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The Unbearable Lightness of Seemings

The principle of phenomenal conservatism states that “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). Huemer, being the main defender of phenomenal conservatism, claims that this is a viable theory of justification, as well as a necessary truth (Huemer 2001). In this paper I will demonstrate the principle’s failure as a theory of justification due to its reliance on seemings. This reliance on seemings leads to a lack of precision when providing justification, which thereby causes phenomenal conservatism’s conception of justification to be so indeterminate as to render the justification phenomenal conservatism provides meaningless. This consequence is due to Huemer’s lack of precision when explaining the use of “seemings” in his theory. Furthermore, I will be building on Peter Markie’s arguments against phenomenal conservatism from his article “Searching for True Dogmatism” (2013), in which he states that seemings can be tainted by a subject’s desires and biases, leading to blameworthy beliefs justified by Huemer’s principle. I will object to Huemer’s counterarguments to this objection as formulated in Huemer’s article “Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles” (2013).

Phenomenal conservatism (from here on referred to as “PC”) has had to undergo changes over the years. When Michael Huemer first formulated the principle in *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, he stated that seemings and appearances granted knowers with “At least prima facie justification” (99). His reasoning for this principle rests on his defense of direct realism and foundationalism: if the former is true, then perception grants us with direct access to the external

world. Our foundation for knowledge, then, lies non-inferentially in these perceptions: certain things about our experiences *seem* to be a certain way to us, this “seeming” provides us with justification for our beliefs about the content of our experiences. Because of direct realism’s truth (according to Huemer), our perceptions are generally veridical and therefore beliefs formed on the basis of our perceptions are generally justified until proven otherwise. What changed in Huemer’s formulation of PC from *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* to “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism” involved a bit of a loosening on how much justification these perceptual beliefs received. The formulation underwent the change of giving perceptual beliefs “[P]rima facie justification” to, instead, “[A]t least some degree of justification”. In other words, perceptual beliefs based on seemings are not so strong as to be held justified until proven otherwise, but they do provide a knower with *some* justification (just how much exactly is not clear, but likely depends on a variety of factors) in the absence of any beliefs that would defeat the seeming.

The reason for this change was due to criticisms of Huemer’s original principle that suggested that it doled out a considerable level of justification too loosely (Steup 2004 offers a prime example of this criticism). In giving beliefs prima facie justification solely because they are based off of appearances, Huemer’s principle provides justification to seemings that would otherwise never seem justifiable. Furthermore, once PC is applied to other seemings, such as “intellectual seemings”, or intuitions, then plenty of morally reprehensible beliefs would also be given justification. For example, if a religiously zealous person were to contemplate how their god would want them to express their devotion, it may seem to them intuitive that god may want

them to do so by bombing an abortion clinic. Under PC's original formulation, an intellectual seeming of this nature would be justified until proven otherwise.

What does the new iteration of PC do? In "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism" Huemer states that the revised principle does not grant full justification to appearance-based beliefs, but instead grants at least a certain extent of justification; as a result, PC 2.0 expands the scope of the previous version, no longer solely applying to non-inferential knowledge (1). How are we to interpret the new formulation's granting of justification to "[A]t least some degree"? According to Michael Tooley, Huemer will grant either of the following interpretations:

Modest PC 1: If it seems to S that p , then, in the absence of defeaters, that raises the probability of p

Modest PC 2: If it seems to S that p , then, in the absence of defeaters, that justifies S in believing p more strongly than would be the case in the absence of the relevant seeming (Tooley 2013)

As we can see, the revised formulation is much more restrained than the original. In each reading of the new PC's take on justification, appearances are granted with nothing more than a supporting role in providing the subject's belief with justification. Are there ever propositions which, solely on the basis of a seeming, are worth believing in? Just how strongly does a seeming affect the probability of a belief's truthfulness? The answers to these questions would at least partially lie in Huemer's explanation of what he means by "seems".

Unfortunately, Huemer does not ever explicitly define what he means by “seems”. In *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Huemer distinguishes seeming-states from beliefs, in what he describes as “[A]n attempt to identify a special class of foundational beliefs” (99). Additionally, he makes clear that seemings are not only exclusive to perceptual experiences, but also expands the scope of seemings to memory and intuition (ibid.). What is not clear about the explication of “seems” in this text is what exactly it is like for it to seem to *S* that *p*. In other words, what effect is a “seeming” supposed to have on *S*?

