

PC: Response to Critics

Logan Paul Gage and Blake McAllister

We thank the other contributors for raising several important objections to the PC approach to religious epistemology. They raise far too many issues for us to cover each in detail. Hence, we will limit ourselves to five key objections: (1) McNabb worries that PC requires an awareness of natural theology for most adults; (2) Baldwin worries that seemings can't be ultimate justifiers; (3) DePoe worries that PC is far too liberal and even allows stray hunches to be justified; (4) DePoe further worries that PC has a circularity problem; and (5) Oliphint, Baldwin, and DePoe all worry that PC doesn't have the right sort of connection to the truth. In what follows, we discuss each critique of PC in order.

The Natural Theology Objection

First, we argued that, while seemings provisionally justify beliefs, most adult theists in our culture encounter potential defeaters to their theistic seemings. For this reason, they will need to form a broader worldview in which, say, evil and religious disagreement make sense if they are to have robust justification for their beliefs. Tyler McNabb worries, however, that PC requires more of ordinary theists than is necessary. He thinks that our design plan is such that most serious believers will have *strong* theistic seemings that completely overwhelm potential defeaters. (To compare, you would likely dismiss out of hand any argument that purported to show that you do not exist.) So theists won't have to rely on the support of a broader worldview to dismiss potential defeaters.

In reply, we disagree about the strength of our initial theistic seemings. If a boy goes to church camp and it seems to him that God exists, that seeming, in and of itself, is probably not going to be strong enough to deflect all challenges for the rest of his life. Nor is that how it seems to work for most believers. For instance, the boy will, at some point, begin to question where this seeming came from and whether it was veridical. If he cannot assure himself that this seeming was a part of God's self-revelation, then he will have a defeater.

That said, we agree that most mature theists, once assured in their faith, will have robust theistic seemings. Such assurance is not a brute feature of their design plan, however, but stems from their broad range of evidence: having thought about the world, having grown closer to God in prayer, from hearing an apologetics lecture at church, from talking to other believers about the ways God redeems suffering, from witnessing God's transformative power in their own lives, and so on. Whether they realize it or not, they've built up a host of auxiliary beliefs that reinforce their theistic commitments and neutralize the defeaters they encounter. So we think that McNabb doesn't give ordinary theists enough credit.

Perhaps McNabb thinks that our approach requires most theists to rely on the formal arguments of natural theology. If this is the objection, let us state clearly that this is not so. We think ordinary people require broader worldviews to deflect potential defeaters, and that such worldviews can provide additional support for theism because the world as they see it becomes inexplicable without God. But we do not think theists need to be able to state formal *arguments*. There is a whole lot of ground between relying on random hunches and knowing Plantinga's modal ontological argument. Ordinary people, we suggest, have reasons that fall in between these categories—reasons that tend to make their religious beliefs reasonable.

The Seemings Aren't Ultimate Objection

Second, Erik Baldwin argues that seemings cannot be epistemically ultimate, bedrock, or foundational, as we claim. As we see things, our beliefs typically stem out of experiences we call "seemings." If you think about why you believe what you believe, you eventually trace your belief back to the fact that the world appears to you to be a certain way. So seemings, for us, are

ultimate in some sense. Baldwin appears to think, however, that this means that on PC seemings can't be questioned—that we can't consider whether our seemings are truth-oriented or misleading.

But this is not the case. We must distinguish *prima facie* justification from *ultima facie* justification. We have only argued that seemings lend *prima facie* justification to one's beliefs. Seemings may certainly be questioned. They aren't fundamental in the sense of being unquestionable. When defeaters arise, for instance, we can and do question our initial appearances. This is what makes PC a version of moderate/modest foundationalism; the foundations need not be certain or indubitable, as Descartes would have it, but are open to question. The typical theist, as we suggested above, will encounter reasons to question his or her seemings. To obtain *ultima facie* justification, the totality of the theist's evidence must support theism. This will likely require a larger theistic belief system to address potential defeaters (a belief system that will be profoundly shaped by one's tradition).¹

The Crazy Liberal Objection

Third, John DePoe chastises the PC view for being far too liberal. Even a stray hunch, DePoe claims, would be capable of justifying a guilty verdict in a court of law.² In response, note that normal adults have learned over many years how to tell the difference between a stray hunch and a reasonable judgment based on an overall impression of the world—even when they can't articulate all the features of the world that prompted the seeming. One need not be an epistemologist to notice that a seeming is out of the blue. It is psychologically implausible to us that people have the sort of random seemings DePoe describes with any regularity. We certainly don't. And those who do are likely to immediately recognize the seeming as a stray hunch. At any rate, it is implausible that such seemings would be of any strength, and thus would only lend the weakest support to any attendant belief.

Moreover, our claim is only that seemings increase one's rational support for believing a proposition *in the absence of defeaters*. While many worry that PC makes it too easy to gain evidence for dubious propositions, notice that PC also makes it extremely easy to gain evidence *against* dubious propositions. One has a weak seeming that some strange proposition is true; and then it immediately seems to one that this is no better than a strange hunch, and the seeming is defeated (counterbalanced, if not outweighed).

