

The Phenomenal Conservative Approach to Religious Epistemology

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Introduction

From an early age, we thought it important to approach our Christian beliefs rationally. Through C. S. Lewis and contemporary Christian apologetics, we encountered various arguments in support of the Christian worldview. Later we discovered the latest and greatest arguments of natural theology, many of which we found convincing. In light of these arguments, we were tempted to endorse a Classical Evidentialist approach to religious epistemology: belief in God or Christianity is justified if and only if it is supported by good arguments.¹ This made sense, for we wanted our beliefs to be grounded in solid reasons rather than wishful thinking or tribal prejudice.

As we read more philosophy during our undergraduate years, however, we encountered the growing movement of Reformed Epistemology in the writings of Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and others. We came to believe that the Classical Evidentialist approach did not adequately account for the ability of people without Ph.D.s to hold justified religious beliefs. Furthermore, when we assessed the foundations of our own beliefs, we realized that, though we possessed arguments, our beliefs did not absolutely *depend* on those arguments. Thus, we found Reformed Epistemology's critique of Classical Evidentialism deeply attractive.

Nevertheless, we couldn't shake the conviction that evidence matters to the justification of our beliefs. Only in our graduate studies did we come to see that a third option—the phenomenal conservative approach—offers a more satisfying synthesis of the good-making features found in both Classical Evidentialism and Reformed Epistemology.

In this essay, we set forth the basics of phenomenal conservatism (PC) and defend it against common objections. We then use PC to develop an overall approach to the justification of religious belief. Several advantages of this approach emerge which allow it to walk a middle road between Classical Evidentialism and Reformed Epistemology. Most prominently, PC acknowledges that experiences can directly provide evidence for belief. Thus, a religious belief can be justified by *evidence* even if it is not based on *arguments*. Given our backgrounds, we will limit our discussion to theistic and Christian beliefs. However, almost everything we say could apply to other forms of religious belief as well.

¹ Classical Evidentialism would also maintain that these arguments must be founded on propositions that are incorrigible.

Phenomenal Conservatism

A well-formed belief structure is like a sturdy house. Some bricks may be supported by other bricks, but underlying them all is a foundation. The foundation of the house is supported not by other bricks but by the ground, which has the unique ability to support the elements on top of it without itself requiring support. In the same way, some beliefs may be justified by other beliefs, but ultimately our belief structures must rest on properly basic beliefs that are non-inferentially justified. These foundational beliefs are not based on other beliefs but on experiences, which have the unique ability to justify beliefs without themselves requiring justification.²

If (like most epistemologists in history) we accept this picture, the question becomes: What kinds of experiences are capable of non-inferentially justifying belief? Philosophers like Descartes and Hume said that only introspection and rational intuition could justify basic beliefs. These sorts of experiences, they thought, deserved the benefit of the doubt. Perceptual experiences, on the other hand, had to be proven reliable before they could be trusted. By the end of the early Modern period it was clear that such a view led to skepticism. Reason and introspection provide too meager of a foundation to support the existence of the external world or other matters of common sense.³

To account for the justification of common-sense beliefs, we must extend the benefit of the doubt to other kinds of experiences. Following in the footsteps of the “common sense” tradition of epistemology from Carneades (in the second century B.C.) to Thomas Reid (in the eighteenth century) to Roderick Chisholm in our own time,⁴ Michael Huemer has proposed the following principle:

(Phenomenal Conservatism): 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*. (Huemer 2007: 30)⁵

PC extends the benefit of the doubt to everything that seems true to us. For example, intuitions, introspections, perceptions, and memories are all different types of experiences in which something seems true. PC says that all of these experiences—these “seemings”—are capable of justifying basic beliefs.⁶

It is imperative to see that PC is a principle of *non-inferential* justification. If there seems to be a tree in front of me, then I immediately have justification for believing this. I do not need to make the second-order observation *that* I am being appeared to *tree*ly, and then *infer* that there is a tree which is making things appear this way.⁷ It just seems to me that there is a tree, I am moved to

² This position is called “foundationalism.” The alternatives to foundationalism are infinitism, which says that justification requires an infinite regress of beliefs, and coherentism, which drops the linear conception of justification altogether and says that individual beliefs are justified by virtue of their presence in a coherent belief structure. See Klein 1999 and Bonjour 1985 for classic defenses of infinitism and coherentism, respectively.

³ There are those who disagree. See Vogel 1990 on the explanationist response to skepticism.

⁴ On the history of this tradition see especially Chisholm 1966, Gage 2014b: ch. 4, and (concerning Reid) McAllister 2016.

⁵ This version of PC is slightly (but importantly) revised from Huemer 2001.

⁶ For recent defenses of experience as evidence, see Gage 2014b and Gage 2018.

