

The Sellarsian Dilemma: Not What It Seems

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1. Introduction

According to internalist foundationalist theories of epistemic justification there are non-doxastic mental states that (a) can provide epistemic justification for beliefs but (b) do not themselves require epistemic justification and thereby (c) rule out the possibility that our justified beliefs are supported by an infinite regress of justification-requiring justifiers.¹ One of the central challenges to internalist foundationalism is posed by the Sellarsian dilemma, according to which the non-doxastic mental states internalist foundationalists identify as justifiers are either (a) incapable of conferring genuine epistemic justification or (b) can do so only in virtue of features that generate a demand that they themselves be justified. In this essay, I defend internalist foundationalism from the threat posed by the Sellarsian dilemma. I do this by arguing that *seemings*—non-doxastic mental states that, according to the principle of phenomenal conservatism, are the fundamental source of epistemic justification—are sufficient to provide beliefs with epistemic justification but lack the features needed to generate a demand that they themselves be justified.

2. The Sellarsian Dilemma

Internalist foundationalism is, again, the position that there are non-doxastic mental states that (a) can provide epistemic justification for beliefs but (b) do not themselves require epistemic justification and thereby (c) rule out the possibility that our beliefs rest upon an infinite regress of

justification-requiring justifiers. Assume, then, that *b* is an ostensibly *basic* belief; i.e, a regress-halting belief justified by something other than a doxastic state. When asked what justifies *b*, the internalist foundationalist will appeal to a non-doxastic mental state *m*. Now, *m* either has assertive propositional content—i.e., it presents the world as being a certain way—or it doesn't.² If *m* has assertive propositional content, then it seems incapable of providing *basic* or *foundational* justification. If *m* lacks assertive propositional content, then it seems incapable of providing *any* sort of justification. Whichever disjunct is true, *m* appears incapable of providing the kind of justification that would make *b* a basic (and thus regress-halting) belief. This is the Sellarsian dilemma. It is perhaps the central challenge to internalist foundationalism.³

In order to grasp the full import of the dilemma, we'll need to appreciate the support enjoyed by each horn. Let's begin with the second. Suppose that *m* is a mental state that has been cited as a justifier for an ostensibly basic belief, but *m* doesn't have assertive propositional content. Instead, *m* is held to be, say, the very experience—the *ouchy sensation*—of pain. The trouble with this proposal is that brute experiential states appear unfit to play the epistemic role for which they are sometimes drafted. This is because, as Donald Davidson (1986, p. 311) puts it, “the relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be *logical*, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.”

Davidson's point is that a brute experience or sensation (of the non-representational kind in question, at least) is no more a *reason* or *justification* than an egg, an elk, or an elm tree. Reasons are the kinds of things that stand in inferential relations to one another. That is, *r* is a reason for *b* precisely because *r* stands in a relation of logical support—deductive, inductive, or abductive—to *b*. Thus, since *propositions* about elk stand in all kinds of inferential relations to other propositions—e.g., *there is an elk on the lawn* entails *there is a mammal on the lawn*—they

can be unproblematically drafted into the space of reasons and put to use in justificatory language games. Elk themselves, however, don't imply or entail anything. Nor do brute experiences. They are thus excluded from the space of reasons; *m* cannot serve as a reason for or against *b* unless *m* makes a claim about the world that stands in some kind of logical relation to *b*. Indeed, the very idea of a non-propositional reason for belief is simply unintelligible.

Suppose, alternatively, that *m* is a non-doxastic state that possesses assertive propositional content. It makes a claim about the world that can stand in a logical (and thus potentially justificatory) relation to *b*. We are now confronted with the other horn of the Sellarsian dilemma. Recall, that, according to Sellarsians, non-doxastic states with assertive propositional content are *in need of their own justifiers*. This is because, again, any state with assertive propositional content issues a claim about the way the world is. This claim will be true or false. If we are to permissibly employ it as a premise from which to infer or justify other claims, we'll need a reason to believe that it is true.

To illustrate this point, suppose you believe that *there is a pot on the stove*. In support of your belief, you cite a visual state; i.e., the state of seeing that *there is a pot on the stove*. The trouble with this move is that the mental state in question, although not explicitly a belief state, is so belief-like that it (apparently) demands the same sort of epistemic support that beliefs demand. After all, vision can deceive. Thus, if you are to appeal to a visual state to justify a belief, you'll need to have a reason to believe that the state in question isn't deceptive.

