The Burdens of Reliabilism: A Reply to Goldberg

0. Introduction

Sanford Goldberg has recently offered a novel defence of process reliabilism (PR) and truth monism (TM) that purports to defuse the "Swamping Problem".[1] Very briefly, knowledge is intuitively more epistemically valuable than mere true belief. However, it isn't clear why this would be the case if the following two theses are true,

PR: Knowledge is reliably produced true belief (modulo the Gettier problem).

TM: True belief is the only bearer of non-derivative epistemic value.

If TM is true, then it isn't clear why reliably produced true beliefs are any more valuable than unreliably produced ones: the value of reliability is purely instrumental. Goldberg (forthcoming) offers two related arguments to the effect that the value of reliably produced true beliefs is explained by their modal properties. I will examine each of these arguments to show that they don't get PRTM out of the woods. Both arguments will be shown to rely on premisses that might be true, but difficult to vindicate without abdicating the order of explanation distinctive of PRTM. I don't claim here that it is impossible to vindicate them without changing the order of explanation, only that Goldberg hasn't shown us how it is possible. Consequently, the swamping problem is yet to be solved.

1. The Modal Reliability Property

Here is Goldberg describing a property he calls the "modal reliability property" that will figure prominently in each of his arguments,

> According to PR, a belief *B* is reliably formed when *B* was formed by a reliable process-type P, where P is reliable just in case, given all of the situations *S* in which P is or would be employed in belief-formation, a suitably high preponderance of the beliefs P produces are true. Let the *modal reliability property* of *B* be the modal profile of *B*, as seen in the fact that a preponderance of beliefs formed in *S* are true. (Goldberg forthcoming, 2)

The basic idea is that reliably produced true beliefs have a certain property characterized by their modal profile. We will now turn to consider how he thinks their modal profile bears on their epistemic value.

2. The Modal Argument

Here is the argument,

MA1: A true belief *B* which has the modal reliability property is true in most epistemically interesting possible worlds.

MA2: A true belief which is true in most epistemically interesting possible worlds is more epistemically valuable than the corresponding merely true belief.

MA3: Knowledge entails that one's true belief has the modal reliability property.

  Therefore,

K>TB: Knowledge is more epistemically valuable than the corresponding merely true belief. (Goldberg forthcoming, 4)

I won't take issue with MA1 here. MA3 will be implied by any account of knowledge according to which knowledge requires modally robust true belief. Even if the correct account of knowledge denies this, we are interested in whether PRTM has the necessary resources to address the swamping problem. Since knowledge entails modal reliability if PR is true, we can assume it here.

MA2 is where the rubber hits the road. One could try to resist the conclusion by denying this premise. This is the line of objection Goldberg anticipates. He claims that this is not the right hill for the defender of the Swamping Problem to die on, since it involves denying the setup of the problem.[2] That is, the Swamping Problem is a challenge to PRTM. The challenge is to explain why knowledge is more valuable than merely true belief. It is hard to do this without running afoul of PRTMs other commitments. However, if you were to deny that modally robust true belief is epistemically better than mere true belief, then you are in effect denying that knowledge is more valuable than merely true belief. Yet that is the very fact you are challenging friends of PR to explain.

Even if Goldberg is right about the above (which I recommend we grant for the sake of argument), he owes us an explanation of why MA2 is true.[3] Since he is committed to TM, he can only appeal to actual truth in explaining why MA2 is true. The counterfactual is generally explained in terms of the actual and Goldberg has given us no reason to think that this is an exception. Yet the subject with a mere true belief and the subject with a true belief that also has the modal reliability property are in the same position so far as actual truth is concerned. At least this is how things appear at first glance and he has given us no reason to think appearances are misleading.

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[2] At least on the assumption that knowledge entails counterfactually robust truth. I won't question this assumption here.