⁷ It is good that PC does not require this, for typically one lacks any second-order belief about oneself seeing a tree.

believe it, and (assuming I have no defeaters or substantial counter-evidence) this belief is justified.⁸

Beliefs based on seemings can be justified to different degrees depending on the seeming's strength. Something that seems exceedingly obvious, say, that everything is identical to itself, might thereby be justified to a degree sufficient for knowledge, whereas something that only slightly seems true might be justified to a much lesser degree. The important point is this: seemings provide positive reasons for belief.⁹

Seemings can sound technical, but we all have them constantly. A seeming is simply a conscious experience in which a proposition is presented to the subject as true—i.e., a conscious experience with assertive propositional content. We call seemings “assertive” because they feel as though they are asserting something to be true of the world. In contrast, when you merely imagine that something is true, it doesn't feel as though the state of affairs being entertained is representative of the way things actually are. Thus, imagination lacks this assertive quality (Huemer 2001: 77-79; Tucker 2010: 530).

Chisholm (1957: 44-47) helpfully distinguished the epistemic sense of ‘seeming’ from the comparative sense in which something looks the way such things typically look. A stick in water, for instance, might seem bent in the comparative sense without it seeming epistemically that the stick is truly bent. In the epistemic sense of ‘seeming,’ it will not seem to the experienced rower that a submerged oar is bent (even if it looks that way in the comparative sense). Seemings, then, are not mere ‘looks’ but rather the way things seem to us to be in reality.

Some (e.g., Swinburne 2001: 135-151; Rogers and Matheson 2011) suggest that seemings are reducible to beliefs or inclinations to believe. But we think this reduction should be resisted.¹⁰ First, seemings provide non-trivial explanations for our beliefs and inclinations to believe (Huemer 2007). Seemings explain *why* we believe or are inclined to believe, and so cannot be identified with those beliefs or inclinations. Second, something can seem true without one believing (or feeling inclined to believe) that it's true, such as when you see a tree in passing but pay it no mind. There are also cases where seemings conflict. Say *p* seems true to you, but then, on the basis of expert testimony, you have a second experience in which *p* seems false. You will likely withhold judgment for at least a short time until you figure out how to resolve the conflict. But if seemings *just are* beliefs, we would have to uncharitably say that, while deliberating, you irrationally believe both *p* and not-*p*.

We also think, against some accounts (Tolhurst 1998; Huemer 2001: 58-79), that seemings must be distinguished from sensations. Typically, when we have sensations they are accompanied by seemings. For instance, when I bite into an apple it might taste tart and, simultaneously, seem to me that it is tart. But the sensation and the seeming are distinct. An infant might have the very

⁸ Notice that it could seem to you that there is a tree without you actually forming the belief that there is a tree. For this reason, PC is a principle of propositional justification rather than doxastic justification. That is, you have justification for believing *p* regardless of whether you in fact come to believe *p*.

⁹ In fact, one formulation of such a principle we like avoids potentially confusing justification language altogether: “(Reasons Commonsensism): If it seems to *S* that *p*, then *S* thereby has a *pro tanto* reason for believing *p*” (Dougherty 2011: 333).

¹⁰ See McAllister 2018a for a more complete presentation of the reasons to resist reduction.

same sensations that an adult would have while looking at a picture above her crib, but it won't *seem* to her that there is a van Gogh print on the wall (as it would to an adult). Importantly, as we gain new concepts and background beliefs, we begin to experience the world in deeper ways. There is a sense in which art experts *see* more when viewing paintings. The expert has "thicker" experiences in which things seem to him to be the case that would never occur to the novice.

Seemings, then, are assertive experiences with propositional content.¹¹ On reflection, we think it apparent that most (really *all*) of our beliefs are based on the way things seem, at least somewhere down the line. What PC claims is that seemings can serve as the ultimate source of justification for those beliefs.

Consider now the notion of justification. Epistemic justification is an evaluative notion; that is, it involves an assessment or evaluation of our beliefs. There are two major schools of thought on justification: internalism and externalism. Roughly, internalists hold that epistemic justification rests on features the subject is or can be aware of. They evaluate whether your belief is fitting or sensible or permissible *given the information available to you*.¹² Externalists hold that justification largely depends on features of which the subject may be unaware, such as whether the belief is formed by an objectively reliable process or by properly functioning mental faculties.¹³

Say you were briefly abducted by aliens, who then wiped your memories and replaced them with false memories of a quiet evening at home. As a result, you believe that you spent yesterday evening reading a book by the fire. Given internalism, this belief is justified, since it best fits the information within your first-person perspective. Given externalism, this belief is likely unjustified, since it is unreliably formed and improperly caused.

PC is a thesis about internalist justification. It says that when something seems true to you, and you have no reason to think that this experience is misleading, then, from your perspective, it is sensible for you to believe it. Even if your experience is misleading, this does not affect the internal justification of your belief so long as this fact remains unknown to you.

