

Reponses to John M. DePoe

A Phenomenal Conservative Response to Classical Evidentialism

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There is a lot of agreement between Classical Evidentialism and the Phenomenal Conservative approach we have defended.¹ Both are internalist. Both are evidentialist. Both are foundationalist. Both claim that properly basic beliefs are justified by evidence from a certain kind of mental state. (Indeed, if we weren't Phenomenal Conservatives, we might well be Classical Evidentialists in the vein of DePoe.) Our disagreement lies mostly at the foundations. DePoe claims that properly basic beliefs must be incorrigible—the sort about which you can't be mistaken—while Phenomenal Conservatives allow anything that seems true to be properly basic in the absence of defeaters. According to DePoe, basing everything on incorrigible beliefs helps maintain two desiderata:

- (1) An objective connection between justification and truth, and
- (2) The subjective assurance that justified beliefs are true.

In the following, we'll explain some problems for DePoe's view and why we think Phenomenal Conservatism is superior.

§1 An Objective Connection to Truth

DePoe thinks that justified beliefs are objectively likely to be true, and that Classical Evidentialism, because of its appeal to incorrigible beliefs, accounts

for this feature of justification in a way that other internalist theories (like ours) do not. But what does it mean for a belief to be objectively probable? The most natural interpretation is that the belief is true in most nearby possible worlds. That is, in most situations similar to the subject's, that belief is in fact true. In this sense, not even Classical Evidentialism ensures that justified beliefs are objectively probable.

Consider a subject, let's call him "Unlucky," who is being deceived by Descartes's evil demon. From the inside, things appear to Unlucky exactly as they do to us. Starting from incorrigible beliefs, Unlucky makes all the same inferences about the world that we do: he believes that he has a body, that there is an external world in which his body is located, that the external world includes the planet Earth which existed long before he did, and so on. Unfortunately, Unlucky's beliefs are all false. He is a disembodied spirit, there is no external world, and everything came into existence right as Unlucky did. Unlucky's beliefs are all objectively improbable as well, since they remain false in all the possible worlds similar to his. Nevertheless, Unlucky's beliefs are justified. (Classical Evidentialists must affirm this on pain of skepticism, since our own beliefs are justified only if Unlucky's are. We all base our beliefs on the same evidence, after all.)

What this example shows is that, as soon as we stray beyond incorrigible beliefs, it doesn't matter how carefully we follow the evidence, we cannot thereby guarantee that our beliefs are objectively probable in the above sense. It is a mistake to demand such guarantees from justification. Thus, neither Classical Evidentialism nor the Phenomenal Conservative approach satisfies (1), so understood. We are just upfront about this fact.

Perhaps there is a different sense in which justified beliefs need to be objectively probable. Perhaps DePoe only means that the evidence one possesses needs to rationally support the content of your belief, making it *epistemically* probable, and that rational support of this sort is an objective matter (objective epistemic probability). Classical Evidentialism can account for the objective likelihood of justified beliefs in *this* sense, but arguably so can Phenomenal Conservatism. When something seems true, and there are no other relevant considerations, that experience makes its content objectively epistemically probable for the subject.² That is, the seeming bears an objective support relation to its content.

In summary, the only kind of objective connection that Classical Evidentialism provides is one that Phenomenal Conservatism can plausibly provide as well. Thus, there is no advantage for Classical Evidentialism here.

§2 The Subjective Assurance of Truth

We agree that part of justification is having some indication from the first-person perspective that the belief is true. We also agree that certain incorrigible beliefs have this in a supreme way. Consider the law of noncontradictions: it cannot be the case that p and $\sim p$ are both true at the same time and in the same way. What kind of subjective assurance do you have in this principle? First and foremost, that, when you consider it, it feels utterly obvious. We would describe this by saying it feels true in an especially strong way. There is a certain phenomenal character at play here—the feel of truth—which makes the content of a mental state evident. Incorrigible judgments are based on experiences that have this “truth-y” phenomenal character in a (virtually) maximal way, which gives us maximal subjective assurance in their truth.

