

RESTORING COMMON SENSE: COMMON SENSE EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE RESTORATION TRADITION

§1. Introduction

At the official opening event of Bethany College in 1841, Alexander Campbell declared, “After a long and violent controversy between philosophy and Common Sense, they have at length amicably adjusted their differences, and entered into a solemn league and covenant never to be dissolved.”¹ Campbell’s pronouncement is a tip of the hat to Scottish common sense philosophy—a tradition originating in the work of Scottish philosophers like Thomas Reid. Scholars regularly note the influence of Scottish common sense philosophy on the Restoration movement (particularly its influence on the movement’s biblical hermeneutics),² but relatively little attention has been paid to how the common sense tradition shaped the distinctively philosophical thought of Restorationists.³ Counter to the trend, this chapter will focus on Campbell’s common sense response to skepticism and its Reidian origins.

We cannot adequately appreciate the significance of a covenant between philosophy and common sense until we understand the tumultuous history between philosophy and common sense and the way in which the common sense tradition seeks to reconcile them. One of my

¹ Alexander Campbell, “Introductory Lecture, Delivered at the Organization of Bethany College, Nov. 2, 1841,” in *Introductory Addresses, Delivered at the Organization of Bethany College, November 2nd, 1841*, ed. Alexander Campbell, 61-86 (Bethany, VA: A. Campbell, 1866), 65.

² For example, see Michael W. Casey, *The Battle of Hermeneutics in the Stone-Campbell Movement 1800-1870*, vol. 67, Studies in American Religion (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 41-49, and Randall Balmer, “Willful Naïveté: American Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Tradition,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 7 (Fall 2004): 211-223. For a broader examination of the influence of Scottish common sense philosophy on the evangelical tradition, see Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought,” *American Quarterly* 37.2 (Summer 1985): 216-238 and George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 55-61, 212-220, among others.

³ See J. Caleb Clanton, *The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2013) for one of the most extensive and nuanced engagements with philosophy in the Restoration movement.

primary aims in this chapter will be to make the import of Campbell's proclamation more accessible by placing it in its philosophical context. This will not, however, be a mere historical survey. Whether philosophy and common sense might be genial bedfellows is a question as relevant to those in the present day as it was to Campbell and other early Restorationists. With this in mind, I will provide reasons to think that the common sense reply to skepticism is, in the main, correct.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Sections §2 and §3 will cover the necessary philosophical background, including the threat of skepticism and the Reidian reply that Campbell endorses. In section §4, I present an epistemic principle known in contemporary circles as "phenomenal conservatism" which I think preserves the core insight of Reid and Campbell's response while improving on some of its less plausible features. I defend phenomenal conservatism in section §5.

§2. The Specter of Skepticism

Investigations into the foundations of human knowledge took center stage during the early modern period thanks in large part of the agenda-setting work of René Descartes. Descartes' intention was to set the edifice of human knowledge on firm and lasting foundations. Somewhat paradoxically, Descartes pursued his non-skeptical ambitions by razing the existing structure of human knowledge to the ground so that it might be rebuilt on immovable foundations. Alas, tearing down proved easier than building up. According to Reid, Descartes succeeded only in casting doubt on our ability to know much of anything. Both Descartes and those following after him strove ardently to avoid skepticism, but Hume, in Reid's estimation, proved all of these efforts to be in vain. Thus, Reid characterizes the early modern period as a

slow descent into skepticism, starting with Descartes and reaching its lowest point in the radical skepticism of David Hume, who was Reid's contemporary.

After retracing the developments that led to Hume, Reid concludes that the skeptical germ had been contracted very early in the process with Descartes' inception of the "way of ideas", or what is called here "the ideal system":

These facts, which are undeniable, do indeed give reason to apprehend that Des Cartes's system of the human understanding, which I shall beg leave to call *the ideal system*, and which, with some improvements made by later writers, is now generally received, hath some original defect; that this scepticism is inlaid in it, and reared along with it.⁴

Put more bluntly,

I observe, That modern scepticism is the natural issue of [Descartes'] new system; and that, although it did not bring forth this monster until the year 1739 [the year of Hume's first major publication], it may be said to have carried it in its womb from the beginning.⁵

So, what exactly is Descartes' way of ideas and what about it gives birth to such monstrous skepticism?

The way of ideas—a system which Locke, Berkeley, and Hume inherited from Descartes—has multiple components which lead to skepticism, including a notorious perceptual doctrine known as the "veil of perception".⁶ We will focus our attentions on a different tenet of the way of ideas called "introspective foundationalism":

⁴ Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 23.

⁵ Reid, *Inquiry*, 210.

⁶ The way of ideas claims that we immediately perceive nothing other than impressions in our own minds, thus placing the veil of perception between us and the external world. To see how this leads to skepticism, combine this principle with the empiricist doctrine that all of our ideas must be furnished through experience. It quickly follows that we cannot even conceive of anything whose existence is independent of our thoughts, such as a mind-independent external world. We can call this "no-concept skepticism". Reid responds to no-concept skepticism by adopting direct realism—the theory that what we directly perceive are not ideas or mental impressions but mind-independent objects in the external world. Reid's direct realism explains how we gain the ability to think or believe things about a mind-independent external world. It does not, however, explain how we gain *justification* for believing in an external world, at least not by itself. "No-justification skepticism" denies justification to our beliefs in the external world

- (Introspective Foundationalism) A proposition p is justified for S if and only if, for S, p is
- (i) justified *a priori* (justified by reason independently of any rational support from empirical experience),
 - (ii) justified immediately through introspection, or
 - (iii) justified inferentially by premises which are justified *a priori* or immediately through introspection.

Reid explains this tenet as follows:

The new system admits only one of the principles of common sense as a first principle; and pretends, by strict argumentation, to deduce all the rest from it. That our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath real existence, is admitted in this system as a first principle; but every thing else must be made evident by the light of reason. Reason must rear the whole fabric of knowledge upon this single principle of consciousness.⁷

To fully understand introspective foundationalism and how it will lead to skepticism, we need to back up and review a few concepts.

The first notion to attend to is that of a *basic belief*. Basic beliefs are those beliefs that are not held on the basis of any other beliefs. If you believe that it will rain today, judging by the gray storm clouds in the distance, then your belief is not basic because it has been inferred from other things you believe. Alternatively, if you look outside and see it raining, you may immediately form the belief that it is raining—no argument involved. In this specific case, your basic belief is produced by your perceptual faculties, though other faculties can produce basic beliefs as well. Through memory, you might believe, without any argument, that you ate cereal for breakfast this morning. Through reason, you might form the basic belief that if $a=b$ and $b=c$, then $a=c$. Through introspection, you might immediately come to believe that you are in pain.

A basic belief that is justified—reasonable or rational for the subject to hold—is a *properly basic belief*. Thanks to a rush of adrenaline, you may form the basic belief that you cannot lose this next hand of blackjack. This belief may be basic, but it is not properly basic. It

rather than challenging our ability to form such beliefs, and it is this form of skepticism that I will be addressing in this chapter.

⁷ Reid, *Inquiry*, 210.

is not reasonable for you to maintain such a belief. On the other hand, if you feel pain, it is perfectly reasonable for you to form the basic belief that you are in pain. You do not need an argument to substantiate this judgment, as the pain itself is directly before you. This would be an example of a properly basic belief.

