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Riggs on Strong Justification

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I. Introduction

In 'The Weakness of Strong Justification' Wayne Riggs claims that the requirement that justified beliefs be truth conducive (likely to be true) is not always compatible with the requirement that they be epistemically responsible (arrived at in an epistemically responsible manner)[1]. He supports this claim by criticising Alvin Goldman's view that if a belief is strongly justified, it is also epistemically responsible. In light of this, Riggs recommends that we develop two independent conceptions of justification, one that insists upon the requirement that beliefs be truth conducive and another that insists that they be epistemically responsible. It will then, on his view, be possible to properly evaluate beliefs with regard to each conception of justification. Riggs, however, is mistaken in supposing that the two epistemic requirements are independent. If a belief is responsibly arrived at, it is therefore likely to be true. He is thus also mistaken in supposing that the two epistemic requirements are incompatible. This mistake arises because Riggs assumes that justification is possible or, at least, that it involves standards that are akin to our own. Moreover, once this assumption is made explicit, we can see why a notion of justification that connects epistemic practice with likely truth is significant.

II. Riggs's Argument

[1].[1].

Riggs suggests that there are two competing conceptions of justification, the 'truth conducive' and the 'responsibilist' conceptions. Truth conducive conceptions of justification take as their starting point the intuition that for a belief to be justified it must be (sufficiently) likely to be true. Responsibilist conceptions of justification take as their starting point the intuition that for a belief to be justified it must be arrived at in an epistemically responsible manner. Alvin Goldman's reliabilist epistemology is a typical truth conducive epistemology. Laurence Bonjour's epistemology is a typical responsibilist one. The problem, according to Riggs, is that insisting that justification be truth conducive means that the responsibility criterion cannot be met. He supports this claim by criticising Goldman's reliabilist views.

In 'Strong and Weak Justification' Goldman differentiates between two notions of justification, the weak notion and the strong one. The weak notion of justification is that of *merely* nonculpable or blameless belief. The strong notion of justification is that which is explicated by reliabilism[2]. A simplified version of Goldman's reliabilism is given by the following principle:

(R) If *S's* believing that *p* at *t* results from a reliable cognitive belief-forming process (or set of processes), then *S*'s belief in *p* at *t* is justified.[3]

Here the requirement that justification be truth conducive is made explicit. A well known objection to this view is offered by Bonjour. Bonjour asks us to consider Maud, a woman who believes, with no reason whatsoever and despite the protestations of others, that she has the power of clairvoyance. One day Maud comes to believe, once again with no apparent reason,

[2]. [2,p.179].

that the president is in New York City. Moreover, she justifies this belief by appealing to her clairvoyance. Now as it happens the president is in New York City, and Maud does have reliable clairvoyant powers at the time[4]. It appears that according to (R) Maud is strongly justified in her belief that the president is in town. However, Maud's belief appears to be irrational.

Goldman's more sophisticated formulations of reliabilism do offer a way of countering Bonjour’s objection. In these Goldman requires that for a belief to be justified it must not only be reliably produced, but must also not be undermined by the cognitive state of the person who is entertaining it[5]. On this version of reliabilism, Maud is not justified in believing that the president is coming to town because of the evidence she has for the non-existence of clairvoyance.

Riggs, however, still believes that Bonjour's example can, with slight changes, be used to show the inadequacy of Goldman's views. Whilst Bonjour's target is the claim the equation of justified belief with reliably produced belief, Riggs's target is Goldman's additional claim that strongly justified belief fulfils the responsibility requirement.

Let us return to Maud.

> Let us add to the description of her situation that she lives in a world under the domain of an evil demon. But this is an evil demon of a more subtle bent than others we have discussed. This demon arranges it so that the inhabitants of his world are (at least nearly) always wrong about what they generally consider to be reliable belief-forming processes. Processes that are actually reliable produce beliefs that nearly always conflict with other firmly held beliefs, with the result that such processes are generally considered to be

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[3]. [3, p.13].
[4]. [4, p.40].
[5]. [5,p.63].

> unreliable. On the other hand, processes that produce beliefs that nearly always bear up under rigorous scrutiny are actually unreliable[6].