Consider also that we all have a great deal of experience with our own cognitive faculties—enough to know that we are in no position to have reliable seemings about the date that a certain tree was planted just by looking at it.³ We know we possess no track record of success about such propositions and would naturally distrust any such seemings—seemings that, as we said above, we’ve certainly never experienced. Typical human beings are cautious about radically new or foreign experiences. We could say something similar about the juror who has a gut feeling that the defendant is guilty. We all know that such gut impressions are not reliable enough to place the defendant’s guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, and it would be completely unreasonable for the juror to ignore such considerations. For this reason, we think the worry that PC allows nearly any proposition to be justified is off base, both because it posits hosts of strange seemings that we think ordinary people lack and because if ordinary people had such seemings they’d also possess defeaters. These supposed counterexamples to PC have whatever force they do precisely because all cognitively unimpaired adults immediately recognize the seeming as bizarre. In other words, typical persons would find such seemings bizarre given their background information and discount them for that reason.⁴ We’ve now been accused by McNabb of being too demanding and by DePoe of being too liberal. Perhaps we truly have the Goldilocks view.

The Conceptual Circularity Objection

Fourth, DePoe also argues that PC provides a circular definition of epistemic justification. DePoe is incorrect for the simple reason that PC doesn’t provide any definition of justification at all! PC merely states a sufficient condition for when a proposition has *prima facie* justification. PC does not claim that what it is for a proposition to be justified *just is* for that proposition to seem true and lack defeaters. Indeed, almost all proponents of PC, including ourselves, acknowledge other ways in which a proposition can be justified—for instance, through the inferential support provided by arguments. Thus, we have some prior understanding of justification in mind when we assert PC. Taking a closer look at that understanding of justification will clear up any remaining worries about conceptual circularity.

Justification, as we are conceiving of it, belongs to those propositions that one is permitted to believe given all that is indicated to be true from within one’s first-person perspective.⁵ On this approach, evidence for *p* can

be understood as something that indicates the truth of p to the subject. Thus, a proposition is justified for a subject if it is permissible to believe given all of that person's evidence. When this is the case, we say that the proposition is "on-balance" indicated to be true for the subject.

On this framework, the heart of PC is just this: when p seems true to somebody, that person thereby has some indication of p 's truth. Even more simply, seemings indicate the truth of their content—the stronger the seeming, the more strongly the content is indicated to be true. It follows that, if p seems true, then p will be on-balance indicated to be true unless there is something in one's broader evidence to counter this. PC captures this implication by saying that p is justified in the absence of defeaters. We chose to frame PC in these terms to remain consonant with the literature and to make explicit the tie between having evidence for p and having justification for p , but perhaps it would be helpful to formulate it differently. We have done so in our other work. There we defended the following principles, which we take to be equivalent:

PC_R If it seems true to S that p , then S thereby has *pro tanto* good reason to believe p .

PC_E If it seems true to S that p , then S thereby has some evidence for p (the strength of that evidence being proportional to the strength of the seeming).

When laid out in this way, it should be especially plain that PC does not suffer from any kind of conceptual circularity vis-à-vis justification.

The Truth Connection Objection

Lastly, in perhaps the most serious challenge to PC, Oliphint, Baldwin, and DePoe all worry that the PC approach to religious epistemology does not contain a tight enough connection to the truth. The worry is that something can be justified in the sense that we have described and yet still be false. Indeed, you can be justified in our sense and still be *way* off the mark. In prehistoric times, for instance, people might have been justified in believing that the earth was flat, even though this isn't even close to the truth. Our critics seem to think that this constitutes an objection to our approach. It's not. Justification, properly understood, doesn't *intend* to provide any guarantee of truth or objective reliability. There are other positive epistemic statuses, like warrant, which concern themselves with guarantees of objective reliability. But the fact that justification is different from warrant is

no objection. Nor does our choice to focus on justification suggest any lack of affection for truth. As we'll explain below, the love of truth should lead one to focus on justification. Before we get there, however, we must say more about the history of justification and its connection to truth. This will better position us to see why criticisms of this sort are misguided.

On our reading of the history, justification has always been—at least since the Early Modern period—about having good evidence. To be justified in believing something, the subject needs to have some on-balance indication that it is true. The evidence, moreover, cannot just be “out there”; it needs to be present within the subject's first-person perspective. Anything less was considered improper, irresponsible, a violation of one's epistemic duties in the pursuit of truth. A standard assumption accompanied this conception of justification:

The Objective Connection to Truth—Necessarily, a justified belief is true or, at least, objectively reliable.

That is, following your evidence was thought to guarantee the reliability of your belief. Descartes went so far as to say that, so long as one carefully followed the evidence, one could never be mistaken!

