

Christopher S. Hill's "Process Reliabilism and Cartesian Scepticism"

I. THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

- a. Where S is any subject and H_1 and H_2 are any two empirical hypotheses, S is not justified in preferring H_1 to H_2 (i.e., in believing H_1 and rejecting H_2) unless S is in possession of evidence that supports H_1 more strongly than it supports H_2 .
- b. In determining whether McX is justified in preferring RWH [the Real World Hypothesis] to SH [a Skeptical Hypothesis], it is appropriate to set all non-sensory evidence aside, and to focus exclusively on facts involving McX's sense experiences and their purely sensory characteristics.
- c. Since RWH and SH differ only with respect to their claims about the causation of McX's sense experiences, and not at all with respect to their claims about the experiences themselves, the purely sensory evidence that is available to McX supports RWH and SH to the same degree.
- d. Thus, McX is not justified in preferring RWH to SH, and by the same token, McX is not justified in believing RWH.
- e. Where S is any subject and p is any proposition, S does not know that p unless S is justified in believing that p.
- f. Thus, McX does not know that RWH is true.

II. THE EVIDENCE ARGUMENT FOR THE SECOND PREMISE OF THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

- a. If we're justified in holding a belief on the basis of extramental evidence, then we must also be justified in holding the belief on the basis of sensory evidence (since extramental facts can count as evidence only insofar as they're represented by deliverances of the senses).
- b. Therefore, if one wishes to determine whether McX is justified in preferring RWH to SH, it is permissible to set all of McX's extramental evidence aside, and to focus exclusively on McX's sensory evidence. [**Call this *Proposition A*.**]

III. AN OBJECTION TO PROCESS RELIABILISM (PR)

- a. PR says that justification is an *a posteriori*, empirical matter (of, in particular, the reliability ratings of certain cognitive processes). This suggests that one should address such matters in an argument for the claim that no beliefs are justified (in particular, such an argument could draw its skeptical conclusions, or so it seems, only if it demonstrated that certain processes are not reliable, and this is an *a posteriori*, empirical matter). However, the skeptical argument is plausible and convincing even though it is completely *a priori* (and relies on no empirical findings whatsoever). This casts doubt on PR.

IV. TWO REPLIES ON BEHALF OF THE PROCESS RELIABILIST

- a. Both replies suggest that the skeptical argument *does* address matters of reliability and, in particular, that we are entitled to set matters of reliability aside.
- b. Why might the skeptic think that we can set matters of reliability aside?
 - i. THE EVIDENCE ARGUMENT, which concludes that Proposition A is true. But this conclusion is supposed to be (something like) the second premise of the skeptical argument, and it doesn't seem to be. No worries, though, since the skeptic claims that Proposition A entails Proposition B (= the second premise of the skeptical argument):

Proposition B: In determining whether McX is justified in preferring RWH to SH, it is appropriate to set all non-sensory evidence aside, and to focus exclusively on facts involving McX's sense experiences and their purely sensory characteristics.

- ii. THE CIRCULARITY ARGUMENT

- 1. If McX were to defend his preference for RWH over SH by appealing to extramental facts (including facts about a process's reliability), she would beg the question (since SH calls such facts into question).
 - 2. A defense that begs the question is no real defense.
 - 3. Therefore, propositions about extramental facts (including facts about a process's reliability) cannot justify McX's preference for RWH (and reliability can have no bearing on questions of justification).

V. THE EVIDENCE ARGUMENT IS UNSOUND

- a. Proposition A does not entail Proposition B
 - i. A allows facts of a certain sort to count as justificatory (e.g. facts about the *informational* characteristics of sensory experience). But B says that we may *ignore* such facts. Thus, Proposition A does not entail Proposition B.
- b. Why do we mistakenly suppose that Proposition A entails Proposition B?
 - i. We confuse internalist and externalist brands of justification
 - 1. Both involve probabilification
 - a. Externalism involves objective probabilities (about whether certain beliefs are true).

- b. Internalism involves subjective probabilities (about whether certain beliefs are true).
- 2. Proposition A is *externalist* in character (or, at least, allows extramental facts about sense experience to play a justificatory role), while Proposition B is *not*.
- 3. Since we confuse the two brands of probabilification, it is easy to think that Proposition A entails Proposition B.

VI. THE CIRCULARITY ARGUMENT FAILS

- a. It relies on the following premise:

If S is obliged to beg the question in defending a belief, then the belief is unjustified.

- b. This premise is *false*: I am obliged to beg the question in defending my belief that I have a headache, but that belief is *not* unjustified.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

- a. The skeptic is wrong to think that matters of reliability can simply be set aside. This suggests, given the plausibility of process reliabilism, that the skeptic should address these issues if she wants to draw legitimate skeptical conclusions.
- b. Hill goes on to suggest that success is unlikely for any empirical enterprise undertaken to show that certain processes are unreliable. So it's likely not only that process reliabilism provides certain constraints on skeptical arguments, but also that the skeptic will have a difficult time showing that reliabilism is false. To this extent, reliabilists can be comfortable in their position.