemic reliabilism is "the dispute between those who would interpret epistemic justification internally and those who would interpret it externally" (Chisholm 1989, p. 75). Chisholm stands out among philosophers of his milieu by his penchant for formulating definitions which he subsequently revised in the light of counter examples. (Stanford,2023) Essentially, the dispute he raised pertains to the appropriate analysis of the concept of epistemic justification, it seeks to show that the internalists and externalists should share a single or similar concept of justification, that is one that distinguishes knowledge from true belief that is not knowledge. Thus, in participating in this epistemological debate between the internalists and externalists, Chisholm sought to answer the question; "is the concept of epistemic justification to be analyzed internally or externally?" (Chisholm 1989, p. 76).

Beginning with a reflection on internalism, Chisholm admits that the traditional approach to the question concerning the theory of knowledge is properly referred to as *internal* or *internalistic*. The internalist according to him assumes that by mere reflection upon his own conscious state of mind can possibly formulate a set of epistemic principles that will aid him to find out; with respect to any possible belief, he has whether he is justified in having that belief or not. Therefore, whatever epistemic principles that he formulates are principles that one may come upon and apply not minding the situation without any necessary assistance. In other words, we only need to consider our own state of mind. With regards to these aforementioned traditional conceptions of internal epistemic justification, there is no logical connection between epistemic justification and truth. A belief may be internally justified and yet be false and this outcome is unacceptable for the externalist. The externalist expects that "an adequate account of epistemic

justification should exhibit some logical connection between epistemic justification and truth” (Chisholm 1989, pp. 76-77).

Chisholm discusses reliabilism as that which is grounded upon the externalist concept of justification. He defines his view of reliabilism thus; “S is externally justified in believing P=Df. The process by means of which S was led to believe P is reliable” (Chisholm 1989, p. 78). The reliabilist tradition is therefore one that maintains that belief is justified on the condition of it being reliably formed (Beddor 2021, p.01) However, he admits that there is a challenge with this definition. The challenge he maintained is that the definition does not allow us to say, of a person who does not believe P, that he is justified in believing P. but conceivably, by making judicious use of counterfactuals, one could repair the definition to provide for this possibility. Moreover, he feels that another challenge with reliabilism has to do with the interpretation of the expression *reliable process*.

By process, he is referring to the means by which one is led to a belief as a series of activities that result in one’s acquiring or retaining that belief. If we comprehend *process* in this manner, and if *reliable process* means more than process that is productive of true belief, then the present version of reliability theory is inadequate. “For if the belief is true, then the process that led to it, however bizarre the process may have been, produced a belief that is true” (Chisholm 1989, p. 78). He went on to formulate the definition of externally justified process thus; “S is externally justified in believing P=if the process by means of which S was led to believe P is a process which generally lead to true belief” (Chisholm 1989, p. 78). What this means is that, if S has acquired a true belief, then once again, no matter how bizarre the situation may be, he has followed some procedure which is such that following that procedure always leads to true belief. Thus; If a person S has arrived at a true belief on a particular occasion, then S will have followed some procedures which was unique to that occasion. For Example, S could have arrived at his belief by reading the tea leaves on a Friday afternoon twenty-seven minutes after having visited his uncle. If necessary, we may add further specifications -say, something about what S has just eaten or about the clothes that he is wearing. Since he has used this successful procedure only on one occasion, we may say: S has arrived at the belief that P by means of a belief-forming process which is such that, whenever he arrives at a belief by means of that process, the belief he thus arrives at is true (Chisholm 1989, 78).

Chisholm’s view is that justified belief depends on what is practically right for the person to believe. He is committed to the view that epistemic justification and, hence, knowledge, depends on evidence ‘internally’ available to the knower, a view known as *Internalism*. In support of this view, he points out that we rarely have direct access to the truth of propositions, that is, to reality. Being justified in believing a proposition is dependent on how well believing a given proposition meets the goals or requirements of rationality. The degree to which a proposition meets these goals is relative to the evidence available to a person; not relative to the absolute or ‘God’s eye’ view. Epistemic appraisal or evaluation is a function of the relative rationality of a person’s adopting a propositional attitude (acceptance, denial, withholding) given the evidence available to that person.

