

**Justification, Ambiguity, and Belief:  
Comments on McEvoy's "The internalist  
Counterexample to Reliabilism"**

**Henry Jackman  
York University**

Unadorned process reliabilism (hereafter UPR) takes any true belief produced by a reliable process (undefeated by any other reliable process) to count as knowledge. Consequently, according to UPR, to know *p*, you need not know that you know it. In particular, you need not *know* that the process by which you formed your belief was reliable; its simply *being* reliable is enough to make the true belief knowledge.

Defenders of UPR are often presented with purported counterexamples describing subjects who have true beliefs resulting from reliable (and undefeated) processes, but whom we do not intuitively take to *know* the propositions that they believe (call this "the internalist objection"). Mark McEvoy has recently challenged such arguments claiming (1) that the internalist objection against UPR simply begs the question against it, and (2) our intuitions about cases structurally similar to the standard examples characteristic of the internalist objection are actually often in line with UPR.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I'll argue that the plausibility of (1) depends on McEvoy's success in establishing (2), but with the level of description provided, (2) seems undermotivated.

As an instance of a typical proposed counterexample to UPR, McEvoy focuses on the following case of Bonjour's:<sup>2</sup>

Maud thinks she is clairvoyant, although she has no reasons for this belief. She believes this despite having compelling scientific evidence that clairvoyance is impossible. Maud comes to believe that the President is in New York, though she has no evidence for this belief. She claims that the belief is caused by her psychic powers. It turns out that the President is in New York, and Maud *has* completely reliable psychic powers, and furthermore that her President belief was produced by these powers. (McEvoy 2005, p. 180)

McEvoy argues that we shouldn't conclude that Maud's belief is unjustified in this case, since the intuition that Maud is not justified in believing that the president is in New York rests on the following "crucial assumption":

(EV) For any true belief to be justified, and thus to be knowledge, it must not be the case that one has excellent evidence that the faculty supposed to have produced this belief does not exist. (McEvoy 2005, p. 180)

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However, since (EV) is itself incompatible with UPR, it may seem as if the internalist is simply begging the question here. There are two rival accounts of justification, E-justification (which understands justification in an externalist fashion), and I-justification (which understands justification in an internalist fashion), and McEvoy suggests that the internalist objection only has bite if one already presupposes that I-justification is what we are ultimately concerned with. As McEvoy puts it:

Since all versions of the internalist objection assume some such principle [like (EV)], they all beg the question against UPR. Once we disambiguate ‘justification’ there is no possibility of this kind of counterexample against UPR. The subject, S, in any such case will be E-justified, the reliabilist doesn’t care that S isn’t I-justified, and any claim that S doesn’t know begs the question. (McEvoy 2005, pp. 181-82)

This response, however, raises the question of where the burden of proof lies with these debates. The issue is really whether the distinction between “E” and “I” justification is a case of *disambiguation* at all. The internalist will insist that our intuitions in the purported counterexamples to UPR are just intuitions *about justification*, and there are no questions being begged here at all. Just because we can find rival *accounts* of justification, it doesn’t follow that “justified” is ambiguous between two states corresponding to such accounts.

After all, consider the ‘Jackternalist’ who takes a belief that *p* to be justified if and only if I, Henry Jackman, find *p* plausible. Now the internalist and the reliabilist might argue that this account of justification is obviously inadequate, since there are cases where the Jackternalist condition is satisfied, and yet the believer is obviously not justified in their belief. For instance, assume that I find it plausible (for good reason) to think that Toronto has at least three Chinatowns. Now if someone else formed such a belief by a purely *random* and unreliable process (say picking the first digit in his phone number), he would not be *justified* in believing that Toronto had three Chinatowns. When faced with this obvious objection, it seems disingenuous of the Jackternalist to reply “Once we disambiguate ‘justification’ there is no possibility of this kind of counterexample against Jackternalism. The subject in any such case will clearly be *J-justified*, and we Jackternalists don’t care that the speaker isn’t I-justified or E-justified, and so any claim that the subject doesn’t know begs the question.”

The Jackternalist reply is not legitimate because “justified” clearly is *not* ambiguous between ‘J-justification’ and some other sense of the term. °In much the same way, the internalist will argue that the externalist is simply begging the question if he assumes that our ordinary sense of justification

*McEvoy's "The Internalist Counterexample to Reliabilism"*

is ambiguous between I-justification and E-justification. Indeed, our intuitions about cases like Maud's are supposed to *establish* principles like (EV), they shouldn't be understood as *presupposing* them. That is, rather than presupposing that justification is I-justification, they are supposed to show that our intuitive conception of justification has always been, at bottom, an internalist one.

However, McEvoy attempts to show that cases like Maud's cannot establish anything like (EV) because similar cases can be constructed where one would think of oneself as justified in believing *p*, even "when one has excellent evidence against the existence of the process that produced *p*" (McEvoy 2005, p. 180). As he puts it:

[C]onsider the case of Victor, the lone sighted individual in a world otherwise populated by the blind. Victor has told people of his unusual ability, but they have explained to him, using much hard scientific evidence, that there is no such thing as vision; he remains unpersuaded. °Victor, through his completely reliable faculty of vision forms the belief that the President of his country is walking towards him. It seems to me that, despite the evidence Victor's compatriots have offered for the claim that there is no such thing as vision, Victor's President belief is justified and is knowledge. Since Victor's situation is structurally parallel to Maud's, the same verdict should hold in her case—despite the fact that she has excellent evidence against the existence of clairvoyance. Since one's belief that *p* can be justified even if one has excellent evidence against the existence of the *p*-producing process, the fact that E-justification has this consequence does not refute it. (McEvoy 2005, pp. 180-81)

However, this story about Victor seems underdescribed, and if it is filled in so that widespread blindness is the only difference between Victor's world and ours, then Victor's situation doesn't seem "structurally parallel" to Maud's at all. Further, if the case is filled out so that it is structurally parallel, the intuition that Victor's belief is justified seem much less secure.

After all, if Victor was the lone sighted individual in a world that is otherwise like ours, he would quickly have *very good* evidence for the reliability of his visually based beliefs. Even if he were given excellent reasons for the non-existence of vision, he would also have excellent reasons for believing in its existence. His day-to-day experience would involve constant confirmation from his other senses that the information provided by his vision was reliable. Consequently, Victor's case does not, as it stands, seem structurally parallel to Maud's, since she has "no reason" to believe that she is clairvoyant, and so we can assume that she hasn't been faced with hourly confirmations of the reliability of her faculty of clairvoyance.

Victor's case can, of course, be elaborated so that it is structurally

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similar to Maud's, but once this is done, it doesn't seem obvious that vision produces justification. Imagine, for instance, not only that Victor is the only sighted individual on his planet, but also that the planet is completely dark, so that Victor is only able to form visually-based beliefs in those rare occasions when a flash of lightning illuminates an area. Further, these flashes of lighting have always been across an impassable river, so that Victor has never been able to confirm with his other senses (or the testimony of others) any of the things that he has seen. Everyone convinces Victor that these 'visions' of his are self created. Nevertheless, Victor still forms beliefs based on these visions. Should such beliefs count as justified? It seems far from obvious to me that they should.

It seems, then, that if we wish to defend reliabilism against the internalist objection, we need explain away the significance of intuitions about cases such as Maud.<sup>3</sup> It may be tempting to either deny the existence of such intuitions, or claim that appealing to them begs the question against reliabilism, but such approaches are harder to motivate than they may initially seem.

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> McEvoy 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Bonjour, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> For an attempt of this sort, see Goldman 1992.

**Bibliography**

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