

Explaining Phenomenal Explanationism: A Précis of *Appearance & Explanation*

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The heart of what we argue for in *Appearance & Explanation: Phenomenal Explanationism in Epistemology* (*A&E*) can be summed up in a single sentence. A phenomenal conception of evidence combined with Explanationism (understood as a theory of evidential support) yields a powerful theory of epistemic (propositional) justification—this is what we call “Phenomenal Explanationism” (PE).¹ Since PE is itself an Evidentialist theory, it is helpful to first say a bit about Evidentialism and then explain how PE fits within that framework.

Evidentialism, as it is often presented, is a family of theories or a framework for a theory of justification. According to Conee and Feldman (2004: 101), the “bedrock” of Evidentialism is a supervenience thesis:

(ES) The epistemic justification of anyone’s doxastic attitude toward any proposition at any time strongly supervenes on the evidence that the person has at that time.

The mere fact that justification strongly supervenes on the evidence does not tell us exactly what is required for belief, say, to be the justified attitude, aside from the fact that it is determined by the evidence. Feldman and Conee’s (1985: 15) expression of propositional justification gives more guidance:

(EJ) Doxastic attitude *D* toward proposition *p* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* if and only if having *D* toward *p* fits the evidence that *S* has at *t*.

EJ tells us a bit more than ES but still leaves significant questions unanswered. Before EJ can be a theory of justification, we need to know what it means for an attitude to “fit” the evidence and what constitutes the evidence *S* has at a time. PE fills in the Evidentialist framework by opting for an Explanationist account of “fit” (roughly, a doxastic attitude fitting the evidence is a matter of explanatory relations between *p* and *S*’s evidence) and a phenomenal account of evidence (roughly, *S*’s evidence consists of how things appear to her). We will say more about this below.

Although it helps to begin with this explanation of PE’s connection to Evidentialism, a good way to get a handle on it is to consider the most prominent rival theory that works from a

¹ Propositional justification concerns the justification one has in support of a doxastic attitude toward *p* regardless of whether one actually has that attitude toward *p*. Doxastic justification requires that one not only have propositional justification but also hold the justified attitude on the right basis.

phenomenal conception of evidence, Phenomenal Conservatism (PC). In *A&E* we begin with PC because it is promising, but we argue that it is incomplete in various ways. Considering PC and where it falls short helps to motivate and clarify PE.

1. Phenomenal Conservatism: Promising But Incomplete

PC is a popular theory of epistemic justification, and this popularity is not misplaced. PC gets a number of things right about the nature of non-inferential justification (i.e., justification that does not derive from justified beliefs). However, PC is also flawed in a number of ways, and fails to provide a complete theory of justification. Since PC is promising but has shortcomings, we extract the kernels of truth that PC contains and use those in developing our superior theory. Let us take a closer look at PC, the good and the bad.

Here is (PC):

If it seems to [a subject] *S* that *p*, then, in the absence of defeaters *S* thereby has some degree of justification for believing that *p*. (Huemer 2007: 30)

PC holds that there is a tight connection between the attitudes that are epistemically *justified* for *S* and those that are epistemically *rational* from *S*'s standpoint. Given that internalism of this sort, especially when understood in terms of *mentalism*, is very plausible, PC has a lot of intuitive support from the start.² McGrath (2013: 226) explains PC's intuitive appeal:

Suppose it seems to you that *p* and you have no defeaters (i.e., no good evidence for $\sim p$ and no good evidence that this seeming is unreliable as to whether *p*). Which doxastic attitude would it be reasonable for you to have toward *p*? Disbelieve *p*, without good evidence for $\sim p$? Withhold judgment on *p*? It *does* seem to you that *p*, and you lack evidence for $\sim p$ and for the unreliability of the seeming with respect to *p*. The only reasonable attitude to take is belief.

These considerations make a fairly strong case for PC as a theory of non-inferential justification.

In addition to its intuitive appeal, PC comes with a number of attractive features. First, it is an internalist theory of justification. For those, like us, who find the intuitions behind the New Evil Demon problem and Clairvoyance cases strong, this is a very important feature.³ Second, PC is non-revisionary, as it holds that we have the justification that we ordinarily take ourselves to have and promises a response to skepticism. Third, it is a unified theory of non-inferential justification—all such justification comes down to how things seem/appear.⁴ Fourth, it addresses the regress of

² Mentalism is the idea that mental duplicates will also be duplicates when it comes to justification. Thus, it is impossible for S1 and S2 to be mentally identical and yet different doxastic attitudes are justified for S1 and S2.