Sellarsians conclude, then, that it is misleading to say that states with assertive propositional content can provide non-doxastic reasons for belief. Since any state that makes a claim about the world can, in principle, make a false claim, such states fail to provide the regress-halting epistemic ground-floor internalist foundationalists seek.⁴

3. A Conservative Solution

Advocates of internalist foundationalism must rebut one of the horns of the Sellarsian dilemma. Fumerton (1995), Fales (1996), and the recent Bonjour (2003) attempt to rebut the second horn. They contend that the notion of a non-propositional justifier can be articulated in an intelligible way. For reasons I cannot present here, I find their arguments unconvincing. Thus, I aim to rebut the first horn of the Sellarsian dilemma. My argument runs as follows:

1. Seeming states are capable of justifying beliefs.
2. If a mental state *m* ought to be justified, then it can be justified.
3. Seeming states can't be justified.
4. Thus, it is not the case that seeming states ought to be justified.
5. Thus, there are mental states that are capable of justifying beliefs but are not such that they ought to be justified.
6. If there are mental states that are capable of justifying beliefs but are not such that they ought to be justified, then internalist foundationalism is not undermined by the Sellarsian dilemma.
7. Thus, internalist foundationalism is not undermined by the Sellarsian dilemma.

Premise (1) follows directly from the principle of phenomenal conservatism. The progenitor of phenomenal conservatism, Michael Huemer (2007, p. 30), formulates the principle as follows:

(PC) If it seems to *S* that *p*, then, in the absence of defeaters, *S* thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that *p*.

According to Huemer (2013), “most phenomenal conservatives hold that its seeming to one that p is a matter of one’s having a certain sort of experience, which has propositional content but is not analyzable in terms of belief.” This suggests, then, that seeming states, as understood by phenomenal conservatives, are *sui generis* mental states that can stand in logical (and thus potentially justificatory) relations to beliefs.⁵ Various arguments for phenomenal conservatism have been put forward (see, e.g., Huemer (2001), (2007), (2013), Skene (2013), Tucker (2010), (2011), and Moretti (2015). I find several of these arguments convincing. Since I cannot review them here, I will take (1) for granted.

Premise (2) is a specific instance of a widely accepted general principle; namely, the “ought implies can” principle. Although philosophers occasionally challenge this principle (e.g. Graham (2011)), I cannot defend it here. Nevertheless, the “ought implies can” principle enjoys strong intuitive support and is taken for granted by a very significant segment of the philosophical electorate.⁶ I shall follow suit.

Premise (4) follows from (2) and (3). Premise (5) follows from (1) and (4). Premise (6) can be supported by pointing out that the central lesson of the Sellarsian dilemma is (supposedly) that no mental states that can justify beliefs escape the requirement that they too be justified, thereby rendering internalist foundationalism untenable. If there are such mental states, however, then Sellarsian dilemma fails to render internalist foundationalism untenable.

It should now be apparent that, on the assumption that (1) is correct, (3) is the most controversial premise of my argument. For that reason, I dedicate the remainder of this essay to supporting it. I do this by appealing to linguistic data and introspective evidence. On my view, these data show that seeming states are a counterexample to the supposed lesson of the Sellarsian

dilemma. They possess the assertive propositional content needed to justify beliefs but fail to possess all of the features needed to yield a demand that they be justified.

Recall that, according to Sellarsians, any state with (a) propositional content that (b) is assertively presented and thus (c) *can, for all we know, be false* (i.e., setting aside the evidence we have, it is epistemically possible that its content is false) is such that it can justify a belief only if it is itself justified. Since the mental states in question could be false, Sellarsians contend that we need some independent reason to think their contents are true before we can appeal to them as a source of justification. Thus, they hold that (a)-(c) are jointly sufficient to generate a demand for justification. Since seeming states meet conditions (a)-(c), the Sellarsian will argue that they are in need of justification, i.e., that we need independent reason to think their contents are true. If she's correct, then seeming states cannot provide genuinely *foundational* regress-halting non-doxastic justification.