In “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism” he describes “seemings” as a propositional attitude, and terms mental states that accompany seemings “appearances” (1). We may be getting a little warmer, but we are not quite where we want to be. According to Tooley, Huemer defined a seeming as an “Assertive mental representation” in a private correspondence he had with him (“Michael Huemer and the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism” 309). As Tooley goes on to point out in his paper, “assertive” when describing “seeming” is a metaphorical usage of the word. How this metaphor is ever meant to be cashed out, Tooley and I are not sure. As Tooley states in his article, if seemings are assertive mental representations that are distinct from beliefs but make the subject inclined to believe its content, then Huemer will need to explain how a mental state with content *p*, that pushes the subject towards belief in content *p* can also be compatible with the subject not necessarily believing that *p* (311).

Huemer has most recently written about what he means by “seems” in “Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles”. He states that the way he employs “seemings” most closely resembles the epistemic understanding of the word, as compared to any phenomenal or comparative understanding. In his own words: “[A]pppearances are a source of defeasible

epistemic justification. They also normally incline one to believe their content” (331). Now we know that when Huemer speaks of p seeming a certain way to S , he is speaking in a roughly epistemic sense: the way p seems to S is *in itself* an epistemic justification, and pushes S to believe the content of the way p appears to them. Now that we are caught up to speed on Huemer’s project, we can see if it actually proves to be a viable theory of justification.

If a person is rational and deems that a certain belief is not justifiable, then the belief should be dismissed until sufficient justification is gathered in order to warrant its adoption. What we use to determine whether a belief is justified or not is a theory of justification. A theory of justification, therefore, should provide us with assistance when evaluating beliefs and their supporting evidence. A solid and reliable theory of justification is essential if our goal is to attain beliefs that are veridical. Does Huemer’s PC manage to accomplish this feat?

It is not clear that PC has given us an actual method of determining whether beliefs are justified or not. In the most current formulation of PC, Huemer claims that a “seeming”, or appearance, of a belief to a subject is sufficient to warrant at least *some* justification for that subject to hold that belief. Examples that Huemer himself provides involve memory-related seemings, “I seem to remember that Saturn is the fifth planet from the sun”, intellectual seemings, “That the shortest path between any two points is a straight line seems to be true”, and perceptual seemings, “This tomato seems to be red” (*Skepticism* 99). The seemings are, according to Huemer, providing our belief in each of these instances with some amount of justification. But are all seemings equal? Is my belief that the sun is bright, supported by the appearance of the sun’s brightness, equally justified to my belief that I fed my dog this morning, supported by the memory of me feeding my dog? Given what Huemer has said about his use of

seemings, we will now dive deeper into his theory and see how each of its components are meant to work.

If PC is a theory of justification, then it should help us determine whether a given proposition is worth believing or not. However, there appear to be two questions, one of which I have alluded to above, that Huemer has not adequately addressed:

1. Given that seemings only provide us a *degree* of justification, how much justification *exactly* does a seeming provide?
2. Are all propositions supported by seemings, regardless of the seeming's source and context, justified?

Without clarificatory remarks that can address the concerns attached to these questions, the principle will run into a variety of problems that render it an implausible theory of justification.

Given that Huemer speaks of seemings as an occurrence which raises the probability of a proposition's truthfulness, it is only fair that we ask him how exactly this would work within the principle when applied to a set of examples. Let us examine a few low stakes, everyday seemings, and try to determine how justified we would be in believing its accompanied propositions

1. It seems to me that this analog clock reads "7:15"
2. It seems to me that the dalmation that just ran past me has less than 50 spots
3. It seems to me that, after glancing at this grape vine, it contains 34 grapes