By hypothesis, Maud's belief is reliably produced by clairvoyance in this world. Moreover, according to Riggs, it appears that in this new situation there is no reliably obtained evidence that undermines Maud's belief that the president is coming to town. On his view, inductive evidence cannot be appealed to in order to undermine her beliefs, since the inductive method is not a reliable belief forming process in the imagined world. Neither, he adds, does there appear to be another reliable process that she could appeal to. Thus, Maud's belief is strongly justified. At the same time, Riggs claims, since Maud does not appeal to responsible methods such as the inductive method, Maud is not justified by responsibilist standards. He accordingly concludes that Goldman is wrong in supposing that strong justification entails responsibilistic justification. Indeed, Riggs adds that, in Maud's new situation, being responsibly justified would involve appealing to inductive evidence, that is to say to an unreliable method. If so, then not only does her situation show that being justified in the truth conducive sense does not entail being responsibly justified, it also shows that there are cases in which being justified in the truth conducive sense actually precludes being responsibly justified.

Riggs suggests that Goldman's failure is inevitable since reliability is assessed in terms of what actually turns out to be true, independently of what people believe, whilst what people believe is essential to assessing epistemic responsibility. This, Riggs claims, means that we can always construct cases in which beliefs are the result of reliable processes that appear to be unreliable. Thus, strong justification will always differ from responsibilist justification. Indeed, Riggs claims that the problem that Goldman's views face is a special case of a problem for any

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[6]. [1, p.185].

reliabilist attempt to capture responsibilist intuitions. It is for this reason that he recommends that we independently develop two conceptions of justification. With this achieved, it will be possible to properly evaluate beliefs with regard to each conception of justification.

III. Responsibilist Justification

I do not think that Riggs's argument supports the thesis that Maud is epistemically irresponsible, and hence that epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness come apart. But, before clarifying this point, let me present some of the intuitions in favour of the supposition that responsibilist justification does involve fulfilling the requirements of truth conducive justification.

If responsibilist justification were independent of truth conducive justification, being responsibly justified would entail nothing about being justified in the truth conducive sense. This is the point of Riggs's argument. Now, to believe a proposition is to believe that it is true. However, if someone were to believe that having responsible beliefs entails nothing about their truth, he or she would have no reason to believe that any proposition is true, and hence no reason to believe any proposition. Given this conclusion, it would seem that being epistemically responsible cannot be entirely independent of being justified in the truth conducive sense.

In face of this Riggs could, of course, insist that accepting that having responsible beliefs entails nothing about their truth does not mean accepting that we have no reasons for our beliefs, but only that we have no truth conducive reasons for them. However, in light of our readiness to infer that we have no reasons to believe any propositions from the assumption that having responsible beliefs entails nothing about their truth, I suspect that this response involves a redefinition of the term 'reason'.

The tension between the independence thesis and responsibly believing that some proposition is true can be further brought into focus by considering certain second order beliefs. Riggs aims to get us to responsibly believe the independence thesis. Yet, responsibly believing this thesis, i.e. responsibly believing that having a responsible belief never entails having a belief that is likely (or unlikely) to be true, seems incompatible with the possibility of responsibly believing that some beliefs are likely to be true. For example, if we responsibly believe that having a belief which is based on empirical evidence never entails having a belief that is likely (or unlikely) to be true, it seems that we cannot responsibly believe that empirical beliefs are likely to be true.

Let me be explicit about the worries certain second-order beliefs cause for Riggs's position. Being epistemically responsible means having certain responsible beliefs about beliefs: it includes responsibly believing that certain beliefs are likely (or unlikely) to be true. Yet, this seems to conflict with responsibly adopting the independence thesis. Riggs's argument is an allegedly responsible argument for the independence thesis: if successful it would establish the responsible belief that having a responsible belief never entails having a belief that is likely (or unlikely) to be true. But this seems to be the same as saying that we can never responsibly believe that *any* belief is likely (or unlikely) to be true. After all, we cannot be responsible in believing that an irresponsible belief is likely to be true. It thus seems that responsibly believing that some beliefs are likely (or unlikely) to be true, is incompatible with responsibly believing the independence thesis. Moreover, since being epistemically responsible includes responsibly believing in the likely truth of some beliefs, this incompatibility implies that there must be some connection between being responsibly justified and being justified in the truth conducive sense.

To some the conclusion just reached might seem unwarranted. In particular, it might not be immediately clear why responsibly believing that having a responsible belief never *entails*

having a belief that is likely to be true means that we can never responsibly believe that any belief is likely to be true. At first glance, it might appear that the relation between having a responsible belief and having a belief that is likely to be true can be weaker than that of entailment whilst still allowing responsible beliefs about the likely truth of beliefs. In particular, it seems possible that having a responsible belief makes it likely, without entailing, that we have some belief that is likely to be true. This might lead some to mistakenly suppose that if having a responsible belief were to make it likely that we have some belief that is likely to be true, it would be responsible to believe that some belief of ours is likely to be true. However, the mere fact that it is likely that we have a belief that is likely to be true *never* makes it responsible to suppose that some belief of ours is likely to be true. This would follow only if, in addition, it were sometimes *responsible* to suppose that having a responsible belief makes it likely that some belief of ours is likely to be true. But, it is precisely this kind of responsibility that was supposed to be underpinned by the supposition that having a responsible belief makes it likely that we have some belief that is likely to be true.