Many philosophers, including Reid, have thought that some basic beliefs must be justified if any beliefs are to be justified at all. An argument can rationally support its conclusion only if there is already rational support for its premises. If someone argues that you should invest in his company because it is about to take off, this argument will gain little traction unless there is reason to believe that his company really is poised to make money. Thus, an argument can only pass along justification from its premises to its conclusion; it cannot bestow any justification on the conclusion that is not already afforded to the premises. This raises the question, from where do we get justification for the premises? We may appeal to further arguments, but these arguments provide justification only insofar as their premises are justified. We are left with a chain of justifiers—the premises of one argument being the conclusion of a prior argument, and so on. If the proposition at the end of this chain is to be justified, there are three main options: (i) there is an infinite regress of justifiers; (ii) the chain loops back on itself; or (iii) the chain terminates in propositions that are immediately justified, or justified apart from any argument. Though formidable defenses of each option exist,⁸ most philosophers throughout history, including those in the early modern period, have opted for (iii). On this view, commonly called “foundationalism,” our noetic structures rest on a foundation of properly basic beliefs.

⁸ For a classic defenses of (i) and (ii), respectively, see Peter Klein, “Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 297-325, and Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). For more recent defenses of (i) and (ii), respectively, see Scott Aikin, *Epistemology and the Regress Problem* (New York: Routledge, 2010), and Ted Poston, *Reason and Explanation: A Defense of Explanatory Coherentism* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

Given foundationalism, the crucial question then becomes: What sort of beliefs get to be properly basic? Excepting *a priori* truths, the only properly basic beliefs allowed by Descartes were about the immediate contents of one's own mind—that is, introspective beliefs about the existence of sensations, ideas, and other things of which one is conscious. All other beliefs must be justified by inference from this limited foundation of properly basic beliefs. This is what Reid means when he says of Descartes' system, "That our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious, hath real existence, is admitted in this system as a first principle; but every thing else must be made evident by the light of reason."⁹ It is this feature of the way of ideas, namely, introspective foundationalism, that leads to skepticism.

To see how, consider the belief that there is a world external to our minds. Given introspective foundationalism, belief in the external world cannot be properly basic. When we observe our surroundings, we can immediately believe only in the presence of certain impressions in our minds: patches of color, hums and buzzes, tactile feels, smells and tastes, etc. The existence of an external world must be *inferred* as the cause of these impressions if belief in its existence is to be justified. The trouble is that providing such an argument is no simple chore. It is easy to imagine skeptical scenarios in which you have these same sensations but in which there is no external world: you could be a dreaming spirit or the victim of a godlike malicious deceiver. You may be inclined to treat these skeptical scenarios flippantly, but what rationally licenses your dismissal? If introspective foundationalism is correct, you need to produce a rational argument showing why sensations are caused by a mind-independent world and not an

⁹ Reid, *Inquiry*, 210.

evil deceiver or the like—a difficult task, to understate the matter.¹⁰ In the absence of such an argument, your dismissal, however tempting, is unjustified.

It is here that Hume’s presence looms large. According to Reid, Hume successfully shows that we cannot rationally infer the existence of an external world from the existence of our impressions and ideas. Thus, given introspective foundationalism, belief in the external world is unjustified. And this is only the tip of the iceberg. Hume also argues (and Reid agrees) that using only introspective knowledge and *a priori* principles, we cannot rationally infer that the sun will rise tomorrow or that the shortest path between two points is a straight line or, astoundingly, that *we*—the intellectual substances in which our impressions and ideas are thought to reside—exist. Radical skepticism ensues.

It is a cruel irony that Descartes, who set out to establish the edifice of human knowledge on firm and lasting foundations, succeeded instead in casting doubt on whether anything beyond the existence of our own thoughts and ideas could be known at all. It was not, of course, apparent to Descartes that he had planted the seed of skepticism. It was not until this seed was nourished by Locke, pruned by Berkeley, and brought to full bloom under Hume’s green thumb that its skeptical fruit was clearly identified. Indeed, Reid credits Hume for being the first to fully draw out these skeptical implications. Hume was also unlike his predecessors in that he embraced the resulting skepticism.¹¹ Reid describes Hume’s mentality with characteristic flair:

Thus we see, that Des Cartes and Locke take the road that leads to scepticism, without knowing the end of it; but they stop short for want of light to carry them farther. Berkeley, frightened at the appearance of the dreadful abyss, starts aside, and avoids it.

¹⁰ A significant number of contemporary philosophers attempt to provide such an argument. They argue that the hypothesis of a mind-independent external world explains the sensory data better than the alternative skeptical hypotheses. This is known as the “explanationist” response to external world skepticism. See Jonathan Vogel, “Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 87.11 (1990): 658-666.

¹¹ This is, at least, how Reid interpreted Hume. Contemporary Hume scholars often favor a less skeptical reading of Hume.

But the author of the *Treatise of human nature*, more daring and intrepid, without turning aside to the right hand or to the left, like Virgil's Alecto, shoots directly into the gulf.¹²

We may scoff at Hume as he dives headlong off the precipice, but we cannot ignore him. The question we must ask ourselves is, *Can we avoid being dragged down with him?*

It is into this context that Campbell boldly pronounces the marriage between philosophy and common sense—a remarkable proclamation considering, and far from an idle truism. For hundreds of years, philosophy had been set in opposition to common sense, disparaging our ability to know matters of common sense like the existence of an external world. How is it that Campbell can speak so confidently of their reconciliation?

§3. The Common Sense Reply to Skepticism

Given the way of ideas and its introspective foundationalism, philosophy stands in opposition to common sense (or so we shall grant). But is philosophy fairly represented by the way of ideas? Speaking of lady philosophy's alleged unfaithfulness to common sense, Reid questions,

Is it not possible she may have been misrepresented? Have not men of genius in former ages often made their own dreams to pass for her oracles? Ought she then to be condemned without any farther hearing? This would be unreasonable. I have found her in all other matters an agreeable companion, a faithful counsellor, a friend to Common Sense, and to the happiness of mankind. This justly intitles her to my correspondence and confidence, till I find infallible proofs of her infidelity.¹³

Let us carefully review the case against philosophy to see if there might not have been a terrible misunderstanding.

¹² Reid, *Inquiry*, 213.

¹³ Reid, *Inquiry*, 24.

Let I = Introspective foundationalism is correct. Let S = We can know of little beyond the existence of our own thoughts and ideas. Let $\sim I$ and $\sim S$ be the denial of I and S, respectively.

Both Reid and Hume agree on the following conditional:

($I \supset S$) If introspective foundationalism is correct, then we can know of little beyond the existence of our own thoughts and ideas.

Hume also affirms the way of ideas and so endorses the following argument:

Hume's Argument

$I \supset S$

I

$\therefore S$

Reid has a different reaction. Starting with the same conditional, Reid proposes that the following argument is more plausible than Hume's:

Reid's Argument

$I \supset S$

$\sim S$

$\therefore \sim I$

In short, Reid thinks it is more reasonable to reject introspective foundationalism than to accept its skeptical implications.¹⁴ Introspective foundationalism is a controversial philosophical thesis in its own right. Is it not more likely that we are wrong about this thesis than that almost all of our common sense beliefs about the world are irrational? Reid offers a fitting analogy:

A traveler of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and while the road is before him, he may go on without suspicion, and be followed by others; but when it ends in a coal-pit, it requires no great judgment to know that he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.