You’ll notice, however, that many other judgments are based on experiences with this same truth-y phenomenal character. For instance, perceptual beliefs are based on perceptual appearances in which propositions about our proximate physical environments are made evident. These perceptual appearances may not feel *as* true as the appearances underlying incorrigible judgments, but the difference is one of degree, not kind. Indeed, when we say that something “seems true,” all we mean is that the subject has a mental state with this truth-y phenomenal character. Thus, *any* belief whose content seems true has the same sort of subjective assurance enjoyed by incorrigible beliefs, albeit to a lesser degree.

Now, Classical Evidentialists say that only beliefs with maximal subjective assurance—that is, incorrigible beliefs—can be properly basic. Why place the bar so high? One traditional motivation is this: if the foundations are guaranteed to be true, then surely anything properly based on those foundations is also guaranteed to be true, or at least true in most nearby possible worlds. In other words, demanding maximal subjective assurance at the foundations is supposed to secure the objective connection to truth. We saw in the last section, however, that such an idea is mistaken. Not even Classical Evidentialism can guarantee that justified beliefs are objectively probable in this sense.³

The other traditional motivation is that incorrigible beliefs enjoy a special kind of reflective assurance. That is, when you ask yourself whether an incorrigible belief is true, you are immediately able to see that it is,

dispelling any doubts. The hope of Classical Evidentialists is that limiting the foundations to incorrigible beliefs will transfer this same kind of reflective assurance to anything based on those foundations. We could be certain, on reflection, that those non-incorrigible beliefs were objectively probable. Once again, the example in the previous section shows that nothing beyond incorrigible beliefs enjoys that kind of reflective assurance. We can never entirely get rid of the possibility that our beliefs are radically mistaken. We can, of course, reflect and give good reasons to think that our beliefs are mostly true. This more moderate form of reflective assurance is available on Phenomenal Conservatism as well. But neither theory can extend the special reflective assurance belonging to incorrigible beliefs to the non-incorrigible.

The emerging trend is that Classical Evidentialism is running a campaign on promises it can't keep. It asks us to restrict the foundations of our noetic structures to the incorrigible, promising that this will guarantee the probable truth of beliefs based on those foundations and allow us to dispel skeptical worries once and for all. These are things it cannot do. Nothing beyond the incorrigible can enjoy such security.

Once we realize this, there isn't any reason we can see to limit properly basic beliefs to the incorrigible. Indeed, it begins to seem quite arbitrary to say that incorrigible beliefs are properly basic because they seem true, but other beliefs are not properly basic even though they too seem true. These other beliefs might be less evident, but that just means we shouldn't hold them *as confidently* as we do incorrigible beliefs, not that we shouldn't hold them *at all*. The natural position is that our justification for basic beliefs should be *proportional* to the degree of subjective assurance we have in their content. This, of course, is just the view of Phenomenal Conservatism, which says that the degree of justification you have for a basic belief is proportional to how strongly its content seems true (other things being equal).

§3 Final Worries

We have already mentioned (in our defense of Phenomenal Conservatism) that we worry Classical Evidentialism leads to skepticism. This is because there doesn't seem to be strong enough arguments based solely on the incorrigible to justify our robust confidence in all matters of common sense. And even if there are, people don't actually base their beliefs on such arguments. They do not acquaint themselves with their ordinary judgments, acquaint themselves with how things appear to them, and then acquaint

themselves with the connection between their judgments and how things appear, which is what Classical Evidentialism requires of them in order to be justified.

We should say, however, that such skeptical concerns are of less import in our thinking than the above sorts of considerations. Going back at least to Descartes, Classical Evidentialists limited properly basic beliefs to the incorrigible because this was supposed to provide special guarantees of truth to the rest of one's noetic structure. Once we realize this isn't the case, there just isn't any good reason we can see for limiting the domain of properly basic beliefs in this way.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, Phenomenal Conservatism is just the single epistemic principle: 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*. But there are a cluster of additional epistemological theses that fit naturally with Phenomenal Conservatism. For convenience, we will often speak of "the Phenomenal Conservative approach" as though it incorporates these additional positions.
2. At least one of us openly endorses this. The other prefers to formulate Phenomenal Conservatism in terms of a more subjective form of epistemic probability.
3. Not unless they are willing to embrace skepticism and limit justified beliefs to the incorrigible.