Assess Reliabilism

In order to asses Reliabilism, it must be viewed within its context as a philosophical idea and with and against the conditions it establishes. Reliabilism is the philosophical ideas that, what we use to justify our beliefs, are methods that have proved to be reliable in the past, or rather a method that we know, or normally just believe, to be reliable.

The idea of Reliabilism can be seen as coming as a response to the Gettier problem. The Gettier problem being that all of the tripartite conditions for knowledge can be met, but there may be no actual knowledge, by the accepted definition of Plato, as justified true belief.

One such example of a Gettier problem is this: say I have a friend, Fred. I walk into Fred's room and see Fred on his bed. I shall then know that Fred is in the room. However, who I believe to be Fred, is actually his brother Tim. So, I now have no justification to believe that Fred is in the room; or rather I have a false justification, as Fred is not in the room. However, Fred is in the room, but hiding under the bed. Would I be right in my knowledge that Fred is in the room? No, as I am not properly justified. I have only true, belief.

So, quite obviously the problem with this Gettier example is that my true, belief, was not justified in a reliable way. It was only by accident, Fred's hiding under the bed, that I had a (falsely) justified true belief; as a result, I did not have knowledge.

However, if reliability is the answer to justification that is not false, reliability must be defined. That is very difficult. Is reliability defined as something that is never wrong? Such a thing would be reliable, but it would also be infallible, o could not be known as merely reliable. Furthermore, if that was, what is reliable, there would be very few reliable methods of justification as most are occasionally wrong.

It would seem more prudent to define reliability as something that is correct, but not infallible. Or rather, something that is generally correct, but not infallible. This however, leads to another problem. How often must something be correct in order to be reliable? If I had a computer, which crashed only once a year, I would say that it was very reliable. Standards for reliability appear relative to what they concern.

It is clear that there is a problem to be found with Reliabilism from the outset. Furthermore, problems arise when trying to explain the idea that there can be a reliable method for gaining knowledge, which is based on something that is false. For example, say I want to find out who is the fastest within a group of people. To do this I shall use a stopwatch. However, the stopwatch is wrong. Every time it gives a time, it adds on 10 seconds. Now, the information it gives is false, but it is consistently false by the same amount. So the fact that it gives false information has no impact on my wanting to find the time of the people. The reason for this is that the fastest person will still heave the lowest time and the slowest, the highest.

Such an example goes further towards developing a satisfactory standard or definition of reliability.

One way it might be possible to get a clearer idea of a method, which might be considered to be reliable is to use the idea of Causality.

The idea is that one thing causes us to believe another. For example I go on holiday in a foreign country. I come across an area covered with solidified lava. I form the belief p, that the mountain nearby, m, erupted in the past. There is a Causal connection between my belief and the eruption of m in the past. There must be a Causal chain between my belief and m's erupting.

However, the problem comes when the Causal chain is broken. Let us say that *m* did erupt in the past, however a person, *A*, removed all of the lava. Let us also imagine that even later someone else, *C*, without knowledge of *m*'s eruption, covered the Country in lava.

As aforementioned, I saw the lava and *m*, and concluded that *m* erupted and covered the Country in lava. Do I know that *m* erupted? How could I? The Causal chain linking my belief in the eruption of m and the eruption of *m*, has been broken, by *A* removing the Lava.

Alvin Goldman has argued that in order for a person to actually know a given proposition, *p*, the belief must be caused. *P*, in this case the belief that m erupted, can only be knowledge if it is caused by the eruption of *m*. So, knowledge is appropriately caused true belief. A belief is appropriately caused if it is produced by the fact, object or event that makes the belief true. So, for example, I know that I am writing this essay as my essay plays a part in causing me to believe that I am writing it.

Goldman's analysis may also help with the Gettier cases. This is, as the chain between the belief that p is correct and the fact that p is, have been broken. As an example, lets say, I believe something, d. What caused me to believe d, that my Fred Ben owns a Ford or that Mark is in Italy, was not that Ben owns a Ford, but something else, such as I have seen Ben driving a Ford or. So the fact that makes d true, that mark is in Italy, did not cause me to believe d, as I actually had no idea that Mark was in Italy – I had chosen that location at random. According to Goldman, if a true belief is to be knowledge, then the belief must be caused in the right way, by the fact in the proposition.