The proper response to this challenge is to reject the claim that underwrites it, viz., that (a)-(c) are jointly sufficient to generate a demand for justification. To see how one might begin to construct such a response, let's consider some instructive remarks from Matthias Steup (2000, p. 6):

Suppose you ask me: What justifies you in believing that your coffee is sweet? This is a sensible question, and it has a sensible answer. The answer would be: "It tastes sweet." But now suppose we were to ask: "But what justifies you in experiencing the coffee as tasting sweet, i.e., in having a sense experience that has as its content the proposition that the coffee is sweet?" Well, this is not a sensible question. If you were to ask me that kind of a question, I would have to reply that I don't know what you mean.

In this passage, Steup draws our attention to a crucial difference between belief states and seeming states; namely, that the rules of our standard justificatory language games permit players to ask one another to justify beliefs but *do not* permit them to ask one another to justify experiential states (of which seemings are a kind). Thus, the Sellarsian who asks someone to justify their seemings is operating in defiance of standard justificatory norms. This suggests, then, that (a)-(c) are *not* jointly sufficient to generate a demand for justification. Instead, a mental state requires justification only when a *further* condition is met; namely, condition (d), which says that a state must properly figure in our justificatory language games in order to generate a demand for justification.

Since we regularly ask for and receive reasons for belief, it is clear that belief states meet condition (d). By contrast, we do not ask our interlocutors to justify claims about how things seem. Nor do we *criticize* such claims. Indeed, consider the following snippet of dialogue:

Sue: It seems that the black cat is bigger than the gray cat.

Bill: Yes, but why do things seem that way you? Do you have any good reason for its seeming to you that the black cat is bigger? If not, you should really stop it from seeming that way to you. To do otherwise would be irrational!

Bill's remarks are palpably ridiculous. Although Sue can perhaps tell a causal story about how she came to have the seeming state in question, it's not at all clear how she could provide a satisfying *epistemic reason*—a reason of the sort that would demonstrate she is conducting her

intellectual life in compliance with the norms of truth-seeking—for the way the way things appear to her.

In requesting such a reason, Bill is flouting the norms of ordinary epistemic discourse. Indeed, it's rather like he is requesting an epistemic reason for, say, Sue's having a headache or tripping down the stairs. Moreover, Bill is criticizing Sue for failing to do something—i.e., provide him with an epistemic reason for her seeming—that she isn't in any position to do. All of this suggests, again, that seemings do not meet condition (d) and thus do not require justification. Thus, on the assumption that seemings can *confer justification* upon other kinds of mental states, the justification they confer is foundational and the beliefs they justify are (or can be) basic.

As formulated thus far, however, condition (d) is not especially informative. We should like to *explain why* the rules of our justificatory language games permit players to request reasons for beliefs but not for seemings. The example of Sue and Bill provides us with a place to begin constructing the desired explanation.

What is objectionable about Bill's critique of Sue is that he censures her for failing to do something she simply cannot do. For seemings are not among the kinds of mental states that can be justified by appeal to epistemic reasons. This is because seeming states are *evaluatively inert*; i.e., they aren't modified, abandoned, revised, strengthened, or weakened in response to evaluations. Thus, when *S* reports that things seem a certain way and an interlocutor issues an evaluation (negative or positive) of *S*'s seeming-report, the evaluation will have no direct effect on how things seem to *S*. Even if *S* becomes convinced that a cognitive misfire has given rise to its seeming to *S* that *p*, it will still seem to *S* that *p*. Indeed, to return to a familiar example, the lines of the Müller-Lyer diagram seem to be different lengths even to the psychologically

sophisticated and philosophically well-trained observer. Thus, there is good reason to think that, as Huemer (2001, p. 97) puts it, “evaluations of [seemings] have no effect on those [seemings].”⁷

In support of this claim, I invite the reader to introspectively consider the impact of evaluations on her own seeming states (visual, memorial, and otherwise). In my case, when I learn that things seem to someone else just as they seem to me, I do not find that this increases the strength of the seeming I enjoy. For instance, suppose I say “It seems like there’s an animal rustling in the bushes.” My wife responds by saying “It seems that way to me, too.” In cases like this one, my wife’s testimony increases my confidence that things *are* as they seem—i.e., it increases the strength of the *belief* I form in response to how things seem—but has no effect on the strength or force of the seeming state itself.

