

# Putting Skeptics in Their Place

THE NATURE OF SKEPTICAL  
ARGUMENTS AND THEIR ROLE IN  
PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY

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## Agent Reliabilism

We are looking for a theory of knowledge and evidence that confirms and explains the conclusions of Chapters 2 through 6. More specifically, we are looking for a theory that explains (a) why not all evidential relations are inferential; (b) how sensory evidence in particular can be non-inferential (or how beliefs about the world can be evidentially grounded in sensory appearances yet not inferred from sensory appearances); (c) how some knowledge can be foundational (or how some knowledge can be based on evidence which is not itself in need of further justifying reasons); and (d) how inferences that are only contingently reliable can nevertheless give rise to knowledge. Our theory should also explain (e) how knowers can be sensitive to the reliability of their inferences, and even though such inferences are only contingently reliable, so knowers cannot just “see” that they are reliable by a kind of logical intuition into necessary relations.

I have already suggested that agent reliabilism does all of these things. In this chapter I develop and defend that claim. The argument occurs in two stages. In Part I, I argue that reliabilist theories in general confirm all of the conclusions noted in (a) through (d). In other words, “simple” or “generic” reliabilism explains *why* the skeptical assumptions rejected in Chapters 2 through 6 are false. In Part II, I argue that agent reliabilism is the best version of reliabilism. This is because, in part, agent reliabilism explains (e), or how knowers can be sensitive to their contingent reliability without falling into Humean circularity problems.

In the next chapter, I continue to show how agent reliabilism addresses skepticism by revisiting argument (D3) from Chapter 2. This is the version of Descartes’ skeptical argument that I claimed was susceptible to a relevant possibilities approach. In Chapter 8, I develop an

account of what makes a possibility relevant, or what makes a possibility such that it must be ruled out in order that one have knowledge, and I show how agent reliabilism can provide a theoretical explanation of that account. In other words, the theory explains why some possibilities need to be ruled out to have knowledge, and why other possibilities are irrelevant and can be ignored.

If a theory of knowledge can do all of these things, then that is powerful evidence in its favor. Such a theory would capture a wide range of our pre-theoretical intuitions about which particular cases count as knowledge, would explain why skepticism is false, and would be psychologically plausible. In the final chapter of the book, Chapter 9, I argue that agent reliabilism also gives us insight into the possibility of moral and religious knowledge. A consideration of various skeptical arguments suggests that empirical knowledge is grounded in the faculties and habits of cognitively virtuous agents, and teaches us something about the nature of the cognitive virtues involved. This puts us in a position to consider whether similar virtue is possible regarding religious and moral beliefs. For example, we may consider the possibility of moral perception in the light of our conclusions about the nature of empirical perception. Traditional arguments against moral perception, it turns out, are no longer persuasive in the context of our more adequate understanding of empirical perception. Progress in moral and religious epistemology would constitute further evidence in favor of the theory of knowledge being defended.

### I. Simple Reliabilism

I now turn to the argument that reliabilism provides a theoretical explanation for the conclusions of Chapters 2 through 6. I begin by sketching the view and then turn to the concerns of (a) through (d) just reviewed.

#### 1. SIMPLE RELIABILISM: THE BIG IDEA

Simple reliabilism is the view that knowledge arises from reliable cognitive processes. Here “reliable” cannot mean “reliable in producing knowledge.” That would be to give a circular account of knowledge. Rather, reliable cognitive processes are ones that are reliable in arriving at *truth*.

Note that we need not load much into the word “truth” here. For