³ See Leher and Cohen (1983) and Cohen (1984) on the New Evil Demon Problem, and see Bonjour (1980) on clairvoyance cases.

⁴ Many use the terms “seeming” and “appearance” interchangeably. Chapter 3 of *A&E* argues that there are sufficient reasons for treating them separately. Rather than going into those details here we will simply stick with our preferred term “appearance” and its cognates.

justification worry, as it is a (fallibilist) form of foundationalism. All told, it is unsurprising that PC has many fans.

Despite its virtues, PC is not without significant flaws. Although several objections have been leveled at PC,⁵ its real problems lie in three areas. First, PC is incomplete as it provides no account of inferential justification. While Huemer (2016) attempts to supplement PC so that it covers this sort of justification, the resulting theory is problematic.⁶ Second, PC includes a “no-defeater” condition but provides no *account* of epistemic defeat. Once one examines the nature of defeat and how defeaters work within the framework of PC, it becomes apparent that something more than PC is necessary to explain defeat. Third, PC falls to the problem of reflective awareness: if S becomes reflectively aware of an appearance, then the appearance loses its *inherent* justifying power. This fact limits PC’s ability to explain justification and it greatly reduces its promised refutation of skepticism.⁷

PC’s promises make it a great starting point for developing a theory of justification, but its shortcomings make it a poor stopping place. PE builds on the insights of PC to accomplish this task. Before diving into the details of PE, it will be helpful to explore the nature of appearances and important distinctions between different kinds of appearances.

2. On Appearances

Like PC, PE holds that all justification is ultimately grounded in how things appear. Therefore, it is essential to get clear on the nature of these appearances. We agree with most proponents of PC that appearances are a particular sort of mental state. More specifically, we endorse what Tucker (2013) calls the “experience view” of appearances. Appearances are experiences with propositional content (they are appearances *that*), a mind-to-word direction of fit (an appearance is accurate insofar as the world is that way that it represents it to be), and they have forcefulness (they present their content in a way that has “the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (Tolhurst 1998: 298-299)). Forcefulness, for many phenomenal conservatives, is what makes appearances inherently capable of justifying.

In *A&E*, we point out that phenomenal conservatives fail to distinguish importantly different kinds of appearances. Whereas most fans of PC acknowledge that appearances can be stronger or weaker, vivid or less vivid, they do not go beyond these contrasts. There are at least three important distinctions to be drawn among kinds of appearances. The appearances of these three kinds are all experiences with propositional content, mind-to-world direction of fit, and forcefulness. However, they have features which allow them to provide more or less *prima facie* justification. Let us take a look at all three beginning with the least justifying sort.

First there are “mere seemings.” These appearances come with no accompanying sensation or rich phenomenology. Although mere seemings are evidence, they are minimally so. A mere seeming provides an infinitesimal amount of justification. The amount of justification provided by a mere seeming that *p* is so slight that, on its own, it does not make believing *p* justified. Instead, a

⁵ Chapter 1 of *A&E* argues that several objections that have been raised for PC actually miss their mark.

⁶ See for example *A&E*: 103-104, and Moretti (2019).

⁷ For a development of our thinking on this problem beyond what we present in *A&E* see our (forthcoming).

mere seeming that p provides what Chisholm (1977: 8) termed “presumption.” It makes believing p more reasonable than disbelieving p , but not more reasonable than withholding concerning p .

Next, there are “paired appearances.” These come with accompanying sensations but no presentational phenomenology (e.g., hearing a dog barking in another room). Paired appearances provide more justification than mere seemings, but they still cannot justify belief. A paired appearance that p gives p presumption in its favor and makes believing p almost more reasonable than withholding but not quite. Consequently, a paired appearance p can make believing p justified only if it is supplemented with background evidence.

Finally, we have the most justifying kind of appearances—what we call “presentational appearances.” They incorporate or are accompanied by sensations and have presentational phenomenology—namely, they apparently present a truth-maker for their content. To get a handle on the idea of presentational phenomenology, consider a case where you see a cat that is partly blocked by a pole. The cat’s tail appears with presentational phenomenology, but its abdomen does not. A presentational appearance that p can, absent defeaters, provide knowledge-level justification for believing p .