It is also important to understand that PC is an internalist view of *justification* rather than a view of *knowledge*. Internalists (like ourselves) think internalist justification is necessary but insufficient for knowledge. Advocates of PC might even include accounts of virtue, reliability, and/or proper function in their account of knowledge. But we think this focus on justification is crucial. While we can't control the nature of the external world (e.g., whether we live in Descartes's demon world), and hence we can't fully control whether we have knowledge, we can all do our level best to believe according to our evidence.

¹¹ Cullison 2010 thinks of seemings as *sui generis* "propositional attitudes." We prefer to talk of "experiences" because we do not want to give the impression that seemings are judgments, choices, or things we endorse. Seemings tend to be much more passive than this.

¹² One should not assume with Plantinga 1993: 15 that internalist epistemic justification is deontological (involving praise and blame). Leading proponents of internalism like Conee and Feldman 2004: 61-64 deny that the view of justification they have in mind is deontic.

¹³ The most important externalist critique of internalism in recent years is Michael Bergmann's 2006 dilemma for internalism. For a recent reply from a PC perspective, see Gage 2016.

Having clarified the nature of internalist justification, PC can seem almost obvious. If something seems true and we genuinely have zero reason to doubt it, why should we be rationally prohibited from believing it—especially if we hold that belief provisionally and are open to correction? All that matters for internalist justification is whether, from the first-person perspective, it makes sense to believe something when it seems true and one has no reason to doubt it. In such conditions, we think belief is justified. After all, what else are we *supposed* to believe but what seems true from our perspective?¹⁴

Consider the alternative. If we cannot base belief on anything that seems true until we have first proven that seeming to be reliable, then we will quickly find ourselves mired in skepticism. Any argument you could give for the reliability of one seeming would inevitably rely on other seemings; but you would need to give arguments for the reliability of *those* seemings, which would rely on further seemings, and so on. So, we must give the benefit of the doubt to at least some seemings.

Classical Evidentialists might suggest that we initially trust only those seemings whose content is incorrigible, or unmistakable in some way; all others must be proven reliable before we base beliefs on them. This would mean that only a few rational and introspective judgments could be properly basic. Alas, this too, we think, would result in pervasive skepticism about matters of common sense, both in principle and in fact. It would lead to skepticism *in principle* because, as we learned from the early Moderns, there doesn't seem to be any good argument for things like the existence of the external world, the existence of other minds, the reality of the past, etc., based solely on incorrigible judgments—at least, no such argument is good enough to justify the supreme level of confidence we place in those common-sense beliefs.

The Classical Evidentialist approach would also lead to skepticism *in fact* because, even if there is a good argument from incorrigible propositions for, say, the existence of the external world, ordinary people do not actually base their beliefs on this sort of argument. It just seems that there is an external world and people believe it. Indeed, many adults (not to mention toddlers) may not be able to even understand the argument much less work it out for themselves. So, unless we are willing to embrace pervasive skepticism about matters of common sense, we must extend the benefit of the doubt to a wider variety of seemings. For instance, we must allow the perceptual seeming that there is an external world to immediately justify belief.

Putting aside the threat of skepticism, it seems arbitrary to give the benefit of the doubt some seemings but not others, as Classical Evidentialism recommends. For instance, why would it be rational to trust introspective seemings without verifying their reliability but not other kinds of seemings? Introspective seemings may be incorrigible, but we do not *know* this to be true about introspective seemings until we have reflected on those experiences and intuited or argued for their incorrigibility; and, for the reasons described above, we cannot require this sort of reflective process prior to placing trust in those seemings on pain of total skepticism. So, any confirmation of the reliability of introspective seemings only comes *after* we have already placed our trust in them.

¹⁴ See Huemer 2001: 104-105 and McGrath 2013: 226 for similar arguments. Perhaps the most extended articulation of this general line of thinking is in McAllister 2019.

The fact of the matter is that we initially trust in the testimony of our introspective seemings for no other reason than that their content *feels true* to us. But all seemings have this same assertive phenomenal character, though often to a lesser degree. If that assertive character is sufficient to justify belief, absent defeaters, in the case of introspective seemings, then it should be sufficient to justify belief, absent defeaters, in the case of other seemings (albeit to a lesser degree). In a nutshell, if it is rational to believe in the content of some seemings just because that content feels true—something that must be the case if we are to rationally believe anything—then it should be rational to believe in the content of *any* seeming whose content similarly feels true. Thus, consistency demands that we trust all seemings to a degree proportional to the strength of their assertive phenomenal character. And this is just what PC maintains.