¹⁴ Reid would say the same regarding other skepticism-generating components of the way of ideas, such as the veil of perception.

The way of ideas and its introspective foundationalism has landed us in a coal-pit. The only question is whether we will set up camp and lament that New York is not what it used to be.¹⁵

If we follow Reid's advice, it is not essential that we identify precisely what is mistaken about introspective foundationalism: "Such philosophy is justly ridiculous, even to those who cannot detect the fallacy of it."¹⁶ We need not know *why* it is false to know *that* it is false. But it helps us return to the path, and stay true in the journey ahead, if we can point out where we were led astray.

In Reid's analysis, opposition between philosophy and common sense arises only when we ask philosophy to play a role in the relationship which it was never intended to fill and for which it is completely unsuited. In the way of ideas, philosophy is asked to support common sense. Belief in the external world and the like must be justified by philosophical argument. The fact that philosophy is unable to do this signals only that it is wrong to place this burden on philosophy in the first place. Reid writes:

It may be observed, that the defects and blemishes in the received philosophy concerning the mind, which have most exposed it to the contempt and ridicule of sensible men, have chiefly been owing to this: That the votaries of this Philosophy, from a natural prejudice in her favour, have endeavoured to extend her jurisdiction beyond its limits, and to call to her bar the dictates of Common Sense. But these decline this jurisdiction; they disdain the trial of reasoning, and disown its authority; they neither claim its aid, nor dread its attacks.

In this unequal contest betwixt Common Sense and Philosophy, the latter will always come off both with dishonor and loss; nor can she ever thrive till this rivalship is dropt, these incroachments given up, and a cordial friendship restored: for, in reality, Common Sense holds nothing of Philosophy, nor needs her aid.¹⁷

¹⁵ The above maneuver has become known as the GE Moore Shift after the 20th century philosopher GE Moore, who famously adopted this Reidian response to skepticism. See G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25.5 (1939): 273–300 and "A Defence of Common Sense," in *Philosophical Papers*, (New York: Macmillan, 1959).

¹⁶ Reid, *Inquiry*, 21.

¹⁷ Reid, *Inquiry*, 19.

Common sense, says Reid, does not need philosophy. It is no problem that common sense beliefs cannot be philosophically proven (at least not in ways that will satisfy the skeptic), because these beliefs do not need philosophical arguments to be justified. The principles of common sense, “are older, and of more authority, than Philosophy: she rests upon them as her basis, not they upon her.”¹⁸

What Reid is claiming is that the domain of properly basic beliefs should be extended beyond the lines drawn by Descartes and Hume’s introspective foundationalism. Common sense beliefs, like belief in the external world, can be justified without argument. Reid goes as far as to maintain that any of the basic beliefs produced by your natural constitution and the proper functioning of the faculties contained therein should be admitted as properly basic until one is given reason to doubt them. In his writings, he lays out several “first principles of common sense” indicating the sorts of beliefs that we are to accept immediately and without argument. A few of them include:

(Reid’s Principle of Perception) Those things that I distinctly perceive by the senses really exist and are what I perceive them to be.¹⁹

(Reid’s Principle of Consciousness) Those things of which I am conscious exist.”²⁰

(Reid’s Principle of Testimony) “Those things to which another human testifies are probably true.”²¹

That is, if you are naturally compelled to believe in an idea in your mind, or an object in the external world, or the testimony of another person, it is reasonable for you to maintain that belief in the absence of reasons to doubt.

¹⁸ Reid, *Inquiry*, 21.

¹⁹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek R. Brookes (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 476.

²⁰ Reid, *Essays*, 470.

²¹ Reid, *Essays*, 487.

Campbell, after declaring the reunification of philosophy and common sense, provides a few first principles of his own (or something like them). Three conditions in the covenant between philosophy and common sense include:

(Campbell's Principle of Perception) "That they will always, and only, employ the five senses in ascertaining *sensible* facts; and receive the testimony of any two or more of them as infallible, when it can be shown that they are in good health and in favorable circumstances to ascertain the facts in question."²²

(Campbell's Principle of Consciousness) "That the internal sense of consciousness will always be regarded as a faithful and competent witness of the mental and moral facts of the inner man, as the five external senses are of the material and external facts and events of the outward man."²³

(Campbell's Principle of Testimony) "That they will always receive the testimony of other persons who simply declare what they have seen, heard, or learned from their own experience, when that testimony is free from suspicion of fraud or fiction."²⁴

Though there are differences, Campbell's three principles echo those of Reid above. Campbell seems to share Reid's basic stance that what is presented to us by our natural faculties is to be received in a spirit of trust and credulity.

We can get a better understanding of Campbell's position by taking a closer look at what he says about the testimony of other persons.²⁵ In numerous places, Campbell points out that humans are naturally disposed to receive the testimony of others on trust, or faith, and so to believe the content of their testimony. Campbell calls this innate tendency "credulity":

Man is, therefore, so created and circumstanced now, as to be naturally and necessarily credulous. Credulity—for I know no term more expressive of the native bias to receive truth upon testimony—I say, credulity is as natural to man as breathing.²⁶

²² Campbell, "Introductory Lecture," 64.

²³ Campbell, "Introductory Lecture," 64.

²⁴ Campbell, "Introductory Lecture," 64.

²⁵ There are many similarities between Campbell's view of testimony and Reid's. See Clanton, *The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell*, chapter 3, note 86 for evidence of Jardine's influence on Campbell's views of testimony.

²⁶ Alexander Campbell, *Debate on the Evidences of Christianity; Containing an Examination of the Social System and All the Systems of Scepticism of Ancient and Modern Times, Held in the City of*

We can, perhaps, become jaded and suppress (to some extent) our trusting ways, but credulity is the default. An effect of our credulity is that we will naturally believe in the content of testimony without argument. That is, testimonial beliefs are often basic. According to Campbell, it is vital for humanity that it be so:

This is a wise provision in the constitution of the human mind, that it must, and, with the utmost ease, does assent to testimony; for, without it, there could be no improvability in man. He would cease to be a progressive being. No child could be educated without it. Without it, the art of the linguist, the logician, the rhetorician, would be unavailing. Human nature would be a metal, (if I may be allowed the figure,) that would not polish.²⁷

For what can be more evident than that every human being is by an insuperable necessity compelled to make the very first step in life, intellectual and moral, if not physical, by faith? ... Man, then, is so constituted that he must walk by faith if he walk at all. He must do this long before reason has commenced its career of examination.²⁸

The conclusion we are building to is not just that credulity is practically necessary for our survival and flourishing (though that is something on which he would indeed insist). Campbell thinks we know a lot about the world. And given the prominent role testimony plays in human development, much of that knowledge is undergirded by testimony—specifically, testimony accepted without argument in accordance with our natural credulity.²⁹ Thus, Campbell concludes, it must be rational to approach testimony with credulity. Testimonial beliefs, formed by natural credulity, are properly basic (in the absence of reasons to doubt).