[3] One could reason from the truth of the other premises, and the further premise that If PR is true, then knowledge is not more valuable than mere true belief, to the conclusion that MA2 is false. One can do this consistently because they could grant that knowledge is more valuable than true belief and grant that knowledge entails the modal reliability property but deny that the modal reliability property explains the added value of knowledge.

Goldman & Olsson (2009) have attempted to meet the challenge by explaining the modal properties in terms of dispositions in the actual world. However, Goldberg claims to be offering a novel response to the swamping problem and he is at pains to contrast his proposal with that of Goldman & Olsson (see his forthcoming, 2). So, he is unable to appeal to it, whatever its merits might be.

To sum up, even if Goldberg is right that MA2 is true and even if he is right that his critic is on dialectically unstable ground disputing it, he is also on dialectically unstable ground appealing to it.

3. The Warranted Confidence Argument

It is possible that the Modal Argument was never intended as a standalone argument. Perhaps the explanation of why MA2 is true is meant to emerge from consideration of the Warranted Confidence argument. With that in mind, let us turn to that argument now.

WC1: If one's true belief, *B*, has the modal reliability property, then (under certain conditions C) one is epistemically entitled to a significant degree of confidence in *B*.

WC2: If one's belief, *B*, is merely true then one is not epistemically entitled to any significant degree of confidence in *B*.

WC3: Beliefs which are such that given C one is epistemically entitled to a significant degree of confidence in them are epistemically more valuable than beliefs in which one is not entitled to any significant degree of confidence.

WC4: Knowledge entails that one's true belief has the modal reliability property.

Therefore,

K>TB: Knowledge is more epistemically valuable than merely true belief. **(**Goldberg

forthcoming, 5-6)

Here is Goldberg on WC1,

WC1 explicates the notion of warranted or entitled confidence in modal terms. I start with

an intuition: if you see a yellow bird on the tree, you are epistemically entitled to (a non-

negligible degree of) confidence that there is a yellow bird on the tree, while if you wildly

guess that there is a yellow bird on the tree, you are not epistemically entitled to confidence

even if your guess happens to be true. Now we saw above that reliably formed beliefs have

the modal reliability property, and so are true across a great swath of epistemically interesting

worlds. What underwrites the entitlement to confidence in the perception case but not the

guessing case? I submit that it has something to do with the perceptual belief's possession of

the modal reliability property. (Goldberg forthcoming, 6).

I won't dwell on WC1 here, I recommend we grant it at least for the sake of argument**.** WC2 seems

like a corollary of WC1, so I won't dwell on it here either. W4 is entailed by PR, so I will assume it

here.

WC3 is where an intervention is needed. However, just as in the last section, I won't deny

that it is true. Whether it's true doesn't matter for my purposes. Rather, I will call into question the

adequacy of the resources available to defenders of PRTM to explain why it is. Very briefly, the

problem is that it is hard to see why WC3 is true on the assumption that TM is.

WC3 concerns deontic properties. It says that one such property, that of being entitled to a

significant degree of confidence, is epistemically valuable. This may be true, but it is nonetheless the

epistemologist's task to explain why this is the case. One could of course claim that this is a brute

fact, but no truth monist will say this. The truth monist wants to explain all epistemic value in terms

of the value of true belief. PR is often taken by its proponent to be a form of rule consequentialism (Goldman 1986, 95ff.; Ahlstrom-Vij & Dunn 2017).[4] This claim has been disputed (Sylvan 2020). I will now show that Goldberg faces difficulties whether or not he endorses the rule consequentialist interpretation of PR.