Common Objections to Phenomenal Conservatism

PC, however, faces two obvious challenges. First, isn't PC too permissive? That is, doesn't PC allow all beliefs to be justified—even crazy beliefs—so long as they seem true to the subject? Well, PC is undoubtedly more permissive than some theories of justification. It allows a wide variety of beliefs to be non-inferentially justified. But why think that justification is difficult to obtain? Outright irrationality is surely less common than partisan talking heads claim. Indeed, we think it an advantage that, on PC, two equally intelligent and thoughtful individuals might rationally disagree about an issue. Sometimes perfectly reasonable disagreements arise because (given differences in genetics, environment, past experiences, current beliefs, and a host of other factors) people experience the world in different ways. An adequate theory of justification should, like PC, acknowledge this fact.

But couldn't belief in a flat Earth be justified by PC so long as Earth seems flat to the believer? Well, yes and no. If it were truly the case that the world seemed flat to some tribesman in the middle of nowhere—a person with no contact with modern science and who is focused on gathering food to survive each day—then, sure, perhaps that tribesman could have a justified false belief in a flat Earth. Why should we expect him to hold beliefs from *our* perspective rather than his own? Similarly, only the hardest of the hard-hearted would judge a child's belief in Santa Claus epistemically unjustified when every adult she trusts tells her that Santa brings gifts on Christmas Eve. Her justification, we insist, depends on the information *she* possesses.

However, it would be very difficult for someone in our society to justifiably believe in a flat Earth, since they are extremely likely to be aware of defeaters for that view (e.g., pictures from outer space, scientists' testimony, etc.). Far from troubling PC, this objection highlights the fact that PC rightly acknowledges the perspectival nature of rationality. What we are rational in believing isn't some fixed set of beliefs but depends on the information we possess at a given time. PC gets exactly the right answer, then: we'd be unjustified, but the tribesman might be justified, in believing in a flat Earth.

A second objection arises from the growing awareness that our perceptions of reality can be heavily influenced by non-rational factors. How can PC claim that beliefs based on seemings are innocent until proven guilty if seemings can stem from wishful thinking, confirmation bias, or

eating spicy peppers? The worry is that our seemings can be “tainted” by these non-rational factors and rendered incapable of justifying belief. This is known as the cognitive penetration objection.¹⁵

While it may appear strong at first, we think this objection is ultimately mistaken. As we’ve already indicated, given the perspectival nature of rationality, what matters for justification is the evidence one possesses—not evidence from a third-person perspective. So long as *S* is not aware that the reason it seems to him that *p* is because of wishful thinking, then this has no bearing on *S*’s justification for believing *p*. But if *S* knows that the reason it seems to him that *p* is wishful thinking, then *S* has a defeater and is not justified in believing that *p*.¹⁶ To turn the question around: if it strongly seems to *S* that *p*, and *S* is unaware of the tainted source of this seeming, then wouldn’t it be irrational for *S* to flout his experience and fail to believe *p*?

Far from revealing flaws, then, these objections showcase how PC gives just the right answers vis-à-vis permissiveness and cognitive penetration.

Theism & Non-Inferential Justification

We argue that PC shows that many theistic beliefs are likely justified. (Christian belief specifically will be the focus of a later section.) The story here will sound very much like the one Reformed Epistemologists typically tell. There are numerous people to whom it seems God exists when they are out in nature, when they pray, in their moments of joy and sorrow.¹⁷ Indeed, it is not uncommon for believers to undergo periods of time in which God’s existence appears woven into the very fabric of existence—they see his fingerprints everywhere. In these moments, God’s existence can seem nearly as apparent as the existence of other human beings. The very idea of a world without God feels absurd. In accordance with PC, these theistic seemings provide non-inferential justification for believing that God exists.¹⁸ Defeaters (discussed more in the next section) can arise which remove this justification. But until they do, such believers appear well within their epistemic rights to believe that God exists, even if they are mistaken.¹⁹ What else are they supposed to believe in light of their experiences?

Of course, not everyone finds God’s existence so apparent. Some have tried to turn this into an objection to theism, called “the problem of divine hiddenness,” arguing that there wouldn’t be any reasonable doubt about God’s existence if theism were true. There are convincing objections to this line of reasoning that are independent of (but also available to) PC. For example, at most we have evidence for the *temporary* hiddenness of God, and there are plenty of ways that temporary periods of non-belief might prepare people to submit to God or help them grow in his likeness. But PC may offer some special insight here. Given PC, it is natural to think that what is reasonable for someone to believe is largely (if not entirely) a function of what seems true to him; but what

¹⁵ It has also been referred to as the “tainted source” or “bad basis” objection (Tucker 2013: 12-16).

¹⁶ We should always be watchful for and responsive to indications that our experiences have been skewed by such non-rational factors. By no means does PC say we should dogmatically cling to our beliefs.

¹⁷ If we’re being precise, it more often seems to people that God loves them or that he has forgiven him of their sins—things which obviously entail God’s existence.

¹⁸ It is also possible, of course, to have strong seemings that God does not exist and thus to be epistemically justified in holding atheistic beliefs. See Dougherty manuscript.