An implication of Campbell's position is that the authority of testimony—its ability to justify testimonial beliefs—is independent of reason. The exact nature of this independence, however, is easily misunderstood and should be unpacked with care. Campbell himself warns,

Cincinnati, for Eight Days Successively, Between Robert Owen, of Lanark, Scotland, and Alexander Campbell, of Bethany, Virginia (London: R. Groombridge, 1839), 107. See also 160-161.

²⁷ Campbell, *Debate*, p. 107-108.

²⁸ Alexander Campbell, "Is Moral Philosophy an Inductive Science?" in *Popular Lectures and Addresses*, ed. Alexander Campbell, 95-124 (Philadelphia: James Challen & Son, 1866), 119-120.

²⁹ Campbell speculates that less than one in a thousand beliefs is independent of testimony, adding, "Here is no exaggeration." Campbell, *Debate*, 161.

Lest, however, it should seem as if faith [in testimony] and reason were rival claimants for the absolute government of man, and, like other aspirants, were seeking to rise, each upon the ruin of his competitor, to this high office, the province of reason should be distinctly noted and understood.³⁰

So, what exactly is the proper relationship between testimony and reason? To start, Campbell insists that reason must play an important role in the ultimate acceptance of testimony. For one, we can neither discern which utterances are instances of testimony, nor understand the content of such utterances without reason. Thus, Campbell writes,

[Reason] examines the testimony, and decides upon its pretensions. In this sense, intellect and reason are as necessary to faith as they are to moral excellence; for a creature destitute of reason is alike incapable of faith, morality and religion.

In this capacity, reason serves as no more than “a minister to faith.”³¹ In addition to the former function, reason also can and should be used to help us sift true testimony from false. Campbell states,

In the first place, then, you will observe that we have certain criteria by which we are enabled to discriminate between the truth and fallacy of testimony; and it is our every-day practice, in the ordinary concerns of life, to avail ourselves of these criteria. We do not believe everything without scruple.³²

In other words, credulity does not entail naiveté. The testimony of others must be compared and reconciled with our total bodies of evidence and, in some cases, rejected. Reason, therefore, plays an important role in determining whether, after all the relevant considerations have been brought to bear, we are rational in believing the content of some testimony.

What Campbell denies about the relationship between testimony and reason is that testimony’s authority is entirely derived from that of reason—that testimony cannot justify belief prior to or independently of reason’s certification. Campbell remarks,

³⁰ Campbell, “Is Moral Philosophy an Inductive Science?”, 120.

³¹ Campbell, “Is Moral Philosophy an Inductive Science?”, 121.

³² Campbell, *Debate*, 168.

Reason can judge of testimony, and this is its province; and in the absence of testimony and experience, it is our sole guide. As such, we do not disparage it, but when it proudly invades the dominions of testimony, and rejects its aids, we must strip it of its fancied supremacy, and abase it by a recital of its miscarriages.³³

Instead, Campbell insists that testimony has a natural authority of its own. There can be properly basic beliefs formed on the basis of testimony just as there can be properly basic beliefs formed on the basis of *a priori* reasoning.

Campbell's position on the natural authority of testimony applies not only to the testimony of other persons but also to the deliverances of our own faculties. Here's how. It is natural to think that our faculties can "testify" to us much like other people do. Reid notes,

There is no doubt an analogy between the evidence of sense and the evidence of testimony. Hence we find in all languages the analogical expressions of the *testimony of sense*, and of giving *credit* to our senses, and the like.³⁴

One important difference between the testimony of our faculties and the testimony of other people is that other people communicate their testimony through utterances, while our faculties transmit their testimony through experiences. Our perceptual faculties, for example, testify to us by producing perceptual experiences containing information about our immediate physical environments.³⁵ What exactly are these experiences? Reid thinks that perceptual experiences (and all other kinds of experience) consist at least partially in beliefs. Let us call the beliefs produced by the proper functioning of our natural faculties "natural beliefs." For Reid, natural beliefs represent the testimony of our faculties.³⁶ From this position, Campbell can maintain that

³³ Campbell, *Debate*, 457.

³⁴ Reid, *Essays*, 231.

³⁵ Likewise, our memorial faculties testify about the past through memories, our introspective faculties testify about our own conscious mental states through introspective awareness, and our rational faculties testify through intuitions.

³⁶ Reid sometimes talks as though these beliefs are the testimony of Nature herself: "This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of nature; it bears her image and superscription." (Reid, *Inquiry*, 169)

it is rational to place faith (or something analogous to it) in the testimony perception, memory, and consciousness just as is it rational to have faith the testimony of other people. He concludes,

Reason, then, in one word, examines the tradition and the testimony, whether it be that of our five senses, our memory, our consciousness, or that of other persons; faith receives that testimony, and common sense walks by it.³⁷

As before, reason has a role in recognizing and assessing the testimony of these various faculties, but their rational authority is not derived from the faculty of reason. Campbell's vision, like Reid's, is one in which our natural constitutions afford us multiple independent sources of evidence and justification: reason, consciousness, perception, memory, and testimony all bring forth properly basic, natural beliefs about the world.

As we saw with Reid, Campbell thinks that unfounded skeptical worries arise when we extend the jurisdiction of philosophy beyond its proper place—that is, when we pretend that the authority of testimony or perception or memory must be derived from reason and introspection. Campbell is most vocal about such matters in the case of testimony. In his debate with atheist Robert Owen, Campbell repeatedly maintains that failure to believe in the testimony of the apostles and others who witnessed the resurrected Christ is an instance of undue skepticism.³⁸ Such skepticism results from thinking that the reliability of testimony must be supported by reason before it can be rationally trusted, a position he ties back to Hume.³⁹ What is true of testimony is also true of perception and memory: attempting to derive their authority from reason and introspection is a misguided endeavor that ends in skepticism.

³⁷Campbell, "Is Moral Philosophy an Inductive Science?", 120-21.

³⁸ See, for instance, Campbell, *Debate*, 108, where Campbell says that the faith required of a Christian is no greater than, and no less rational than, that required of his interlocutor Owen (a native of Scotland) to believe that America existed before seeing it with his own eyes.

³⁹ Campbell, *Debate*, 244-46. For an extended look at Campbell's critique of Hume on miracle-reports, see Clanton, *The Philosophy of Religion of Alexander Campbell*, 77-87.

In the case of Reid, we can encapsulate his view in a single common sense principle that qualifies as an instance of *doxastic conservatism*.⁴⁰

(DC) If S naturally believes *p*, then S thereby has some degree of *prima facie* justification for believing *p*.

Prima facie justification is justification in the absence of defeaters. Defeaters raise doubts about the truth of the proposition in question, either by suggesting that it is false or else by undermining one's support for thinking that the proposition is true. DC says that absent such reasons for doubt, S has justification for those things that S naturally believes. The degree of *prima facie* justification one receives will be correlated with the strength of the natural belief.⁴¹ In light of the preceding discussion, I maintain that Campbell also endorses—or at least would endorse—something akin to DC. Given Campbell's education, his agreement with Reid is not surprising. Campbell studied at Glasgow University under George Jardine, a follower and close personal friend of Reid. In this instance, it appears, the apple does not fall far from the tree.