Alas, Descartes was wrong. All of your current evidence (for things beyond the incorrigible) is logically compatible with any number of skeptical scenarios, such as the possibility that you are being deceived by an evil demon. And if you are in such a skeptical scenario, then your beliefs will neither be true nor objectively reliable (see our critique of DePoe for an example). It follows that no matter how carefully you follow your evidence, you can still be in error—gross error, in fact. In order for you to reach the truth, the world has to cooperate.

Thus, it turned out that the assumption accompanying justification was false. Justification does not guarantee that one's beliefs are objectively reliable. It is no objection to PC, then, that seemings can be misleading. *Evidence* can be misleading. Justification, history has taught us, just doesn't come with guarantees of truth.

Why, then, should we pay any attention to justification if it doesn't guarantee truth or even reliability? We want the truth, right? The answer is that following your evidence is the only sensible way of pursuing the truth. There's really no other option for fallible agents such as ourselves who, unfortunately, cannot snap our fingers and arrive at the correct answer. Take a situation in which all of your evidence points strongly toward *p*. What tolerable option is there but to believe *p*? Your alternatives are to disbelieve

p or to place the odds at 50–50—a stance sometimes called “withholding assent”—and neither of those makes any sense for someone who cares about securing the truth.

Thus, we see that being justified is about putting forth your best efforts in the pursuit of truth—about doing the best you can with the information available to you. This is really all you can do. You have no control over whether you live in an evil demon world or not and, hence, no control over whether your beliefs are reliable. All you can do is align your beliefs with that which your evidence indicates to be true.

Now, those called “externalists” have taken up the search for a positive epistemic status that can replace justification in providing the objective connection to truth. Unfortunately, some of these efforts have continued to use the term “justification” to describe this new epistemic status, though it bears little resemblance to justification as conceived throughout the Western tradition. Some, like Plantinga (and McNabb), have labeled the object of their search “warrant” rather than appropriating the term “justification” (much to our satisfaction). We do not disparage investigations into the nature of warrant. We want our beliefs to be warranted as well as justified. But notice that you do not have any direct control over whether your beliefs are warranted. No effort on your part can guarantee the reliability of your faculties. The only thing that *is* within your control is to take those actions that, given the evidence available to you, will maximize the chance that your beliefs are warranted. Justification, once again, proves indispensable.

To drive the point home, we might ask our critics why they hold the positions that they do. The answer had better be *because that is the position that our evidence indicates to be true*. If that’s *not* the case—if their evidence points to the falsity of their own position or has nothing to say one way or the other—then they have no business believing it! If they really care about truth (as they all undoubtedly do), then they will be concerned to only believe those things that are indicated to be true by their evidence. Thus, every lover of truth should care about justification, even if justification does not guarantee success.

Conclusion

When the true nature of justification is made plain—when we see that it is about doing the best you can with the information available to you and not about guaranteeing success—PC becomes increasingly apparent. Of course

appearances can be misleading. But what else are you supposed to do but follow them? We made this argument in our main essay. There we pointed out that if p seems true and you have absolutely no reason to doubt this, then it seems permissible to believe that p .

We extended the argument by looking at the alternatives. If you demand prior verification of everything that seems true, you're going to end up in complete skepticism. But if you can, at least some of the time, trust what seems to be the case without any prior verification, why would you not be entitled to do so all of the time? It would be arbitrary to extend the benefit of the doubt to some seemings but not others when, from the inside, there is no difference that could license such disparate treatment. Add to this the worry that, if you only give the benefit of the doubt to a limited number of seemings, you will once again end up in radical skepticism.

This argument was not contested by our critics. (Is it too optimistic to think that they found it exceedingly plausible?) Whatever the reason, the fact is that our main case for PC remains intact and unchallenged. Furthermore, we have shown above that none of the objections raised by our critics provides a strong reason to doubt the truth of PC. All considered, then, the evidence still points toward PC. And what else can you do but follow the evidence?

Notes

1. We think traditions have an indirect influence on what is reasonable to believe. They exert *indirect* influence by affecting how things seem to us; and how things seem to us, in accordance with tradition-transcendent standards, *directly* determines what we are justified in believing. For more, see our critique of Baldwin.
2. Most attorneys say that a guilty verdict requires >95% certainty of the defendant's guilt.
3. See Peter Markie, "The Mystery of Direct Perceptual Justification," *Philosophical Studies* 126, no. 3 (2005): 357.
4. Purported counterexamples to PC often just stipulate that the subject with the crazy seeming lacks defeaters. But once we are thinking about a subject that doesn't have any of the information normal adults have, it should no longer be obvious that the proposition that is crazy or unjustified relative to their information. See, for instance, the "Jod" example in Michael Tooley, "Michael Huemer and the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism," in *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal*

Conservatism, ed. Christopher Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 320.

5. Or, alternatively, those propositions that *fit with* what is indicated to be true. Internalists are split over whether to characterize justification deontologically, in terms of epistemic duties, or using a nondeontological notion of fittingness. We stick to deontological terminology for simplicity, but we wish to remain neutral on that debate here.