¹⁹ This is a point of contrast with most versions of Reformed Epistemology, which pin the justification of basic theistic beliefs on the reliability and design of the faculty producing them and, so in turn, on the existence of God.

seems to be the case can be influenced significantly by both communal and individual resistance to God.²⁰ Such resistance might prevent God's existence from being apparent, or even make God seem silly or absurd.²¹ In this case, the non-believer is reasonable—his non-belief is in accordance with what seems true to him—and yet things only seem thusly because of human sin. In those cases, the obstacle to reasonable belief would be located in human freedom, not in God.

There are many non-believers today. Still, the number of people with theistic seemings across times, places, and cultures is striking. Why does it seem to so many people that God exists?²² Notice first that the experiences which produce theistic seemings tend to have a rational structure. It isn't as though theistic seemings are produced whenever one sees yard kitsch or has indigestion. Rather, theistic seemings tend to be produced by experiences that, on some level, objectively appear to support God's existence. For instance, it may seem to one that God exists when he observes exquisite design or gratuitous beauty in nature, or when he thinks about why anything at all exists (even if he doesn't know terms like 'contingency'). It makes sense to posit, then, that (many) theistic seemings result when the subject tacitly grasps the ways in which features of the world support God's existence (McAllister and Dougherty 2018).

Studies by cognitive and developmental psychologists appear to show that we are built to notice signs of agency, and so will automatically come to believe in God at a very young age (Barrett 2004). We seem to be built with mental modules or pathways along which we naturally think. These make it easy and natural for us to see the world as designed, as the product of intelligent agency rather than mindless forces. Our natural tendency to draw these sorts of logical connections can be thought of as a kind of cognitive mechanism or faculty, sometimes called the "*sensus divinitatis*."²³ While some have sought to argue that our natural tendency toward theism means religious belief is a trick of our evolved brains, what the science really shows is that we are built for it to seem to us like God exists (Schloss and Murray 2009). Isn't this exactly the way God would build us if he wanted us to be aware of him and hold justified beliefs about his existence?

Usually, subjects only recognize the support for God on a tacit level. Cognitive science tells us that we are quite adept at this sort of subconscious processing, especially when it comes to detecting signs of agency (Barrett 2004). Thus, the subject is not making any sort of conscious inference or argument. Nevertheless, the logical connections that one intuitively grasps are the sorts of things that, if consciously articulated, would construct theistic arguments.

This marks a point of contrast between our view and Plantinga-style Reformed Epistemology. Like us, Plantinga posits the existence of a *sensus divinitatis*, but unlike us, the structure of the world is only accidentally involved in triggering the *sensus divinitatis*. As Plantinga writes, "the experience is the *occasion* for the formation of the beliefs in question" (Plantinga 2000: 259). If

²⁰ The role of communal sin is, we think, underplayed in these discussions. The rejection of truth by a few can easily infect the perspectives of the many by becoming a part of the dominant cultural narrative.

²¹ An interesting possibility here is that the fallen perspective may fail to appreciate the myriad ways in which God best explains the world around us. Thus, the evidence for God would be available in an objective sense, but one would fail to draw the relevant connections between those things and God. This resembles an idea suggested by Rousselot 1990.

²² The story we give here is not entailed by PC. We think it plausible and fitting, however.

²³ The concept of a *sensus divinitatis*, in its most general sense, just seems to be that of a general cognitive faculty whereby we secure non-inferential justification for belief in God's existence and basic divine attributes.

our experiences only serve as occasions for the formation of theistic belief, and nothing more, then there is no in-principle reason why *any* kind of experience—such as the experience of yawning or tying one’s shoes—couldn’t trigger the *sensus divinitatis*. In contrast, on our view, the experiences of the world that reveal God to us bear an *evidential* relation to God (à la Romans 1:18-20), not merely a *causal* relation to theistic belief.

Plantinga’s conception of the *sensus divinitatis* seems to be that of a special religious faculty—a mechanism that is designed to produce exclusively theistic beliefs and that wouldn’t exist if God didn’t (Plantinga 2000: 187). Positing a special religious faculty runs contrary to the findings of cognitive science of religion, which suggest that belief in God typically results from standard kinds of cognitive mechanisms. Our view, on the other hand, models theistic belief as arising from standard cognitive abilities that are independently confirmed through reflection and cognitive science. It thus avoids the appearance of special pleading and harmonizes well with this growing body of research.