At this point, it might be thought that Riggs could deny that epistemic responsibility requires that it is responsible to believe that some beliefs are likely (or unlikely) to be true. Given this, he might be able to accept that we can never be epistemically responsible in believing that a belief is likely (or unlikely) to be true, whilst insisting upon the independence thesis. However, it is a truism that if it is responsible to believe that *p* is likely to be true, it is thereby responsible to believe that the belief in *p* is likely to be true. Thus, I insist that epistemic responsibility requires that it is responsible to believe that some beliefs are likely (or unlikely) to be true.

IV. Is Maud Epistemically Irresponsible?

I suspect, then, that the independence thesis is wrong. Moreover, Riggs's argument for this thesis does not alleviate my suspicion. Let me explain why. Riggs does not attempt to offer a general argument for this thesis: he leaves that for another paper. He only claims that a study of Goldman's reliabilism shows the characteristic way in which truth conducive conceptions of justification inevitably fail to capture responsibilist requirements. Riggs, however, makes his general strategy quite clear. If we can construct possible situations in which responsibility goes contrary to truth conduciveness, we will be able to counter any attempt to capture both kinds of requirement in a single conception of justification. Will this strategy work? Examining what Riggs has to say about Goldman indicates that it will not.

Riggs asks us to imagine that Maud faces an evil demon who ensures that what appear to be reliably produced beliefs are not really such beliefs. What can we learn about the concept of justification from cases such as these? I think not much. I will argue for this claim in two stages. First, I will show that our judgements in these cases depend upon certain substantive beliefs about the situation, and not merely upon the meaning of our terms. I will then suggest that this leaves no easy route to conclusions about the meanings of terms solely on the ground of what we are inclined to say about a single imagined situation.

The claim that Maud is not responsibly justified rests upon certain substantive assumptions about her situation. Riggs claims that it is because she appeals to clairvoyance, and because clairvoyance appears to be unreliable in her world. Clairvoyance appears to be unreliable, he adds, because it is a method that has not stood up to rigorous scrutiny. Thus, on his view, Maud would be responsible were she to rely on inductive evidence in assessing clairvoyance. Yet, only if we assume that adhering to a method that bears up under (what 'we' take to be) rigorous scrutiny is epistemically responsible does anything about Maud's epistemic

status follow[7]. Without this assumption, Maud may well still turn out to be epistemically responsible. Moreover, this assumption is clearly not merely an assumption about the meaning of the term 'epistemic responsibility', but a substantive assumption about rigorous scrutiny. After all, it really is possible that the insistence on so called rigorous scrutiny is epistemically irresponsible. Perhaps what 'we' take to be rigorous scrutiny is not so, or at least is not so in Maud's situation, and perhaps rigorous scrutiny itself is suspect or insufficient. If so, then Maud's belief might be responsible after all. Alternatively, it may be the case that being epistemically responsible is not possible. If so, it would hardly do to call Maud epistemically irresponsible. If epistemic responsibility were not possible, she would be as responsible as anyone could be. Indeed, this last possibility is closest to my intuitions about Maud's claim. If there is no way for her or anyone else to tell whether an evil demon of the envisaged kind exists or is likely to exist, then epistemic responsibility is not possible.

If, as I have argued, intuitions about Maud reflect not only the meaning of 'epistemically responsible', but also substantive beliefs about what methods are epistemically responsible, what 'we' intuitively say about Maud's belief in clairvoyance cannot, by itself, support views about what 'we' *mean* by 'epistemically responsible'. Admittedly, most epistemologists share Riggs's intuition that cases such as Maud's are cases of epistemic irresponsibility. But if I am correct, we need not explain this by construing 'epistemic responsibility' as Riggs does. We can do so by noting that they believe that clairvoyance is not a responsible method, and that certain other methods are responsible. For, if 'our' substantive beliefs about Maud's situation are misguided, she may be mistakenly applying the term 'epistemically responsible'. In particular, if 'we' are mistaken in supposing that being rigorous (where this means being rigorous in applying 'our' inferential practices) is the epistemically responsible thing for Maud to do, she may yet turn out

[7]. I have put the term 'we' in scare quotes to indicate that I do not suppose that the readers of this

to be epistemically responsible. In such a case the intuition that strong justification and responsibilist criteria of justification come apart is resisted by noting the existence of a tacit belief about Maud's situation. Alternatively, it may be that epistemic responsibility is not possible. It would thus be a mistake to suppose that Maud is being epistemically irresponsible in preferring her beliefs over those of others around her. Once again, a conclusion about the meaning of 'epistemic responsibility' is averted by worrying about some substantive assumption about Maud's situation.