Appreciating the different varieties of appearances is vital for grasping how PE accounts for various sorts of justification. Now that we are clear on mere seemings, paired appearances, and presentational appearances, let us turn to PE itself.

3. Phenomenal Explanationism

As noted above, PE fills in the lacunae of EJ by answering both what counts as the evidence S has and what it takes for a doxastic attitude to fit the evidence. Like PC, PE says that S ’s evidence consists of her appearances and beliefs that are themselves justified ultimately by appearances. When it comes to fitting the evidence, PE is a form of explanationism. A doxastic attitude toward p fits the evidence S has when p bears the right sort of explanatory relations to that evidence. Here is PE:

Believing p is justified for S at t if and only if at t :

(1) S has total evidence, E (consisting of appearances or beliefs justified by appearances);

(2) Either

i. p is the best (sufficiently good) explanation of e (where e is a subset of E),

Or

ii. p is an explanatory consequence of the best (sufficiently good) explanation of e (where p is such an explanatory consequence if and only if the relevant explanation of e would provide an explanation of p ’s truth that is significantly better than the explanation it would provide of $\sim p$ ’s truth);

- (3) it is not the case that p fails to satisfy (i) or (ii) with respect to e because of additional evidence included in E .

There are a number of features of PE that require some elaboration. First, although PE is formulated in terms of belief, it applies to disbelief and suspending judgment as well. When believing $\sim p$ is justified for S, disbelief that p is justified. When neither believing p nor believing $\sim p$ is justified for S, withholding belief/suspending judgment about p is the justified doxastic attitude.

Second, PE is not inference to the best explanation. PE applies to both inferential and non-inferential justification. Consequently, PE does not require that S actually make an inference to the best explanation (or any inference at all) to be justified in believing p . PE simply requires that p bear certain explanatory relations to S's evidence for believing p to be justified for S.

Third, there are different accounts of the nature of explanation. Yet PE requires no commitment to any of them in particular. The approach to explanation we favor is that “explanations track dependence relations” of all kinds—causal relations, mereological relations, constitution relations, and so on. Simply put, an explanation in the context of PE can be understood as a set of propositions that provide an answer why or how S's evidence is as it is.

Fourth, related to the previous point, the sense of “explanation” relevant for PE is *potential* explanation rather than *actual* explanation. The actual explanation of something is true, but a potential explanation is something that would, if true, actually explain e . Hence, a potential explanation may turn out false. Since a falsehood can be the best *potential* explanation, PE allows for justified false beliefs.

Fifth, p 's being the best explanation of e means that there is no equally good rival explanation of e . Even if there are multiple explanations of e , p may still be the best if none of those explanations is a rival that is as good as the explanation(s) that include p . If there exist multiple, equally good explanations of e , and one of them does not include p as a non-redundant part, then p is not the best explanation. The best explanation is a matter of the explanation exhibiting the sorts of virtues typically invoked in discussions of inference to the best explanation—such as explanatory power, parsimony, unification, and so on.

Sixth, it is not enough that an explanation simply be the best in order for believing p to be justified, it must also be *sufficiently* good. For it could be that all the explanations, including the best, are poor explanations. Furthermore, in order for S to have some justification for believing p because it is an explanatory consequence of the best explanation of her evidence, p must not merely be explained slightly better than $\sim p$ by that best explanation, it must be explained significantly better.

4. PC Problems, PE Solutions

We noted that PC faces three serious problems: it is incomplete because it does not provide an account of inferential justification nor an account of epistemic defeat, and it falls prey to the problem of reflective awareness. PE resolves all of these problems.

4.1 Inferential Justification

Let us begin with PE's account of inferential justification. An example will help. Suppose S's evidence, E , includes various justified beliefs which entail p . In this case PE yields the result that S has justification for believing p . In this case, p is an explanatory consequence of the best explanation of E . After all, the best explanation of E would provide a much better explanation of p than $\sim p$. E entails p , so it would provide no explanation of $\sim p$ and a very good explanation of p .

When it comes to inductive inferential justification, PE's story is similar. Suppose S has observed many emeralds in a variety of circumstances, and all have been green. PE says that S can justifiably infer from premises describing her observations that the next emerald she sees will be green. The reason being that part of the best explanation of the observational evidence supporting the premises of S's inference is that all emeralds are green. Of course, the truth of "the next emerald will be green" is better explained by the best explanation of S's evidence—which includes that all emeralds are green—than the proposition that the next emerald will not be green. That all emeralds are green provides a very good explanation of the next emerald being green, but no explanation of the next emerald not being green.