What is especially exciting is that the phenomenal conservative approach offers us the above advantages while retaining what is best about Plantinga-style Reformed Epistemology. Plantinga (2000) was concerned to show how ordinary believers might reasonably hold religious beliefs even though they do not know the ins and outs of classical theistic arguments. Their beliefs could, Plantinga argued, have positive epistemic status even without arguments. We think that this is exactly right, and PC successfully captures this fact.²⁴

Often, however, Plantinga went well beyond claiming that theistic beliefs could have positive epistemic status without *arguments*; he implied that theistic beliefs could have positive epistemic status even without *evidence*. Along with Classical Evidentialism, we think this a mistake. We think a broader and more humane understanding of evidence than that offered by many evidentialists is what is missing. It is not only arguments but experiences that constitute evidence.²⁵

In this way, PC gives us the best of both worlds vis-à-vis Reformed Epistemology and Classical Evidentialism. Classical Evidentialism was right to emphasize the role of evidence in epistemic justification but wrong to insist that, in the case of theistic belief, this evidence must consist in arguments. Reformed Epistemology was right in its insistence that ordinary theistic beliefs might be non-inferentially justified but wrong to detach this justification from evidence. PC, then, incorporates the best of both views and leaves their weaknesses behind.

Theism & Inferential Justification

²⁴ Furthermore, PC captures this fact without going overboard in the opposite direction. Plantingian Reformed Epistemology appeared to give arguments little role in the justification of theistic belief. This is odd. Surely arguments have *some* significant role to play in the justification of theistic belief. Our approach allows non-inferentially justified theistic belief while still ascribing an important role to arguments in the formation of those beliefs, as well as in their long-term justification (see the following section on the latter point).

²⁵ We think, however, that Plantinga’s project could be modified and ultimately harmonized with our view. See especially Tucker 2011 and McAllister and Dougherty 2018.

It is important to see that PC is a principle of *prima facie* justification.²⁶ It claims that seemings justify, all other things being equal. So even if God's existence seems apparent, this can't be the end of the story—at least for most ordinary people in our culture—as theists will almost inevitably encounter all manner of potential defeaters. You don't have to be an academic to wonder how a good God could allow children to suffer, whether theism can be reconciled with contemporary science, etc. Such challenges, if left unanswered, can be enough to defeat the non-inferential justification provided by one's theistic seemings. Thus, mature theists will likely need to address such questions in order to achieve secure, sustainable justification for their beliefs.²⁷

Now, the defeaters one encounters are not always that sophisticated, and hence one's defeater-defeaters don't always need to be that sophisticated either. We shouldn't pretend that everyone is (or should be) an academic. But neither should we naively think that a one-off seeming that God exists can and should carry one's theistic belief fully justified throughout adulthood. The mature theist will likely need to build up a coherent and mutually supporting system of beliefs around her theism in order to remain justified.

Building up a worldview is something we rational creatures do naturally. We wonder at the world, and this leads us to gather evidence about its various features. Since God's existence bears on nearly everything, the theist will frequently need to assess how this evidence fits with theism. This process typically plays out over a considerable period of time, moving in fits and spurts. How exactly this process unfolds and what comes of it will depend greatly on the specific individual.

On the micro-level, the theist will focus in on specific items of evidence (other things that seem true) and evaluate how well theism explains that evidence. We suspect that the ordinary theist will find numerous instances in which her observations are explained especially well by theism. Perhaps the theist has witnessed a remarkable transformation in her own life and in the lives of others that is hard to make sense of apart from God. Perhaps the theist feels in herself a deep yearning for something beyond this world and judges this yearning best explained by God. Or, if she is more philosophically minded, she might find that her belief in objective morality fits better with theism than with naturalism, or that theism better explains the existence of contingent beings. In such instances, the individual gains inferential support for her theistic belief.

One source of inferential justification worth emphasizing is testimony. Testimony provides inferential support for its content if one has evidence for the reliability of the testifier—be it a person, organization, or sacred text.²⁸ Obviously, this evidence of reliability *can* take the form of arguments, but, given PC, it needn't. As Dougherty (2014) argues, an appearance of credibility in the testifier is enough to provide support for the content of that testimony. Thus, if one hears testimony of God's existence (from one's parents, the Church, the Bible, etc.), and the source seems credible, then one will have additional support for theism, absent defeaters.

²⁶ We actually prefer the phrase *pro tanto*, because *prima facie* might lead one to think that when a defeater arises the initial belief was never justified in the first place. In reality, as the *pro tanto* language indicates, a defeater that arises later in time doesn't show one's initial belief never to have been justified but only outweighed at that later time.

²⁷ Reformed epistemologists are starting to acknowledge this as well. See Moon forthcoming.

²⁸ Given PC, there is a sense in which testimony can operate non-inferentially—by occasioning in the recipient a seeming in the content of the testimony—but we will leave that aside here.

There may also be times when theism seems to fit poorly with other things that seem true. These are potential defeaters. In these moments, the theist must assess, first, whether there is any genuine discord between theism and what seems true, and, if there is, whether it is more reasonable to live with the poor fit, alter beliefs in those areas of discord, or abandon theism. In any case, the support for theism is diminished to some degree.