If DC is true, then there is no animosity between philosophy and common sense. The error of the early modern philosophers from Descartes to Hume was to pretend that the former is tasked with substantiating the latter. It turns out that common sense was doing just fine on its own, thank you. Indeed, it is philosophy that is at a loss without common sense. This is because all the building blocks of the philosopher—the immediately justified propositions which must underlie all of the philosopher's arguments—are mined from the quarry of common sense.

⁴⁰ I defend this interpretation of Reid in McAllister, "Re-Evaluating Reid's Response to Skepticism," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 14.3 (2016b): 317–39. Doxastic conservatism is more commonly called "epistemic conservatism."

⁴¹ Reid, *Essays*, 482.

§4. Phenomenal Conservatism

Now that the common sense reply to skepticism is before us, I intend to defend what I take to be its central insight: that it is rational to place some trust in the testimony of our experiences—including our perceptual experiences—prior to any independent substantiation of their reliability. I believe, however, that the best representation of this insight is the principle of *phenomenal conservatism* rather than what I have identified as Reid and Campbell’s principle of doxastic conservatism.⁴² The purpose of this section will be to introduce phenomenal conservatism and the ways it differs from doxastic conservatism. This positions me to argue for the common sense reply to skepticism in its strongest form, in the following section.

The principle of phenomenal conservatism that I will defend is as follows:

(PC) If it seems to S that *p*, then S thereby has some degree of *prima facie* justification for believing *p*.⁴³

The central idea behind PC is that when a proposition seems true, the subject immediately gains justification for believing that it is true, independent of any argument verifying the reliability of that appearance. The degree of justification conferred is correlated with how strongly the proposition in question seems true. As before, this justification is only *prima facie* and can be defeated if any reasons for doubting (i.e. defeaters) arise.⁴⁴ Thus, it may seem to me that a

⁴² Phenomenal conservatism was first defended in Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Studies in Epistemology and Cognitive Theory (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001). Important defenses include Huemer, “Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43.2 (2006): 147-58, Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74.1 (2007): 30-55, and Tucker, “Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 24.1 (2010): 529-45. Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) contains some of the most important recent discussions.

⁴³ This is equivalent to the formulation of phenomenal conservatism in Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism.”

⁴⁴ I am operating here with a broad conception of defeaters. In particular, I am treating the fact that a proposition has a low intrinsic probability (or, more precisely, an intrinsic probability below the probability that the subject is inclined to assign it when only considering its seeming truth) as a defeater.

magician has cut his assistant in half, but I would be a fool to believe it. One must weigh all of the relevant considerations to determine whether one is ultimately justified in believing a proposition.

You will notice a couple differences between phenomenal and doxastic conservatism. The most apparent is that, in phenomenal conservatism, what confers *prima facie* justification on a proposition is that it *seems* true rather than that *it is believed* to be true. Another difference is that phenomenal conservatism does not restrict itself to “natural” seemings, or to those that result from the proper functioning of one’s natural faculties, whereas Reid and Campbell’s principle of doxastic conservatism applies only to natural beliefs. We will walk through each of these differences in more detail.

Phenomenal conservatism appeals to what *seems* to be the case instead of what one *believes* to be the case. We are all familiar with what it is like for something to seem true. At the moment, it probably seems to you that you are awake, that you are reading a book, and that you are indoors. If I ask you whether a triangle can have more than three sides, it will seem to you that it cannot. If someone asks when your birthday is, it will seem to you that it is on such-and-such a day. In contemporary discussions, the kind of mental state one is in when something seems to be true is called an “appearance” or a “seeming.” It will be important for us to gain a better understanding of appearances (or seemings) before proceeding further.⁴⁵

The first thing to note is that appearances have propositional content; they represent the world being a certain way. This is not entirely unlike how a book describes something to its readers. Of course, not all books claim to describe the world accurately. Works of fiction do not purport to give factually accurate descriptions of the world. Similarly, when you *imagine* your

⁴⁵ There are debates about how to best understand seemings. What I am presenting here is the most prominent view in the literature. I defend this conception of seemings as superior to the alternatives in McAllister, “Seemings as Sui Generis,” *Synthese* (2017): 1-18.

favorite team winning the championship, your mental state represents your team winning but not in a way that makes any pretensions to the truth of what is represented. A *seeming*, on the other hand, presents its content as though it is descriptive of the way things really are. This is why you are psychologically inclined to believe that which seems true but not that which you merely imagine to be true.

The difference-maker is the phenomenology of each mental state. The content of a seeming feels true. It feels like what is being represented is the way things actually are. Compare what it feels like to imagine your team winning with what it feels like to perceive them doing so. You represent the same thing in both cases, but only in the latter case does your experience feel real, authentic, revelatory, as though what is being represented is true. It is this phenomenal character—the feeling of truth—that sets seemings apart.

Why prefer conservatism about seemings over beliefs? I would argue that phenomenal conservatism incorporates the core epistemic insight of doxastic conservatism into a more plausible account of experience. In my view, the fundamental reason Reid and Campbell endorse DC is the conviction that we are rationally entitled to trust our experiences without prior verification of their reliability. This is the core insight. Reid is then led to DC because he thinks of experience as consisting in natural beliefs. For Reid, the perceptual experience of a tree includes the natural belief that a tree is present and is the cause one's current sensations.⁴⁶ Thus, DC is inferred from the core insight and a doxastic account of experience. I accept the core insight but disagree with the doxastic account of experience. Experiences do not consist in beliefs; they motivate beliefs. I believe that a tree is present *because* I perceive it. The experience causes the belief and so must be prior to it. For these and other reasons, experiences

⁴⁶ “This conception and belief which Nature produces by means of the senses, we call *perception*.” Reid, *Essays*, 210.

are better understood as appearances than beliefs. Since seemings naturally incline us to believe their content, it is normal for a belief to result from the experiential process. Nevertheless, the experience itself consists in the appearance, not the belief. If this new account of experience is correct, then trusting experience requires lending credence to what seems true, as phenomenal conservatism dictates. In this way, phenomenal conservatism simply combines Reid and Campbell's core epistemic insight with a better account of experience.

Another difference between PC and DC is about the importance of naturalness. Reid and Campbell grant immediate justification only to those beliefs that result from the proper functioning of our natural constitutions. Beliefs that arise due to prejudice or malfunction are not given the same benefit of the doubt. PC, however, does not make the same restriction. According to PC, a seeming provides some initial reason to believe its content regardless of its origin. Despite the apparent sensibility of Reid and Campbell's restriction, it is ultimately arbitrary to initially trust some experiences while refusing the same benefit of the doubt to others that, from the subject's perspective, are in all relevant respects the same. This line of reasoning will be discussed at greater length in my defense of PC, to which I now turn.

§5. In Defense of Common Sense

5.1. The Direct Argument: The Initial Position

My first argument for PC, when it comes down to it, is really quite simple.⁴⁷ In a nutshell, if p seems true to you and there are no reasons for doubting p or the reliability of your

⁴⁷ The basic idea underlying my argument can be found in Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 104 and Matthew McGrath, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Cognitive Penetration: The 'Bad Basis' Counterexamples," in *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, ed. Chris Tucker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 226. My formulation of the idea will differ from theirs at a couple of points, but the overlap is apparent. We are all, I take it, trying to articulate a common intuition. I suspect that this intuition is one of the primary reasons for the growing

appearance, then surely you would not be violating any epistemic duties by believing p , even if you didn't have any prior confirmation of the seeming's reliability. There are basically three stances a subject could take in such a position: believe, disbelieve, or withhold assent.