4.2 Defeat

To illustrate how PE handles defeat, let us consider three simple cases. Suppose first that S apparently hears a dog barking next door. Ordinarily, S's belief that (d) there is a dog barking next door is justified at least partly by her auditory appearance that d . Let us call the case where everything is as it normally is "NORMAL". In NORMAL S has justification for believing d , and her justification is undefeated.

Now let us consider a variant of NORMAL in which S apparently hears the dog next door, but she then checks and discovers the room is empty (call this case "EMPTY"). In EMPTY, S's visual appearance that $\sim d$ provides S with a rebutting defeater for her belief that d . Intuitively, S's previously justified belief that d is no longer justified.

Let us finally consider the variant of NORMAL in which S is aware that she has recently taken a medication known to induce auditory hallucinations of dogs barking. Call this case "DRUGS". In DRUGS, S has an undercutting defeater for her belief that d . Like in EMPTY, it is intuitive that S's belief that d is not justified, or at least it is (much) less justified than in NORMAL.

Let us explore how PE handles these cases. In EMPTY, as S enters the room and sees it is empty, d is no longer part of the best explanation of S's evidence, which includes the auditory appearance that d . The reason being that S now has a visual appearance that $\sim d$. While d was originally part of the best explanation of S's evidence, it no longer best explains S's evidence because

that evidence now includes a visual appearance that $\sim d$. Thus, PE correctly yields the result that S's justification for d is defeated.

When it comes to DRUGS, S's evidence includes both her auditory appearance that d and her evidence about the medication she has taken and its side effects. Accordingly, S has significantly less justification for d than she did in NORMAL. This is because S's evidence concerning the medication invites a rival explanation of S's evidence that appears to be as good as the alternative explanations of it having d as an explanatory consequence. Namely, the explanation that S is experiencing the side effect of apparently hearing a dog next door when there is none. Again, PE delivers the correct result.

Importantly, PE's handling of defeaters is perfectly general and not ad hoc. Defeat is a natural extension of the core idea that the best explanation of S's evidence determines what she has justification for believing. Defeaters either add evidence that makes what was previously the best explanation not so good, or make it so that rival explanations can match the quality of what was the best explanation.

4.3 Reflective Awareness

As noted above, the problem of reflective awareness is that if S becomes reflectively aware of an appearance, the appearance loses its inherent justifying power (i.e. justifying power arising solely from its forcefulness). This is a major problem for PC because it brings into focus that reflective individuals may have justification for believing many things, but the justification cannot rest on the inherent justifying power of their appearances when they are reflected upon. Further, the problem reveals that when one engages with skeptical arguments challenging the reliability of one's appearances, appealing to PC cannot help respond to those arguments. These skeptical arguments make one reflectively aware of one's appearances, which undercuts their justifying power.

PE is not plagued by the problem of reflective awareness. The key reason is that, unlike PC, PE does not assume that appearances have inherent justifying power. Instead, PE holds that an appearance provides justification for believing its content just in case the truth of that content is a non-redundant part of the best explanation of the appearance. To illustrate this, suppose S has an appearance that p , and the truth of p is a non-redundant part of the best explanation of S's appearance. Add to this that S reflects on her appearance. As a result of her reflection, S acquires a new bit of evidence—the justified belief that she has an appearance that p . This new evidence is irrelevant to her justification for believing p though. That p is true remains a non-redundant part of the best explanation of S's appearance that p . Therefore, S's justification for believing p is not undermined by her reflections.

5. Applications of PE

5.1 Varieties of Justification

To fully appreciate PE, it is helpful to say a bit about how it accounts for justification of various sorts (we already discussed inferential justification).

First, consider perception. In typical cases when it perceptually appears to S that p the best explanation of this appearance is that p . Hence, perceptual appearances typically provide justification for believing their contents.

Second, when it comes to memory, PE also yields the correct results. Apparent memories are typically paired appearances, so apparently remembering p does not on its own justify believing p . However, usually, there is a lot of background evidence that makes believing p justified. In such cases there will often be appearances of meta-cognitive feelings—appearances of knowing p , being familiar with p , recalling p being easy, and so on—as well as evidence about how memory works and one's track record. As a result of all of this evidence, it is often the case that S's apparently recalling p is best explained by it being the case that p .