The rule consequentialist is committed to providing a theory of value first and a deontic theory afterward. That is, they first tell us what is of non-derivative value (without invoking any deontic vocabulary, on pain of circularity). Then they explain deontic properties and their normative significance in terms of whatever value they've identified. If you are a truth monist and you are giving a theory of epistemic normativity, then you have identified true belief as the only bearer of non-derivative epistemic value. Your task then is to explain deontic statuses such as permission and entitlement in terms of the value of true belief. If this is your explanatory burden, then it is hard to see how you can avoid the result that the value of the deontic statuses is swamped by the value of truth. After all, their value can be analyzed without remainder into the value of truth. They don't contribute any independent value of their own. Indeed, according to the rule consequentialist the deontic statuses are only epistemically valuable insofar as having them is instrumental to acquiring true beliefs. If the value of the deontic statuses is entirely instrumental, then we have just as much total value when we get the true beliefs through other means.

I am not claiming that the problem is unsolvable in principle, only that it isn't clear from Goldberg's argument how it is to be solved. He helps himself to the value of deontic statuses to explain why beliefs with the modal reliability property are more valuable than those without.

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[4] On this version of rule consequentialism, belief forming processes are treated the way ethical consequentialists treat actions. That is, the epistemic deontic status of a belief forming process is a function of the consequences it has with respect to the production of true beliefs. It is not the case that beliefs themselves are assessed in light of their consequences. Thanks to an anonymous referee for drawing attention to this potential misunderstanding. For more on this point, see Goldman (2015) and Wrenn (2016).

However, it is unclear how we can explain the significance he attributes to them without shirking the burdens of PRTM.

Although Goldberg pitches his solution as an alternative to Goldman & Olsson's "conditional probability" solution to the swamping problem, he might be in effect assuming another solution they offer in that paper. Goldman & Olsson (2009) also offer a "value autonomization" solution to the problem. According to them, certain means can become valuable *qua* means to independently valuable ends but then become valuable in themselves as a result. Goldman & Olsson offer an example to illustrate this point. Money is valuable because it is instrumental to independently good outcomes. However, they don't think it follows that the value of money is only instrumental. They then go on to say the following, 'Furthermore, each token of this type inherits instrumental value from the type, even if some tokens don't actually cause events or states of affairs with fundamental value. (Either the money isn't spent at all, or it's spent on things that bring no pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, etc.).' (Goldman & Olsson 2009). Although the value of money is initially purely instrumental, it autonomizes non-instrumental value. However, the fact that it autonomizes value in this way is explained by its relation to the (explanatorily) prior value of things you can buy with money.

If deontic statuses can autonomize value, then PRTM is out of the woods. This explanation does not commit one to rule consequentialism, since value is non-instrumental after autonomization. The problem is that neither Goldberg nor Goldman & Olsson tell us in detail how autonomization works. Goldman & Olsson give us a few examples, such as the one above, but no explanation of how something with merely instrumental value can come to have non-instrumental value as a result. Upon initial inspection, value autonomization sounds a bit mysterious. It would have to involve tokens of a type acquiring non-instrumental value because the type has instrumental value. Why

don't they both just have instrumental value? At any rate, the non-instrumental value seems to be coming on the scene ex nihilo.

Goldberg never mentions value autonomization, but his Warranted Confidence Argument seems to presuppose it. If deontic statuses have solely instrumental value, then that value gets swamped by the value of the epistemically desirable outcomes they help bring about. They add no value to those outcomes. If deontic statuses add independent value but that value is explained by the fact that they are conducive to true beliefs, then they must be somehow "autonomizing" that independent value in virtue of the fact that they are conducive to true beliefs. At any rate, he is in trouble whether or not he endorses rule consequentialism. If he endorses it, then the value of the rules (and deontic statuses generally) is purely instrumental and consequently swamped by the value of the ends they bring about. If he doesn't endorse it, then the value of the rules/deontic statuses must autonomize somehow. We are not given a detailed account of how that works, and it sounds mysterious in the absence of one.

4. Conclusion

Scrutiny of the Modal and Warranted Confidence arguments shows that Goldberg's appeal to both is dialectically problematic. It is the burden of PRTM proponents to explain why MA2 and WC3 are true, and we have seen no reason to believe that they can do this without shirking the explanatory burdens characteristic of PRTM.[5]

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