Similarly, when I am told that a seeming state I’ve reported is misleading or inaccurate, that doesn’t make things seem any different to me. When I find out that the stick in the water is straight, rather than bent, it continues to seem to me that the partially submerged stick is bent. Likewise, when I am informed that stop-motion video footage shows that Achilles is slightly ahead of the tortoise in a footrace, it still seems to me, as I watch them, that they are running at the same speed.

What’s more, when I acquire reasons, they do not directly yield seemings, despite, at times, directly yielding beliefs. Suppose I’m told by a friend that there is a train whistle shrieking in the distance. This testimonial reason may be sufficient to generate in me a belief that there is a train whistle shrieking in the distance. It is not, however, sufficient to generate in me an auditory seeming as of a train whistle. This example, then, as with those in the two preceding paragraphs, suggests that seeming states aren’t responsive to reasons or evaluations. Yet, a mental state can be justified only if it is responsive to reasons or evaluations, i.e., if a

subject's acquisition of reasons for thinking the content of the mental state is true or false can have *some* effect on its strength, degree, presence, or persistence. Indeed, only reasons responsive states require justification, because only reasons responsive states can be justified (i.e., held for *good* reasons).

The rules of our justificatory language games reflect this point. When we engage an interlocutor in a justificatory language game, what we're doing is testing whether or not, given the reasons available, she ought or ought not to manifest (or maintain) a particular mental state. Since seeming states aren't responsive to reasons, however, there's no question of whether a person ought or ought not to, given the available reasons, manifest (or maintain) a particular seeming state.

As noted above, this point rests on the principle that *ought* implies *can*, i.e., "it ought to be that *S* does *p*" entails "it is possible that *S* does *p*." Since we *cannot* revise our seemings in response to reasons, there's no way to make sense out of the demand that we *ought* to revise them in response to reasons. As a result, our justificatory language games don't take seemings as a target of evaluation. Although the Sellarisan is right to point out that we often lack positive reasons to believe that our seemings are accurate, the claim that we must acquire such reasons for our seemings to carry justificatory force is unfounded. This is because seemings are not among the kinds of mental states that require justification, despite the fact that they are able to *confer* it.

¹Advocates of internalist foundationalism include Bonjour (2003), Chisholm (1989), Fumerton (1995) and, perhaps, historical figures such as Descartes, Locke, and Russell.

²The notion of *assertive propositional content* comes from Laurence Bonjour (1978), (1985), who uses it to distinguish between those contentful mental states that present their content as though it were true (e.g., perceptual states) and those that do not (e.g., hopes, desires, and fears).

³So named, of course, because of its supposed origin in Wilfred Sellars' (1956) "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind." My understanding of the Sellarsian dilemma is heavily influenced by Laurence Bonjour (1978), (1985). I will not address the question of whether Bonjour's reading of Sellars is accurate. Whatever the answer to that question may be, it is Bonjour's presentation of the dilemma that takes center stage in most of the contemporary literature concerned with the prospects of internalist foundationalism.

⁴I should note that the Sellarsian dilemma originated, and mainly persists, as a problem for internalist foundationalism about *empirical* justification. Its advocates are largely interested in using it to support the view that *perception* cannot provide non-inferential (or otherwise foundational) justification. In fact, some its most ardent advocates, such as Bonjour (1985), are perfectly happy to countenance non-inferential justifiers, so long as they are *a priori*. My discussion proceeds on the assumption the Sellarsian dilemma poses a challenge to the very idea of non-inferential justification, since the assertive propositional contents of non-perceptual/non-experiential states—however delineated—can also falsely represent the world. Both reason and perception have the potential to deceive us. Thus, if we accept that the contents of perceptual states are in need of justification, we should, by parity, admit that the contents of intuitions or rational insights are equally needy.

⁵For a defense of the view that seemings are *sui generis* see Cullison (2010).

⁶ For a recent defense of the "ought implies can" principle see Vranas (2007).

⁷It is important to note that we don't need to assume doxastic voluntarism to make sense of the idea that beliefs are revisable in response to evaluations. Even if you have no direct control over what you believe, evaluations of your beliefs and belief forming practices often play a role in determining what your future beliefs will be. By contrast seemings are resistant to such evaluations.

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