More problems with Reliabilism are also shown with Causal theory. The main problem is that of Universal Propositions. For example I may know that all pens are made by human beings. However, this knowledge doesn't seem to be causally supported by the fact that all pens are made by human beings. So, the Causal analysis must say that what causes it is that *this* pen has been created by human beings and so has another pen, etc, etc. However, it seems that my general belief that all pens have been created by humans can be founded in the belief that this pen, or another pen has been created by human beings, regardless of how many pens I believe have been created by people.

There is another person of the Reliability theory, put forward by Robert Nozick. It is often known as the tracking theory. The start of this theory, begins with establishing that a person *A* knows that *p* if; firstly *p* is true and secondly person *A* believes that *p*.

However, this brings us back to the aforementioned Gettier problem that justified, true beliefs can be arrived at by luck. I would still have believed that Fred was in the room, because I saw him, even though it was actually Tim, even if Fred was not hiding under the bed.

As a result of this problem within the tracking theory, a new condition is added. This condition is that if *p* were not true, then person *A* would not believe that *p*.

Still however, in the tracking theory, these conditions are not sufficient for knowledge. This is due to certain circumstances that may not exist, when *p* remains true but *A*, does not believe it.

Dancy, gives the following example of this. Hannah believes that there is a police car, as she can hear the siren. There is, in fact, a police car outside. However, the siren she can hear is on her son's hi-fi. As a result, she does not know the car is there since, if her son's hi-fi had been silent, she would not have believed it was there, even though it was. So, these cases need to be eliminated as a problem, though the

inclusion of a fourth condition. This is, if, in a change of circumstances, p were still true, *A* would still believe that *p*.

According to Nozick, then, we have four conditions; *p* is true, *A* believes *p*, if *p* were not true then *A* would not believe that *p* and if in changed circumstances, *p* were still true, *A* would still believe that *p*.

This tracking theory is also known as the conditional theory, 'if *a* were the case, then *b* would, as a result, be the case.'

From this we are further shown a problem which arises from the vagueness of Reliabilism. As a result of the difficulty in getting a clear notion of what is reliable, conditions are required to limit digress.

Nozick's account is an externalist theory of knowledge. It is an externalist theory as it claims that when a person can be said to have knowledge, it will be founded in some element that is external to the mind. Or rather, if a belief constitutes as knowledge it will be, because the knowledge relates to the world in a certain way. The more externalist theory is the one which puts more emphasis on objective conditions and reliability.

The problem of the externalist theory is that just because the externalist method gives a reliable response, for example a stopwatch counting the right number of seconds, its response may not be true – the stopwatch may add 10 seconds to every time- it is reliable, but false.

In contrast internalist theories claim that it is factors internal to a person's mind that determine whether or not a person has knowledge. The problem with the internalist theory is that it is like a circle. This can be best shown in a series of questions. How do I know that the method I am using to establish whether something is true is reliable? What method do I use to ascertain that the means for determining whether a method is reliable is itself reliable? These questions can go on like a circle.

Of course, the most obvious and perhaps prudent option would be to argue that an adequate Reliabilist theory should be one which combines both the externalist and internalist theories. Robert Audi, has suggested that reliability theories find it hard to avoid the issue of justification.

We form our beliefs about the external world on the basis of perception. Now, when would such a method be reliable? It is when a person is, so-called 'sufficiently-attentive', not drunk, is not confused, sees things in a 'good-light' and so on,. We can define 'sufficiently-attentive' reasonably easily as 'being attentive enough to form justified beliefs about the object seen'. As a result, justification cannot seemingly be removed from the reliability theory, which means nor can internalist theories, be avoided. And, as a result of this, internalist ideas are further mingled with the externalist.

Reliabilism can be of great help to Philosophers aiming to establish what can be said to justify knowledge. However, it has several problems, which all seem to derive from the difficulty, in producing a clear notion of reliability. Until a clear and perhaps definitive definition or notion can be established, the arguments of Reliabilism can be undermined to certain degree, too easily.