Notice that I have not assumed that the intuition that Maud is epistemically irresponsible is misguided. My point is only that this intuition is needed if we are to draw any conclusions about the meaning of 'epistemic responsibility' from her situation. Of course, some might still think that the intuitions about Maud are obviously correct, and hence that Riggs's conclusion still follows. However, worries that 'our' epistemic practices are inadequate or somehow misguided cannot be dismissed in this way. For example, the possibility that Maud is no less epistemically responsible than anyone else, is one which is driven by sceptical worries about the possibility of being epistemically responsible. In order to insist in the face of this that Maud is epistemically irresponsible, and thus to be allowed to draw conclusions about the meaning of 'epistemic responsibility', one would have to offer reasons for supposing that epistemic responsibility is possible. Merely pointing to 'our' intuitions cannot do this job.

I thus conclude that Riggs's appeal to the Maud thought experiment offers no reason to suppose that the requirements of epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness come apart. In particular, Goldman's claim that strong justification entails epistemic responsibility has not been invalidated. Once we recognise the substantive beliefs that go into describing Maud's situation,

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paper have common epistemic values, and thus common standards of scrutiny.

we can see that it may just as well be these rather than anything else that correctly explains why it appears to many that epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness come apart.

We can draw a stronger conclusion about Riggs's argument. In section III I offered independent reasons for supposing that epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness do not come apart. Given this, it is fair to conclude that *if*, as Riggs appears to do, it is supposed that there is no way for Maud or anyone else to tell whether an evil demon of the envisaged kind exists or is likely to exist, it must be concluded that epistemic responsibility is not possible. Those who draw this conclusion must also suppose that it is the pervasive intuition that epistemic responsibility is possible, and not the meaning of the term epistemic responsibility', which explains why it appears to them that epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness come apart.

To some extent, this conclusion is further supported by a slightly modified version of Riggs's thought experiment. Imagine that Maud is in a situation that is identical to the one described by Riggs except in that in it due legal process takes the place of clairvoyance. Assume that the evil demon ensures that all the methods which 'we' consider to be reliable are not so in Maud's world, with the exception of one which Maud believes in, namely due legal process. Assume also, that the demon ensures that all the processes that are reliable in Maud's world appear not to be so. Thus, in Maud's world, collecting empirical data is generally unreliable, except where one is engaged in something like trying to convict murderers through due legal process. Now, I guess, those who previously thought Maud irresponsible will think it intuitive that, in this possible world, Maud's belief in due legal process is less so. Indeed, to some extent they will think that Maud's new belief is responsible. But the only difference between the situation Maud finds herself in this possible world and that in which she finds herself in the one envisaged by Riggs is that in former the method Maud clings to is one that 'we' commonly

believe to be responsible. Thus, it is something like this substantive belief which explains the intuition that epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness come apart in the world Riggs envisages, and not the meaning of the term 'epistemic responsibility'[8].

V. Epistemic Responsibility & Scepticism

There is an easy way to make responsibilist justification independent of truth conducive justification. We can define responsibilist justification so that it simply means being justified by 'our' justificatory practices, whether or not these are truth conducive. We could then proceed with two distinct projects for the analysis of justification. One project could focus upon finding out what our epistemic practices are, and the other upon analysing the notion of truth conducive justification.

I have no particular objection to pursuing these distinct projects, so long as their limitations are realised. To begin with, the mere fact that a set of epistemic practices are those of a particular community ('ours') does nothing to recommend them to anyone, not even to those who belong to that community. In particular, sceptical worries cannot be addressed merely by stating that certain practices are 'ours'. As to the project of developing a truth conducive notion of justification, this project too cannot, by itself, help in assessing 'our' epistemic practices. After all, a claim that a given practice leads to beliefs that are likely to be true can only be appropriately assessed by applying responsibilist standards of the kind that indicate that the practices in question are truth conducive. Without these standards any claim to truth, including claims to the

[8]. On my view, we should expect that the intuition that Maud is epistemically responsible in her new situation might not be strong. This is the case because it is not only 'our' epistemic attitude to due legal process that influences judgments about her being responsible, but also 'our' view of the status of other methods in Maud's world. Thus, the intuition that Maud is responsible in her new

effect that this or that conception of truth indicative justification is correct, ultimately remains arbitrary.