Disbelieving, I take it, is not a live option. The choice is between believing p or withholding assent. I submit that, in its own way, withholding assent in such a scenario is just as risky as believing—perhaps even more so—hence, believing p seems no less permissible than suspending judgment. If believing in this situation is permissible, as I argue it is, then PC is true. What follows is just an attempt to develop this basic line of reasoning.

We need to start with a situation in which (i) something seems true, and (ii) the subject brackets out any evidence for or against the reliability of the seeming or the truth of its content. Let us call this ideal situation “the initial position.” Since all other considerations are bracketed out, looking at the initial position will allow us to isolate the effects of the seeming to determine whether, in and of itself, without verification of its reliability, the seeming is capable of justifying belief in its content. Furthermore, the described ideal scenario specifies nothing about what kind of seeming the subject has, so any of the conclusions we draw about the initial position can be generalized to all seemings. What we will be asking is whether a subject in the initial position is rationally permitted to believe the content of his seeming. If so, this justification can only have come from the seeming itself.

Regrettably, it is difficult to imagine what it is like for someone in the initial position because, in normal circumstances, we are operating with copious background information about the way the world works. We have learned which types of experience are reliable and which are not. For instance, perceptual experiences are highly reliable, early childhood memories are less

popularity of PC. (Chris Tucker, for instance, has said that this intuition is a significant motivator in his endorsement of PC.)

so, and clairvoyant experiences are not at all. We also know the prior probabilities of many propositions—that is to say, we have a sense of how likely these propositions are to be true given our current body of evidence. If we intuit that a certain experience does or does not justify belief in its content, it is difficult to guard against the possibility that this is actually an all-things-considered assessment—one which takes into account what we know about the reliability of such experiences and the prior probability of its content. We must be diligent to ensure that we are not covertly importing background information into our assessments.

It may help to imagine Adam in the Garden of Eden, moments after being made by God. Though he has fully developed cognitive faculties and the command of various concepts, we can assume that he is wholly unfamiliar with the reliability of various kinds of experience. He has no clue what kinds of faculties he has and what sort of information they can or cannot reliably provide. Furthermore, he has given no thought to how intrinsically probable any proposition is. His mind lays at rest until, in his first moment of rational thought, it seems true to him that p . Perhaps it seems to Adam that he exists, or that he is in a garden, or that the moon is the same size as the sun—the specific content will be deliberately ignored. Adam has entered the initial position. Is Adam is justified in believing p ?

Though I have spoken frequently of being rational or reasonable or justified in believing something, I have neglected so far to say precisely what this involves.⁴⁸ It becomes crucial at the present juncture that I do so, for only then can we accurately evaluate whether Adam is justified in believing p in the initial position. On the conception of justification that concerns us here, we can discern whether you have justification for believing by asking whether you could maintain

⁴⁸ There are several competing conceptions of justification. This is not the appropriate venue to rehearse such debates. Suffice it to say that the conception of justification presented below is associated with the conception operative for the early modern epistemologists towards which the common sense reply to skepticism was initially directed.

that belief while doing the best you can with the information available to you.⁴⁹ In other words, imagine if you were to assess, with the utmost care and concentration, all of the available information concerning the truth of p , allowing no desires, emotions, or the like to influence you in the process. Let us add that your goals here are strictly intellectual. We can gloss this by saying that your only aim is, at the present moment, to believe truth and disbelieve falsehood. After satisfying your deepest standards of inquiry, you reach a settled position that represents what is, by your lights, the most effective means of fulfilling your intellectual goals. (For ease of reference, an agent who has gone through this careful reflective process will be described as “fully conscientious.”) There is some doxastic stance, or some selection of stances, that you would have in such a scenario—that is, if you were a fully conscientious intellectual agent. These are the stances you have justification for taking towards p .⁵⁰

Justification, on this conception, requires only that which is in your power to give. So long as your position reflects your best attempt to believe truth and disbelieve falsehood, you are being rational. Crucially, you are not held responsible for things you are unaware of. The only things that matter are those featured within the subject’s first-person subjective perspective.

Return to Adam. He wakes up. It seems to Adam that p is true. He has no other information about p or reliability of his experience, and he is barred from seeking out further information on these matters. His only goals are to believe truth and disbelieve falsehood. His only options are to believe, disbelieve, or withhold assent. The question now becomes: If Adam were to do the best he could to determine the truth of p using only the scant information available

⁴⁹ The conception of justification articulated here is kindred to the notion of egocentric rationality developed in Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁵⁰ I am not giving a definition of justification here. Counterfactual definitions are notoriously problematic. I am merely offering a useful, if imperfect, heuristic for discerning what credences are justified for a subject in the relevant sense.

to him, could Adam come to believe p ? I think he could. The only consideration available to Adam is his present experience—a seeming—in which p is presented to him as true. This experience feels revelatory, as though it is giving him insight into the way the world really is. If this is all he has to go on, then it should be unsurprising that a fully conscientious evaluation of the information could lead Adam to believe p .

Consider the matter from another angle. The apparent truth of the proposition will naturally incline Adam to believe it. To stop a belief from occurring (if that were possible), Adam would have to actively strive tooth and nail against his natural inclination. But why should he have to do so? If the inclination to believe came from desire or the like, then the fully conscientious agent would resist, but appearances are different in relevant respects from desires. If someone allows a desire to directly cause a belief, then she is allowing the apparent goodness of a proposition to motivate her judgment. That is not something a fully conscientious agent would suffer, since her goals are strictly intellectual, not practical—she is concerned with truth, not goodness. On the other hand, when a seeming causes a belief, one's judgment is motivated by the apparent *truth* of the proposition. This seems like precisely the sort of thing that would be relevant to an agent who is singularly concerned with believing truth and disbelieving falsehood. At the very least, there is nothing obviously problematic with being moved by the apparent truth of a proposition. Thus, I find no reason to think that if Adam were being fully conscientious, he would be forced to strive against his natural inclination to believe.

To be clear, my premise is only that Adam, if he were being fully conscientious, *could* believe p in the initial position, not that he *would* do so. The former is more modest than the latter. The position that Adam could believe p is consistent with the position that Adam could also withhold assent towards p —maybe both options are on par to him. Put differently, I am not

arguing here that belief is the only rational response in the initial position. For all I have said, there may be more than one rational response. All I am claiming—and all I need to claim in order to establish PC—is that belief is *one* of the rational responses available to someone in the initial position. The modesty of this central premise makes it more difficult to oppose.

The following may be a helpful analogy. Believing in the initial position is a little like placing a bet in p 's truth—the wager being in some kind of intellectual currency. Similarly, disbelieving is like betting that p is false, and withholding assent is like betting nothing at all. To extend the analogy, if you bet on p 's truth-value and get it right, then there is a payoff—you win some intellectual currency. If you bet wrong, you lose some intellectual currency. If you bet nothing, then you neither gain nor lose anything. In this analogy, a fully conscientious agent would have only one goal: to place the bet with the highest expected payoff. And as before, the subject has only one consideration to go on: the proposition in question seems true. What bet or bets is one rationally permitted to place? If we conclude that it is rational to bet on p 's truth, then we should conclude the same about believing in the initial position.