These small-scale evaluations aid the subject in making a single large-scale evaluation of which worldview, or system of beliefs, best makes sense of her experiences on the whole. We seem to be built to make exactly these sorts of macro-level judgments about where the weight of probability lies (Newman 1979 [1870]). Making these sorts of evaluations needn't be an overly formal (or fully conscious) process. As we noted earlier with regard to the origins of theistic seemings, we are quite adept at drawing logical connections on a tacit level. What the subject will experience is the impression that the theistic belief system, and the picture of the world that it represents, just makes sense.

Thus, if all goes well for theism (which is not guaranteed), the mature theist will be left with a coherent system of beliefs centered around her theism which, overall, seems to make better sense of reality than the relevant alternatives. As a result, her theism will no longer be justified solely by her initial theistic seeming. Her theistic belief will also receive a measure of inferential support by virtue of its presence in this explanatorily virtuous belief system.

The theism of mature believers, then, will likely enjoy both inferential and non-inferential support. This inferential support is, in many cases, subsequent and complementary to one's non-inferential justification. Hence, one can start from a position of non-inferential justification and then secure or bolster one's justified beliefs with further inferential support. In the end, theistic belief may be justified before the possession of inferential support but typically not without it.

The typical adult theist is thus armed not merely with a bare theistic seeming but with a larger worldview in which God is deeply entrenched. This makes the robust nature of most theistic beliefs—even in the face of counterargument—intelligible. At times atheists have written as though ordinary theists are unjustified if they don't have a sophisticated response to some atheistic argument. But we think this a mistake given the way that our belief networks hang together in a complicated fashion. Many mature theists, we believe, are justified not by a killer argument but by the interlocking belief network they've built up.

What about intelligent, informed people who come to a different conclusion? Should the existence of such individuals make theists abandon their worldview? We don't think so. The issue is too complicated to fully flesh out here, but we will note a few things. First, for a host of reasons, people experience the world in different ways. No two perspectives are exactly alike. Thus, PC leads us to expect reasonable disagreement on complicated issues like the existence of God. Endorsing theism commits you to thinking that atheists are mistaken, but it doesn't require you to think that they are stupid or irrational. Perhaps they just have different experiences. Second, a fully worked out theistic belief system (especially a Christian one) will usually contain some explanation for why people have misleading experiences. As we said earlier, communal or personal resistance to God might distort one's perspective on the world. Lastly, even if there is no forthcoming explanation for why some people see the world differently, it is not clear that one

should therefore withhold trust from one's own perspective. Take some horrifying account of child abuse from the news. It seems obvious that those who perpetrate such abuse have done something objectively wrong, and yet there are intelligent people who genuinely disagree. It seems to them that what is occurring is distasteful to Western sentiments—highly unfashionable in present society—but not objectively wrong. Even if we were at a loss as to why their perspective is distorted, it appears reasonable for us continue to endorse what seems supremely evident to us: that such abuse is objectively wrong.²⁹ Rationality does not demand that we automatically abandon the obvious just because others, for unknown reasons, cannot see it. Peer disagreement should give us pause, but it does not force one to relinquish theistic belief.³⁰

Beyond Theism to Christian Faith

Much of what we have said about theism will apply with minimal changes to Christian belief. If Christian doctrine seems true (either of its own accord or because of the special work of the Holy Spirit), then, given PC, one will possess non-inferential justification for believing it, absent defeaters. Of course, the Christian will also need to go through a worldview-building process similar to the theist, and (assuming all goes well for Christianity) thereby supplement his belief with inferential support.

On our version of the phenomenal conservative approach, whether a religious belief is justified ultimately comes down to whether it is, on balance, supported by what seems true. The two-fold process we've described thus far bears this out: first, look at whether the religious proposition itself seems true (and to what extent), and, second, look at how it fits with other things that seem true. But what seems true to an individual is not a static thing. One's perspective can change quite radically over time. What seemed apparent at one stage can seem ridiculous at another, and vice versa.

Now, a deep commitment to theism or Christianity can't help but affect the way one views the world. After taking a course in psychology, for instance, you may begin to view ordinary interactions through the lens of various psychological theories—identifying confirmation of these theories in ways that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Just so, the believer may find newfound appreciation for the ways in which Christian revelation makes sense of things. More generally, the believer will begin to experience the world in light of her religious framework. Some people watch a nature documentary and say, "Nature's powers are more amazing than I thought!" But the Christian might instead perceive God's handiwork. Some see tragedy and decry the world's indifference. But the believer might see an opportunity to be God's hands and feet and help those in need. This perspective-shift can be pervasive, systematically reorienting how one sees the world.

Though confirmation bias is always a worry, there's nothing inherently irrational about a belief influencing one's perspective in the way we've described. Your perceptual seemings, for instance, are completely saturated by belief in the external world. When you look around you, it doesn't seem that there are certain arrangements of color sensations, but rather that there are objects—books, furniture, buildings—existing within a mind-independent world. A primary purpose of

²⁹ See the example and discussion in Plantinga 1996: 181-182.