Either these seemings give their accompanied propositions justification to the same degree, or each seeming provides a different amount of justification. Let us first assume that the seemings from these examples carry the same justificatory weight. Assuming I know how to read an analog clock (and I do), then I have good reason to believe that this clock I am looking at, which seems to have its hour hand on seven and its minute hand on three, reads “7:15”. Am I just as justified in believing that the clock reads “7:15” based off of it seeming to say so as I am justified in saying that a dalmation, running past me at a quick pace, seems to have less than 50 spots on it? I believe it is not a stretch to say that I am. I do not think that dalmations have many spots on them, perhaps they have around 20, but if one quickly passes me by I am not able to precisely count its exact number of spots. However, this seeming is not accompanied by a proposition with an exact number. Rather, the dalmation just seemed to have any number of spots less than 50. Let us now look at the third example, in which I quickly glance at a bundle of grapes, and derive a seeming from this glance that leads me to believe that there are 34 grapes exactly bundled together by a vine. It does not seem likely that I would be able to count so many grapes in a glance that probably took less than a couple seconds. Could it really be that the seeming in this final example is equally justified to the seemings from our first two examples? If Huemer thinks that all beliefs based on seemings have the same amount of justification, then the most uncontroversial seemings we may experience in everyday life would have just as much weight as the most ludicrous seemings we could derive. Considering that PC would be obviously implausible if all seemings are equal, I will assume that Huemer believes that seemings do not

confer equal amounts of justification. I will now attempt to determine whether PC would fare better if this is the case.

Huemer speaks of seemings as conferring justification in degrees. Because we have seen that not all seemings can plausibly provide the same amount of justification, we must settle on a way to determine with precision, or at the very least rough approximation, the value of a given seeming, and determine how we can compare between seemings that give more justification as opposed to those that give less. Let us recall one of the interpretations Huemer grants of PC's notion of conferring justification in degrees: the presence of a certain seeming that p to subject S raises the probability of p . It has been established that seemings do not provide prima facie justification. As a consequence of this, we must not take seemings to provide so much justification that a proposition is likely to be more probable than not solely on the basis of the proposition's seeming.

How exactly does a seeming play its role then? We can look at an expanded version of the dalmation example from earlier in an attempt to arrive at an answer to this question. Three people gaze at the dalmation as it passes each of them at a fast speed. A seeming pertaining to the dog's spots appears to each observer:

1. To one person it seems like the dog must have less than 60 spots
2. To a second person it seems like the dog must have between 20 and 40 spots
3. To the third person it seems like the dog must have more than 15 spots

Each seeming is uncontroversial, but do any of these seemings make a significant contribution to whether or not any of the accompanied propositions would be considered justified true beliefs, or knowledge? How are we to know how this notion of a seeming raising the probability of p cashes out? If seemings provide the subject with a belief that has a higher probability of being true than if the belief were not accompanied by a seeming, then Huemer should provide more details as to how that is supposed to work in a theory of justification that only takes seemings into account. This issue is further emphasized by the inability of seemings to provide full justification, meaning that they can at best make a proposition only slightly more probable. If that is the case, then how are we supposed to use PC as a way to get fully justified beliefs?

A similar issue arises with the other interpretation of how seemings are supposed to confer justification. In the other interpretation, in which a seeming that p justifies a subject S to believe that p more than if there were not a seeming that p , we do not have the problem of attempting to determine the increase of probability of p being true when taking into account its seeming. However, we still do not have a fully working theory of justification that explains how to arrive to a point in which we are *sufficiently* justified in believing that p . What we can conclude from analyzing both readings of PC is that Huemer's theory of justification does not help us arrive at justified beliefs. Unfortunately, no matter how we look at Huemer's theory, it is still unclear how seemings are supposed to work when justifying beliefs. If Huemer is not able to explain just how seemings provide us with justification, then any justification that a seeming may provide under PC is rendered meaningless. At best, we have to look at seemings as bringing an unbearably light amount of justificatory weight.

Moving forward, I am going to determine whether or not all seemings actually bear justificatory weight. My concerns here are due to how seemings are always subjective. Can our seemings therefore be tainted by our subjective perspectives, which can be informed by biases, desires, and other aspects of our psychology that can lead to self-deceit? Markie details how a seeming may be epistemically appropriate or not. In instances in which seemings are informed by certain mental states, such as one's desire, the derived belief could be epistemically inappropriate in that the seeming caused the situation to appear in such a way that it became unreliable, epistemically speaking ("Searching for True Dogmatism" 257).