I think it is safe to assume that betting on p 's falsity (disbelieving) is out of the question, but should we bet on p 's truth (believe) or bet nothing (withhold assent)? As we think through this matter, the first thing we must do is break ourselves of the illusion that withholding assent is the “safe bet,” that we somehow minimize our risk by betting nothing. Each bet comes with its own risks and rewards. Yes, betting on truth comes with the risk of loss, while betting nothing does not; but by betting nothing, we risk losing a payoff, while betting on truth gives us an opportunity for gain. We risk losing or we risk not winning. Risk is unavoidable. There is no safe bet.

The unavoidability of risk stems from the fact that two ideal norms are pulling us in opposite directions. In betting terms, the norms are:

(Pursue Gain) If p is true, then bet that it is true.

(Avoid Loss) If p is not true, then do not bet that it is true.

In doxastic terms, the norms are:

(Pursue Truth) If p is true, then believe p .

(Avoid Falsehood) If p is not true, then do not believe p .

If we were wholly concerned with pursuing gain or avoiding loss, then our decisions would be easy: either always bet on truth or always refrain, depending on whether you follow the former norm or the latter. Since we are concerned to follow both, we always risk violating one norm or the other.⁵¹ If we bet that p is true because it seems to be true, then we run the risk of violating the second norm, of losing a bet, of being duped. If we bet nothing despite the fact that p seems true, then we run the risk of violating the first norm, of failing to win a bet, of missing out on the truth.

When we acknowledge that either option carries risk, it becomes hard to deny that betting on p 's truth is rationally permissible. With so little information to go on, the chances of losing a bet are not, from our perspectives, any greater than the chances of missing a payoff. If anything, the risk of missing a payoff is more pressing since it seems to us that p is true—perhaps even obviously true. So, unless we privilege the avoidance of loss over the pursuit of gain—treating a breach of the former as worse than a breach of the latter—then there are no grounds for thinking that withholding assent is the superior betting strategy. Should we privilege avoiding loss/falsehood over pursuing gain/truth? There have certainly been philosophers who have done so. Descartes privileged avoiding falsehood to such a degree that he tried to withhold assent

⁵¹ I am excepting cases in which we know the truth-value of p with absolute certainty.

from anything that was not certain and indubitable. Even if grant that privileging one norm over another is (in some instances) allowable,⁵² I see no reason for thinking all intellectual agents *must* prioritize avoiding falsehood over pursuing truth, particularly not to the extent that Descartes did. Indeed, if we allow one subject to prioritize the avoidance of falsehood, I do not see how we can consistently bar another from prioritizing the pursuit of truth. There is, I conclude, no discernable reason why we should be barred from believing *p* in the initial position.

Let us quickly remind ourselves of the significance of this conclusion. In the initial position, the subject has nothing to go on except an appearance. He has no information about the reliability of that appearance or the prior likelihood of *p*. Thus, the fact that the subject has justification for believing *p* can only be due to his appearance. This shows that the subject's seeming is, all by itself, capable of providing *prima facie* justification for believing in the truth of its content. Furthermore, the initial position is fully generalizable. None of the above arguments relied on anything specific about the subject's circumstances or the kind of seeming at issue. Thus, we can infer that all seemings provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content, which is just what PC maintains.

5.2. *The Indirect Argument: Assessing the Alternatives*

My first argument appeals directly to the plausibility of PC. I will now argue for PC indirectly, by highlighting the implausibility of the alternatives. There are really only two. The first says that no seemings provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content. The

⁵² Jonathan Kvanvig, *Rationality and Reflection: How to Think About What to Think* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 186, allows divergence in how agents weigh competing epistemic goals. He cites a helpful example from Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," in *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*, eds. Alvin I. Goldman and Dennis Whitcomb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 183–217.

second says that some do, others do not—depends on the seeming. In the rest of this section, I will argue that neither of these alternatives is acceptable.

None of the early modern philosophers we have encountered, not even Hume, would have been so skeptical as to maintain that no seemings whatsoever provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content. Assuming foundationalism, some beliefs must be immediately justified if any beliefs are to be justified at all.⁵³ Plausibly, this requires that at least some kinds of seemings—be they introspective seemings, rational seemings (including *a priori* intuitions), perceptual seemings, memorial seemings, etc.—provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content immediately and without argument.⁵⁴

Try to imagine what someone would be like if he categorically refused to trust any appearances until they had first been proven reliable. Such an incredulous fellow would be a merely sentient being, more akin to a comatose patient than a properly functioning human agent. You place some food before him, but he does not reach out to take it. For, though it seems to him that there is food, he lends no credibility to his senses until they have been proven reliable, and any argument he could hope to give for the reliability of his senses will ultimately require that he trust some *other* seeming without first confirming its reliability. For instance, he cannot argue that the sensations in his mind are best explained by the existence of food, for why would he believe that there are sensations in his mind, much less that food is the best explanation of

⁵³ I am not addressing coherentism in this setting, as it would take me too far afield.

⁵⁴ Traditional foundationalists like Richard Fumerton and Laurence Bonjour admit the need for non-inferential justifiers but tap an alternative mental state for the job (see Fumerton, *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995) and Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)). Fumerton and Bonjour argue that I can be immediately justified in believing that *p* if I am acquainted three things: (i) *p*, (ii) the thought that *p*, and (iii) the correspondence between the thought that *p* and *p*. I have argued in McAllister, “Common Sense Epistemology: A Defense of Seemings as Evidence” (PhD diss., Baylor University, 2016) that if these three conditions are met, it will seem to the subject that *p* is true. Thus, I do not take this to be a counterexample to the claim that at least some kind of seeming must justify the foundations of our noetic structure if any belief in that structure is to be justified.

them? It may seem that these things are so, but this makes no difference to our incredulous friend, who trusts no seemings until they are proven reliable. Suddenly, the man's toes are trod on by a careless passerby! Though his body loosens a blood-curdling scream, the man does not believe himself to be in pain, or that he has toes, or that he even exists! These things seem true, of course, but our shrewd fellow, not wishing to be deceived, has resolved not to trust appearances until they have been independently verified. Such a person would be enveloped in complete and utter skepticism—a skepticism so complete, by the way, that it eliminates any reason he might have had for endorsing it in the first place.

By refusing to trust any of his seemings until proven reliable, the complete skeptic has effectively opted out of the entire rational enterprise. Such a man, Reid notes, cannot be shown the error of his ways—not because there are no sound arguments to this effect, but because the complete skeptic has forsaken his ability to recognize their soundness:

If a Sceptic should build his scepticism upon this foundation, that all our reasoning and judging powers are fallacious in their nature, or should resolve at least to withhold assent until it be proved that they are not; it would be impossible by argument to beat him out of this strong hold, and he must even be left to enjoy his scepticism.⁵⁵

“To such a sceptic,” Reid admits, “I have nothing to say.”⁵⁶ I will, for the moment, join Reid in his silence. ... Since you are continuing to read, I will assume that you have decided not to become a complete skeptic. Thus, we can fairly rule out the first alternative.