³⁰ For a recent treatment of how PC might handle cases of peer disagreement, see Gage 2014a.

education is to help us see the world in light of new concepts. That said, it is important to reflect critically on our experiences, questioning whether our newfound perspective is accurate. If such reflection only confirms the reliability of one's perspective, then what else is one to do but continue to trust it?

The ability to see God in the world can seemingly be honed through prayer and practice, aided by grace (Eph. 1:15-19). In the Christian tradition, believers are told to pray unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17), to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5), to reason out of spiritual maturity (1 Cor. 13:11), and to be transformed by this renewal of their minds (Rom. 12:2). That is, Christians are told to think like God in all they do—to view the world the way He does—and let this transform their lives. If Christianity is true, there is a kind of intellectual virtue involved here—a habit of thinking in line with the truth, conforming our minds to reality, of seeing the world as it actually is with respect to God. Possessing this disposition seems like part of what it is to have Christian faith (McAllister 2018b).

If faith involves this sort of shift in perspective, then faith has the potential to bolster the justification for one's religious beliefs. Remember that, on our approach, justification depends on whether the position itself seems true and whether it fits with whatever else seems true. By helping one see the world in light of Christian truth-claims, faith increases one's justification for holding these positions.³¹ This adds a new layer of meaning to C. S. Lewis's (1996: 106) profession, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

This way of thinking about faith is quite different from the popular misconception of faith, described by Mark Twain as "believing what you know ain't so." Based on something like this misconception, Huemer, the father of phenomenal conservatism, thinks of religious beliefs as being at odds with the justification conferred via PC. Huemer (2001: 109-110) is worried about a blind leap of faith in which it seems to *S* that not-*p*, but because of the teaching of some religious authority (the Scriptures or the Magisterium) *S* believes *p*.

We agree that believing against what seems true is a great way to have unjustified beliefs. However, Huemer fails to understand the perspective of the typical believer. Because of her faith in the religious authority, which the believer normally has reason to trust, there is typically no conflict between the believer's seemings and the religious teaching. The teaching (like all education) affects the very way she sees the world. For instance, when she prays or worships, it is not usually the case that it seems to her that God is absent and then she must will to believe that he is present. Rather, the spiritually minded person just sees God as present in the first place.³²

³¹ For more on the epistemic implications of faith, see McAllister 2018b.

³² Huemer 2001: 109 considers the case in which a Catholic (or other high-church member) receives the Eucharist. Huemer appears to think that the believer has the seeming that the consecrated host is bread but believes against this seeming because of religious teaching. Huemer appears to be confusing the two senses of 'seems' distinguished by Chisholm (above). The faithful Catholic sees the host *as* the body of Christ made present. (N.B., Huemer may also be confused about Catholic teaching. There cannot be a conflict between the way the host looks and the fact that it seems to the believer to be the body of Christ since the Catholic Church teaches that the accidents (all the looks) of the bread remain post-transubstantiation.)

We have been focusing on the intellectual dimensions of faith thus far, but one must remember that Christian faith goes beyond seemings and beliefs—after all, even the demons believe (James 2:19).³³ Faith, as we understand it, involves a disposition (by grace) to trust and commit one’s entire self to God. It is typically a commitment in the direction of one’s theistic evidence and is thus in concert with reason; grace building on nature. But it is a comprehensive commitment—not only epistemic but also affective and volitional. As in a marriage, it is a commitment of the entire person to the beloved, holding nothing back; it is a total self-gift (Wojtyla 1993 [1960]). This comes with a commitment to action: to deepen one’s relationship with God, to live life in light of this commitment to God.

People with such intimate faith can find it difficult to talk about “evidence” for God. That language can feel cold and reductionistic. They think they see God and experience him every day. If we started talking to you about the evidence for your best friend’s existence, you might see it as beside the point (cf. Austin 1962: 115). This is how many people of faith feel. They know the person of Christ, and so talk of evidence can seem inappropriate. Their confidence is so strong, their experience so overwhelming, that academic arguments and evidence seem irrelevant.

As we have sought to show, however, they have evidence nonetheless: the non-inferential evidence of the way things seem to them as well as their (likely) inferential evidence in the way of a large-scale explanatory judgment that God’s existence makes the most sense of the totality of their experience. Evidence in this sense is a natural companion to the kind of personal knowledge of God that the person of faith enjoys. Therefore, seeking evidence for God and seeking relationship with him are not only compatible but mutually reinforcing. This has been so not only in our academic work but also in our personal lives.

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³³ As Aquinas (*ST* II-II.1.2) notes, the act of faith reaches beyond propositions and to the realities expressed propositionally by the articles of faith.

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