Occupying the high end of Chisholm’s justification hierarchy are propositions which are *certain*. Chisholm distinguishes this epistemological sense of the word, *certain* from the psychological sense. We may feel psychologically certain of the truth of a proposition, even when we are not justified in believing it. The epistemological sense of certainty represents the highest level of justified belief and is not merely a feeling of confidence in believing. Chisholm defines *certainly* as: “h is *certain* for S =Df (i) h is beyond reasonable doubt for S, and (ii) there is no i, such that accepting i is more reasonable for S than accepting h” (Chisholm 1989, p. 10). As with all propositions justified on a higher level of epistemic justification, any proposition that is certain for a person also meets the criteria of every lower level of positive epistemic justification. Chisholm claims that propositions that describe the way things appear to a person and some truths

of logic and mathematics, under the right conditions, are *certain* for us. The levels of justification do not come in degrees. Thus, no proposition that is *certain*, according to Chisholm is more reasonable than (or for that matter less reasonable than) any other proposition having this epistemic status. That is, *certainty*, in Chisholm's technical sense, (as every level of justified belief) does not come in degrees. Actually, Chisholm's observations are not intended to belittle the concept of a *reliable belief-forming process*. On the contrary, they are intended to "belittle the suggestion that, epistemic justification can be *defined* merely by reference to such processes" (Chisholm 1989, p. 79). Obviously, one should try to *know* what belief-forming processes one is following and one should try to *find out* which of those processes are reliable; then one should try as far as possible to follow them. Chisholm's foundationalism stopping place seems to be the directly evident hence, his foundationalism has always been considered as paradigmatic consequent upon the clarity in its formulation (Duran 1995, p. 56).

Finally, Chisholm settles for this version of reliabilism. Another possibility he said is to construe a *reliable* process as a process which is *probably* such that it leads to truth. Then we might have: "S is externally justified in believing p = Df The process by means of which S was led to believe p is a process which is *probably* such as to lead to true belief" (Chisholm 1989, p. 80).

Epistemic Indubitability

It has been essentially part of the epistemological discourse that the philosopher's quest for knowledge is not just a quest for probable or tentative truth, but a quest for indubitable truth beyond doubt. Some philosophers had always thought that the criterion of the epistemic justification required for knowledge was certainty. Descartes equated certainty to not being subject to any possible doubt. For the greater part of epistemology, it has been the task of epistemologists to attempt to proffer a transition from subjectivity to objectivity and from probability to certainty. However, the philosophical question of whether one can ever be truly certain about anything has been widely debated for centuries. Many proponents of philosophical skepticism deny that certainty is possible, or claim that it is only possible in a priori domains such as logic or mathematics. Historically, many philosophers have held that knowledge requires epistemic certainty, and therefore that one must have infallible justification in order to be seen as knowing the truth of a proposition. However, many philosophers such as René Descartes were troubled by the resulting skeptical implications. Since all of our experiences at least seem to be compatible with various skeptical scenarios. It is generally accepted today that most of our beliefs are compatible with their falsity and are therefore fallible, although the status of being certain is still often ascribed to a limited range of beliefs (such as "I exist"). The apparent fallibility of our beliefs has led many contemporary philosophers to deny that knowledge requires certainty.

What is the connection between knowledge and certainty? The question is vexed in part because there are at least two distinct senses of "certainty". According to the first sense, subjective certainty, one is certain of a proposition if and only if one has the highest degree of confidence in its truth. According to the second sense of "certainty", which we may call epistemic certainty, one is certain of a proposition p if and only if one knows that p (or is in a position to know that p) on the basis of evidence that gives one the highest degree of justification for one's belief that p. The thesis that knowledge requires certainty in either of these two senses has been the basis for skeptical arguments (Stanley 2008, p. 43). For example, according to one kind of skeptical argument, knowledge requires epistemic certainty, and being epistemically certain of a proposition requires having independent evidence that logically entails that proposition. Since we do not have such evidence for external world propositions, we do not know external world propositions. According to another kind of skeptical argument, attributed to Peter Unger (1975, p. 45), knowledge requires subjective certainty, and we are never subjectively certain of any proposition hence, we never indubitably know any proposition.

In the 17th century, Rene Descartes sought after some foundational and indubitable truth upon which we could reliably base our knowledge of God and the external world. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes first discards all belief in things which are not absolutely certain, and then tries to establish what can be known for sure. Although the phrase "*Cogito, ergo sum*" is often attributed to Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, it is actually put forward in his *Discourse on Method*. Due to the implications of inferring the conclusion within the predicate, however, he changed the argument to "I think, I exist"; this then became his first certainty. Descartes' conclusion being that, in order to doubt, that which is doing the doubting certainly has to exist – the act of doubting thus proving the existence of the doubter. He allowed it to be possible that a malignant demon should deceive him even with respect to those matters of which he was the most certain. The demon would so work upon his reason that he took false statements to be self-evidently true. Notwithstanding the diabolic powers of the hypothetical demon to conjure up deceptive illusions, Descartes succeeded in establishing a foundational indubitable truth of the existence of the doubter in spite of the panoply of doubts (Ayer 1957, p. 40).