Third, PE provides a satisfying account of testimonial justification. On PE, S has justification for p on the basis of T's testimony just in case the best explanation of T's testifying that p is that p is true. Often there are a number of appearances accompanying testimony that enhance or detract from the explanation that p provides (e.g., T appears serious, or T appears drunk). Nevertheless, often the best explanation of T's testifying that p will be that p is true, so it is often the case that S has justification from the testimony of others.

Fourth, PE accounts for introspective justification as well. S's introspective appearance of a pain, say, is best explained by the fact that S is in pain. But, even if there are no such appearances, as some may contend, that S is in pain is still justified because it is an explanatory consequence of every potential explanation of S's evidence, which includes the pain experience. Hence, PE not only says that introspective beliefs are often justified, it says they are often very strongly justified.

Fifth, similar to introspection, PE says that a priori beliefs will often have a considerable amount of justification. The reason being that intellectual appearances are often best explained by the truth of their content. Even more importantly, a priori truths will be explanatory consequences of any potential explanation of S's evidence because they are entailed by any body of evidence. Thus, PE says that we have the strongest possible justification for a priori truths.

5.2 External World Skepticism

PE also provides a promising response to external world skepticism. The heart of this response is the idea that our ordinary view of the world best explains our evidence, i.e., it offers a sufficiently good explanation that is better than any skeptical rival.⁸ It not only does this, but PE also accounts

⁸ For a fuller discussion of PE's response to external world skepticism as well as how it provides satisfying responses to a number of other skeptical problems see McCain (forthcoming).

for how it is that ordinary people can retain justification for their external world beliefs in the face of skeptical challenges.

To see this imagine that S has a presentational appearance that she has hands. PE says that S is justified in believing that she has hands on the basis of her presentational appearance (assuming she does not have defeaters). A philosophy professor has just asked S to consider a skeptical hypothesis—she is handless brain in a vat with a simulated appearance as of having hands. Since S understands the skeptical hypothesis, her appearance that she has hands no longer justifies *on its own* S's belief that she has hands. This seems to pose a problem because even though the skeptic's argument fails, it may not be clear how S keeps from losing her justification for believing that she has hands. As an ordinary person, S may be unaware of the flaws in the skeptic's argument, and it seems that she has a defeater for trusting her visual appearances.

Recall that S's initial justification for believing that she has hands results from that truth best explaining her evidence (the presentational appearance that she has hands). How might S's awareness of her appearance that she has hands and of the possibility that the appearance is caused in a deceptive manner undermine her justification? The only ways S's awareness could undermine her justification in this case is by either making the proposition [S has hands] a poor explanation in its own right, or by providing S with a rival explanation that is as good as (or better than) [S has hands]. Presumably, the threat to S's justification in this case could only arise in the latter way. The possibility of a skeptical alternative to S's ordinary belief merely highlights a rival explanation that the skeptic contends is just as good as [S has hands]. It does not make the explanation provided by [S has hands] a poor explanation in its own right. However, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis (and other skeptical hypotheses) is not as good of an explanation of S's evidence as [S has hands]. So, on PE, S will retain her justification for believing that she has hands in spite of her reflection on the skeptical challenge.

It is worth underlining that PE does not require that S actually understands why the skeptic's argument goes wrong. All that is required is that [S has hands] is in fact (a non-redundant part of) the best explanation of her evidence. It may happen that S recognizes that the skeptic's argument is flawed for the sorts of reasons that we argue for in *A&E*, but it may also be that S can simply tell that skeptical hypotheses are inferior explanations. The average person often picks up on the fact that there is something fishy about skeptical hypotheses. The considerable amount of empirical evidence that ordinary people, even young children, are quite adept at evaluating the quality of explanations makes this possibility quite plausible. Thus, S may not grasp where the skeptical argument goes wrong, but she might still recognize that [S has hands] is part of the best explanation of her evidence. And even if S does not recognize any of this, PE will still deliver the result that S has justification for believing that she has hands because that is the best explanation of her evidence. There is much more that could be said about PE's response to skepticism and in support of PE more generally. But we have said enough in this précis to give a taste of what is covered in *A&E*. Hopefully, this taste will make reading the other entries in this symposium and *A&E* itself appetizing.

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