The notion of epistemic appropriateness and how it is susceptible to the subjectivity of seemings is made clear by Markie's example, in which two prospectors derive seemings while searching for gold. The more experienced prospector of the two has developed all the skills involved in correctly identifying gold, and uses those skills to guide his perceptions in such a way that he can "simply see" that a nugget is gold. The less experienced prospector lacks this perceptual training, and is driven by greed. His desire to find gold right away leads him to "[S]ee what he wants to see", leading him to derive seemings that cause epistemically blameworthy beliefs (ibid.). In both instances each prospector experienced seemings about the world, and it is clear that both seemings had different justificatory weight. The experienced prospector derives seemings about gold that have a higher likelihood of corresponding with the way the world is, this is due to information he possesses that pertains to the correct identification of gold. On the other hand, the other prospector is not in a place in which his derived seemings have as much justificatory weight. Not accounting for the difference between their respective seemings appears to be an issue for PC.

Huemer addresses these objections in “Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles”. He provides three cases in which a subject might have an appearance induced by a deceptive mental state. In the first case, the subject is aware that the seeming they experience is caused by their deceptive mental state, and thereby has a defeater that makes belief in the proposition accompanying the seeming unjustifiable (343). Therefore, in this case PC wins. In the second case, the subject is once again aware that a seeming they are experiencing is being caused by a certain mental state, but they are not sure whether the mental state is reliable. Huemer believes the subject would have no reason to conclude that the mental state is deceptive, and therefore the subject would have justification for believing in the accompanied proposition (344). In the final case, the subject is unaware of the mental state that is causing the seeming. Due to the subject not being aware of the “[A]pppearance’s etiology”, then the seeming and its conjoined proposition therefore seem rational to the subject, thereby making the belief in it justifiable (ibid.).

Psychological research on belief perseverance provides a response to each of Huemer’s cases. In the counter-cases Huemer provides, either we know whether the mental state is deceptive or not, or we are either aware or unaware of the mental state itself. There is a presupposition in each of Huemer’s responses that, if we are aware of the mental state that is the source of a given seeming, we would be able to epistemically evaluate its ability to produce a seeming that reliable corresponds with the world. In other words, given that under PC’s current formulation a seeming can confer justification to a belief in the absence of evidence that contradicts the seeming, Huemer is presupposing that a subject is always able to correctly identify a defeater and adequately revise their belief accordingly. If we are able to recognize and correctly evaluate the source of a seeming and its epistemic value, assuming that the seeming

ultimately leads to a justifiable belief, then the seeming does indeed have justificatory weight. However, considering the conclusions reached by Anderson, Lepper and Ross (1980), we have reason to believe otherwise.

The paper attempts to gain understanding of the phenomenon of belief perseverance, in which people may persevere in holding onto a belief despite having little evidence, or even evidence which has been refuted. The authors of this paper performed two experiments, each consisting of a group of people being told information pertaining to the relationship between risk-taking and success as a firefighter (1038). The participants were then given cases in which they had to predict the success of a firefighter at accomplishing a task according to the information they were given regarding risk taking and success rates. On the basis of the information that was given to them, the participants would perceive the potential success rates of the firefighters in these case studies (1041-1042). Once the subjects had made a few predictions by referring to the information they were given, they were told that the information they had received was actually bogus. However, despite being informed about the falsehood of the information they had received, they still perceived a relation between a firefighter's risk-taking and his potential success in a way that is in accordance with the debunked information, demonstrating how "[E]ven after the intitial evidential bases for their beliefs [had] been totally refuted, people fail[ed] to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs" (1042).

This experiment serves to illustrate the unreliability of seemings as sources of justification. The subjects in the experiment underwent seemings in relation to how they perceived the connection between risk taking and success as a firefighter. These seemings were induced and informed by information they were given. The subjects were eventually told that the

information they had received was fictitious. If PC were correct, then this experiment would not serve as a counter-example had the subjects been able to employ the defeater made explicitly present to them to revise their beliefs, thereby overcoming the deceitful quality of their seemings. Considering that the subjects were *unable* to do this, it looks possible that a subject may not be able to tell whether the way p seems to them has its origin in a tainted source. What this demonstrates is that even in cases in which a defeater is present to us when considering whether to believe in a certain proposition, thereby rendering the accompanying seeming void of any justificatory value, we may still unwittingly make belief judgments based on that seeming. If we cannot always rely on seemings, or find a way to account for this kind of self-deception, then PC is an implausible theory of justification.

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