Apart from Descartes, Aristotle also argued that "not all knowledge is demonstrative" (Aristotle 1956, p. 56) (i.e., not all knowledge is based on an argument from other things known), and that some knowledge must be "independent of demonstration". Many of the medieval philosophers seemed in agreement with Aristotle, holding that all knowledge must rest on "first principles" or "self-evident truths" of some sort. Chisholm seem to have an issue with this view. He argues that this standard is too high a standard for knowledge because this would rule out, by definition, the possibility of our knowing many contingent truths which we think we can know. This would make skepticism about empirical knowledge true by definition.

Implications Of Roderick Chisholm's Reliabilism for Epistemic Indubitability

As an epistemic theory in its own right, Chisholm's perspective of reliabilism couches certain implications for epistemic indubitability. His view of reliabilism tries to explain knowledge or justification in terms of the truth-conduciveness of the process by which an agent forms a true belief. The simplest way to express his reliabilism regarding knowledge of some proposition *p* implies that an agent *S* knows that *p* if and only if *S* believes that *p* is true, and *S*'s belief that *p* is formed by a reliable process. A truth-conducive or reliable process is sometimes described as a belief-forming process that produces either mostly true beliefs or a high ratio of true to false beliefs. Process reliabilism regarding justification, rather than knowledge, says that *S*'s belief that *p* is justified if and only if *S*'s belief that *p* is formed by a reliable process. Considering the thesis of Chisholm's reliabilism, it possesses some implications for epistemic indubitability. These implications shall be highlighted and discussed.

First, Chisholm's reliabilism creates a shift in the assumption from indubitability as a constituent component of knowledge to probability ratio which ranges from certainty, highly probable to false belief. His version of reliabilism seems to be calling on epistemologists to forsake indubitability as the watchword or ideal standard of knowledge requirement and rather focus on probability. He contends that upholding or equating indubitability with knowledge is a standard too high. He considers it a tall dream for knowledge because this would rule out by definition, the possibility of our knowing many contingent truths which we think we can know. This would make skepticism about empirical knowledge true by definition. Thus, in order to make allowance for our knowledge of contingent truth, Chisholm seems to be sacrificing epistemic indubitability. Besides, the quest for indubitability and not ephemeral truths it has been the task of philosophers who seek to establish solid foundation and structure for our knowledge of self or the external world. However, Chisholm's reliabilism may not be too concerned about this. He seems to be uninterested in this philosophical attempt in establishing grounds for uniformity or generality of knowledge. Rather, he places emphasis on the contextualist or tentative view of knowledge.

Reliabilism for him, counts only within a specific framework. This view of reliabilism jeopardizes the epistemic quest for indubitable truth which may not be subject to the shackles of the contextualist conception of knowledge.

Again, Chisholm's reliabilism deemphasizes the truth or falsity of knowledge claims in order to make room for the inclusion of the justification of the process involved in knowledge acquisition. Apparently, he seems to be making the argument that the means or process involved in the acquisition of knowledge, justifies the knowledge and not the knowledge itself justifying the means or process of knowledge acquisition. However, Chisholm's reliabilism tends toward pushing us further away from objectivity to subjectivity. Placing a premium on the specificities involved in the process of a knower acquiring a belief as an individual shifts our focus of evaluation of the justification of the knower's claim to knowing from an objective ground to a more personal or subjective form of certainty.

Conclusion

Having examined the mainstay of Roderick Chisholm's reliabilism, which repudiates the view that knowledge entails some form of epistemic certainty or indubitability, we observe as Chisholm argues, that this traditional view of knowledge that places a premium on indubitability is too high a standard for knowledge because this would rule out, by definition, the possibility of our knowing many contingent truths which we think we can ordinarily know. However, by making allowance for the accommodation of our claims of contingent truths, we concluded that Chisholm's reliabilism holds certain implications for epistemic indubitability. One of which is that his particularist response to skepticism is one that is seen as having the capability of combining with naturalistic and reliabilist conception of epistemic warrant as a foundation to offer a reasonable response to epistemic relativism. Our research however unveils the fact that reliabilism creates a shift in the assumption from indubitability as a constituent component of knowledge to probability ratio, which ranges from certainty to highly probable and onward to false beliefs.

Conflict of Interest

No conflicts of interest.

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