The upshot of recognising the limitations of the two independent projects just described is that an appropriate evaluation of our epistemic practices is possible only in the light of a notion of justification which links epistemic practice with the truth. I suspect that this notion is the responsibilist notion of justification.

Before concluding, let me deal with a possible worry about my suggestion. Riggs's suggestion that we keep responsibilist justification and truth conducive justification apart seems irresponsible because it severs the link between responsibility and truth, but there might be a similar worry for me[9]. It might be thought that an appeal to evidence to the effect that some responsible belief is likely to be true must be question begging since the appeal must itself be a responsible one. Thus, if epistemic responsibility and truth conduciveness were intimately linked, it would not be possible to be epistemically responsible. To some this conclusion is unacceptable, especially in light of the appearance that very responsible beliefs, such as the belief in Ptolemaic astronomy, have turned out to be false. We would thus be urged to conclude that not only is Riggs's suggestion that epistemic responsibility is independent of truth conduciveness irresponsible, but that so too is my suggestion that the two are intimately linked. In such a situation, it might be thought, the only responsible stance is to require epistemic responsibility in belief, whilst remaining agnostic about the reliability of belief.

I reject the suggestion that requiring epistemic responsibility about belief together with agnosticism about its reliability avoids the worries that plague a position which keeps responsibility and truth conduciveness apart. If we are agnostic about the reliability of the way in

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situation might be weakened by the fact that, in it, methods which 'we' take to be epistemically responsible appear to indicate that due legal process is not reliable.

[9]. One of the present paper's referees raised this worry.

which 'we' go about forming our beliefs, 'we' can have no interesting reason to require 'our' way of forming beliefs. 'Our' epistemic practices may well be such that, by their own lights, they ought to be adopted. But this does nothing to recommend them in the face of alternative ways of forming beliefs. As I pointed out with regard to Riggs's position, the mere fact that a set of epistemic practices are those of a particular community, 'ours', does nothing to recommend them to anyone, not even to those who belong to that community.

My point, then, is that epistemic worries will plague any practice of belief formation so long as it does not have implications for the truth conduciveness of belief. This is not something which arises out of the requirement that we develop some notion of justification that links the two. On the contrary, I make this requirement since only if it is fulfilled can we even begin to deal properly with worries about the acceptability of various practices of belief formation.

But are we doomed to epistemic irresponsibility? Is it not the case that all responsible claims to the effect that being epistemically responsible is truth conducive are ultimately question begging? And if we are doomed to epistemic irresponsibility, what then? I cannot offer an answer to these questions here. They are, after all, one of the main starting points of serious epistemological debate since the Greek sceptics. Nevertheless, let me make two points about them. Firstly, I want to re-emphasise that the possibility that all belief is epistemically irresponsible, a traditional kind of scepticism, cannot, and ought not, be rejected out of hand. In particular, it cannot be rejected on the grounds that it is commonly believed that there have been responsible beliefs, such as the belief in Ptolemaic astronomy, which have been found to be false. Secondly, it is not clear that all responsible claims to the effect that being epistemically responsible is truth conducive are ultimately question begging. This might appear to be the case if being epistemically responsible ultimately involved assuming some particular method, or set of methods, for forming beliefs. For example, this might appear to be the case if being epistemically

responsible ultimately involved assuming that we ought to infer the best explanation of a phenomenon. But being epistemically responsible need not involve making such assumptions. It might involve making no particular ultimate assumption, or set of assumptions, about how we ought to go about forming beliefs, but rather placing alternative ways of forming beliefs up for grabs, and attempting to decide between them without begging any questions.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that being justified in the sense of being epistemically responsible involves being justified in the sense of fulfilling some of the requirements of truth conducive justification. I have also explained why Riggs's attempt to show that strong justification is at odds with responsibilist justification fails. It does so because it fails to recognise certain substantive beliefs regarding what is and what is not epistemically responsible. Finally, I have pointed out that we can create two independent epistemic projects by redefining the notion of 'epistemic responsibility'. However, I have also suggested that these projects are of real interest only in as much as we can find some notion of justification that links epistemic practice with the truth. No doubt, such a project is worrying: making the connection between responsibility and truth explicit would also make explicit the worries of scepticism. But, since these worries will remain no matter what our definitions, this is not necessarily a bad result.

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