The second alternative—that some but not all seemings provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content—is more common. We might call it semi-skeptical, as authorizes the subject to immediately trust some of her experiences but not others. Hume probably would have opted for this position. He would agree that, in the initial position, introspective seemings make it rational to believe in the existence of sensory impressions; but he would deny this of

⁵⁵ Reid, *Essays*, 480.

⁵⁶ Reid, *Inquiry*, 71.

perceptual seemings about objects in the external world. If we are going to discriminate between different kinds of seemings, then, on pain of inconsistency, there must be relevant differences between those kinds of seemings—ones that affect their worthiness to be trusted from within the initial position.

Our conception of justification rules out any appeal to factors outside of the subject's first-person perspective. Justification is about doing the best you can with the information available to you. So if it is rational to trust one kind of seeming, it must be rational to trust all other seemings that, from the subject's perspective, are just like it. Aspects of a seeming that are not immediately accessible to the subject (like its causal history or reliability) only become relevant when the subject becomes aware of them. But in the initial position, we are bracketing out any evidence about the seeming. Thus, any features that a seeming does not wear on its face—that are not immediately available to the subject from within the initial position—will not affect that seeming's ability to confer *prima facie* justification on its content.

This is why I think Reid and Campbell were wrong to afford trust only to the deliverances of our natural faculties. The origins of a seeming are not always accessible from the first-person perspective. An unnatural seeming may feel no different from a natural one. For instance, if your perceptual seemings were caused by Descartes' evil deceiver rather than your properly functioning perceptual faculties, you would not have any indication that this was happening. In such a situation, you cannot be required to treat those unnatural perceptual seemings any differently than you would your natural ones.

The operative conception of justification entails this conclusion, but I want to emphasize just how intuitive it is. Compare two subjects. From the inside, everything appears exactly the same to them. Both weigh their evidence with the utmost care and conscientiousness and, as a

result, believe themselves to be sitting in a café drinking coffee. The only difference is that one subject actually is in a café while the other is a brain in a vat being stimulated by scientists to make it appear as though he is in a café. If only natural seemings can be trusted without verification, then we would have to say that the normal subject was being rational but that the brain-in-the-vat victim was being irrational—that he should not have trusted in the way things seemed to him simply because those seemings came from artificial stimulation rather than his natural faculties (never mind that he had no indication of this).⁵⁷ This seems false, to put it mildly. If it is rational for the normal subject to trust his seemings without prior verification, then it is rational for the brain-in-the-vat victim to do the same. Thus, the origins of a seeming do not affect its ability to confer *prima facie* justification on its content.

This same line of reasoning applies to any external criteria one might put forward. For instance, seemings formed by a reliable process do not, in principle, feel any different from those formed by an unreliable process. Compare, once again, the brain-in-the-vat victim to his normal counterpart. The brain-in-the-vat's seemings are terribly unreliable, and yet, from within, everything appears the same as it does to his normal counterpart. Accordingly, if the normal subject is permitted to trust his seemings in the initial position, then so is the brain-in-the-vat victim, despite the unreliability of the latter's seemings.

A final point must be emphasized before we move on. Throughout the course of life, we gain a tremendous amount of information about which seemings are natural, reliable, or possessive of any other epistemically desirable feature. Such information is extremely relevant to whether we are ultimately justified in believing what seems to be the case. It is not relevant to whether we are *prima facie* justified in believing what seems to be the case. That is why the

⁵⁷ This argument is basically a version of the New Evil Demon Problem for externalism from Cohen, "Justification and Truth," *Philosophical Studies* 46.3 (1984): 279-95.

initial position specifically brackets out any evidence about the reliability or origins of the seeming. What we want to assess is whether a seeming, in and of itself, independent of any evidence for or against its reliability, can make it rational for someone to believe in its content. We have already admitted that some seemings are capable of doing this (lest we end up in complete skepticism). The point I am pressing here is that, unless there is some reason within the initial position for discriminating between different kinds of seemings, we must conclude that *all* seemings can be trusted prior to verifying their reliability.

Only one hope remains for the semi-skeptical position. If there is a relevant difference between kinds of seemings, it must be located within the phenomenology of the states themselves. There is, however, no phenomenological difference between different kinds of seemings that could justify a double standard. Return to the initial position and imagine a subject who seems to be in pain. As a result, she comes to believe that she is in pain. Why does she believe this? Because the existence of that pain is evident, manifest, patent, plain, unmistakable, barefaced, crystal clear, clear-cut, clear as day, clear and distinct, clear as the noon day sun, luminous, or just plain obvious. It is as though the truth of that proposition reaches up and smacks her in the face. All of these are different ways of describing that unique phenomenal character which makes an appearance feel as though it is revealing the way things really are: the feeling of truth. When it comes down to it, the subject becomes more confident that she is in pain simply because this feels true; and since this same feeling is present in all seemings, consistency demands that all of them (or none of them) be given the benefit of the doubt. It may be that some kind of seemings will generally be stronger than others, but this only licenses a greater degree of trust in stronger seemings. It does not substantiate a complete lack of faith in those that are weaker.

What our discussion has shown is that all seemings are on par from within the initial position, the one exception being that stronger seemings are to be trusted to a greater degree than weaker ones. There is simply no basis from within the initial position for saying that someone is justified in believing because of one seeming but not another. Therefore, any position that allows some but not all seemings to provide *prima facie* justification (like Hume's) is unacceptably arbitrary. This is effectively the same charge that Reid levies against semi-skeptics like Hume:

[O]f the semi-sceptics, I should beg to know, why they believe the existence of their impressions and ideas. The true reason I take to be, because they cannot help it; and the same reason will lead them to believe many other things.⁵⁸

Bottom line: if some seemings provide *prima facie* justification for believing their content, as we have already admitted, then all of them do.

§6. Conclusion

Put simply, I have argued that it is rational to believe in what appears to be the case, even if you have not confirmed the reliability of those appearances, at least until you encounter reason to doubt their testimony. This principle applies not only to introspective awareness of your own sensations and ideas (as many early modern philosophers would have it) but also to perceptual experiences of the external world.

This conclusion is a game-changer. Descartes, coveting certainty, declared it irrational to believe in the external world unless one could prove its existence through philosophical argumentation. Hume showed us that such a task is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. But if Campbell and Reid are right, as I have argued they are, the failure to produce

⁵⁸ Reid, *Inquiry*, 71.

such an argument is no failure at all. For, from the moment it seems to us that there is a world external to our minds, we immediately gain *prima facie* justification for believing in such a world—no argument necessary. If our perceptual appearances proved to be inconsistent and frequently misleading, or if we discovered some other evidence which brings their reliability into question, then our *prima facie* justification would be defeated; but, on the contrary, the reliability of perception is continually confirmed as our perceptual appearances repeatedly corroborate and complement one another. Skepticism loses its teeth. The friendship between philosophy and common sense is restored.

Such monumental conclusions are not easily established, certainly not in a few pages. I do not claim to have settled the matter. What I have done is develop a formidable case for PC and the common sense reply to skepticism that it embodies—a case that, at the very least, should convince us to take the common sense reply seriously. I began this discussion with Campbell pronouncing a covenant between philosophy and common sense. I spent the first half of the chapter trying to explain just how audacious his proclamation was. I spent the second half arguing that, audacious though it may be, Campbell was right. “What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.”⁵⁹

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