How Seemings Resolve Bergmann’s Dilemma for Internalism

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*Abstract:* A prominent argument for internalism appeals to the requirement that justified beliefs not be accidentally true from the subject’s perspective. Bergmann’s dilemma remains the most troublesome obstacle to those who defend internalism in this way. In a word, what is required for a belief to be non-accidental? If we require the subject to justifiably believe that one is aware of something counting in its favor, then a vicious regress results and one is never justified in believing anything. But we cannot require less since beliefs can satisfy any lesser requirements and still be accidental. I argue here that phenomenal conservatism, which appeals to “seemings,” shows a way out of this dilemma. The key is that seemings, via their unique phenomenal character, make their content non-accidental for us simply by our being conscious of them and without our having to reflect on their significance. This is an important step in the larger project of re-envisioning traditional arguments for access internalism as supporting mentalism instead.

More and more internalists are abandoning access internalism in favor of mentalism. Access internalism limits the factors relevant to justification to those to which the subject enjoys a special kind of access—one that positions to subject to become aware of those factors and what they support upon reflection. Mentalism says only that justification supervenes on the subject’s mental states, leaving open whether those states are accessible to us in this special way. The transition from access internalism to mentalism is driven largely by increasing concerns about reflective awareness—concerns about how extensive reflective awareness of our own minds really is and whether it is feasible to make it so central to justification. Deemphasizing reflective awareness comes with its own costs, however. One of the most serious is that traditional motivations for internalism seemingly must be relinquished along with access internalism.

Michael Bergmann’s dilemma for internalism provides a perfect example (Bergmann 2006). A traditional argument for internalism—which Bergmann calls “the Subject’s Perspective Objection” (SPO)—appeals to the requirement that justified beliefs cannot be accidentally true from the subject’s perspective. But what is required for a belief to be non-accidental? If we require the subject to justifiably believe that one is aware of something counting in its favor, then a vicious regress results and one is never justified in believing anything. But we cannot require less since beliefs can satisfy any lesser requirements and still be accidental. The upshot is that the SPO can only be used to motivate a form of access internalism that is so strong it leads to skepticism.

Many mentalists seem content to write off the SPO and other traditional arguments for internalism and seek alternative motivations. I am not. While it is true that the original defenders of these arguments often articulated them with access internalist assumptions in mind, the central intuitions behind those arguments can often be recast into arguments for mentalism without losing their original appeal.[[1]](#footnote-1) The focus of this paper specifically will be the SPO and how it can be used to motivate a form of mentalism, contra Bergmann. The key is to be found in the principle of phenomenal conservatism and, most especially, in the nature of the experiences to which this principle appeals. I am not the first to argue that phenomenal conservatism points a way out of Bergmann’s dilemma (Gage 2016, Moretti and Piazza 2015, Rogers and Matheson 2011; c.f.Bergmann 2013), but none of these accounts quite puts the finger on how it is that phenomenal conservatism splits the horns.

§1 articulates Bergmann’s dilemma in more detail. §2 introduces seemings and the principle of phenomenal conservatism. §3 explains how phenomenal conservatism resolves the dilemma followed by objections and responses in §4.

§1. Bergmann’s Dilemma

Bergmann maintains that internalism’s defining feature is its endorsement of an awareness requirement (Bergmann 2006, 9−10 and 55−56):

*The Awareness Requirement*—S’s belief B is justified only if (i) there is something, X, that contributes to the justification of B—e.g. evidence for B or a truth-indicator for B or the satisfaction of some necessary condition of B’s justification—and (ii) S is aware (or potentially aware) of X. (ibid, 9)

Grant this. A central motivation for the awareness requirement is what Bergmann calls “the Subject’s Perspective Objection” or SPO (ibid, 11−12). The SPO asserts that unless the subject is aware of something that contributes to the justification of his belief (a *justifier*), then “From his subjective perspective it isan *accident* that the belief is true” (Bonjour 1985, 43, emphasis mine). But surely a belief that is accidentally true cannot be justified. Laurence BonJour is perhaps the most foremost advocate of the SPO and authored what has become its seminal case:

*Norman the Clairvoyant—*Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable. (BonJour 1985, 41)

Many share the intuition that Norman’s belief is not justified. What is lacking seems to be Norman’s awareness of a justifier—specifically, something (anything!) counting in favor of the truth of his belief. Though the belief is not accidentally true from a third-person point of view (the mechanisms forming his belief are in fact reliable), *Norman himself* has no indication of its truth. Justification therefore requires that Norman be aware (or at least potentially aware) of something that indicates the truth of his belief. This is the SPO.

To those who would use the SPO to motivate internalism, Bergmann poses the following dilemma. Must the subject have *strong awareness* of justifiers or only *weak awareness*? Strong awareness of a justifier involves the subject “*conceiving* of the justification-contributor that is the object of awareness as being in some way relevant to the justification or truth of the belief” (Bergmann 2006, 13). Weak awareness does not.

If the defenders of the SPO require strong awareness, then this leads to a vicious regress. How? Bergmann rightly notes that, “if the internalist has the intuition that merely having a justification-contributor isn’t enough—that the subject must also *believe* that she has a justification-contributor—it seems highly doubtful that the internalist will be impressed by the *mere belief* (no matter how justified or insane) that the thing of which she is aware is a justification-contributor” (ibid, 15). This means that for B1 to be justified for S, S must be aware of a justifier for B1 (X1) and form another justified belief B2 about the relevance of X1 to B1. But for B2 to be justified for S, S must be aware of a justifier for B2 (X2) and form another justified belief B3 about the relevance of X2 to B2. For every justified belief, then, there must be some higher-order justified belief about its justification, leading to an infinite regress. It makes no difference whether S must actually form this infinite series of beliefs, or merely have the potential to form it: either requirement is beyond S’s ability to satisfy given the increasing complexity of the propositional contents involved (ibid, 15−16).[[2]](#footnote-2) Hence, we cannot demand strong awareness of justifiers if anything is to be justified for us at all.

What if we require only weak awareness of justifiers? The problem, Bergmann maintains, is that awareness of a justifier in and of itself does nothing to rectify the accidental truth of a belief from the subject’s perspective (ibid, 20-21). Unless the subject conceives of that justifier as relevant to the truth of his belief, then, to the subject, the belief remains as accidental as ever. Essentially, the only way to ensure that justified beliefs are non-accidental is to require strong awareness of justifiers. But if this is so, then the SPO counts just as much against weaker forms of internalism as it does against externalism since neither view can accommodate its central intuition without lapsing into skepticism.

§2. Phenomenal Conservatism

Phenomenal conservatism has a storied lineage, with versions of it being endorsed by Aristotle, Carneades, Zeno of Citium, Descartes, and Locke (among others).[[3]](#footnote-3) It received the name “phenomenal conservatism,” however, from Michael Huemer, who is most responsible for its rise to prominence within contemporary epistemology (Huemer 2001). Some have thought that the principle of phenomenal conservatism holds the key to unraveling Bergmann’s dilemma.

The secret lies in the special kind of mental states to which the principle of phenomenal conservatism appeals—states known by the name of “seemings.” On the best and most popular account of seemings, seeming are defined as having propositional content and assertive force.[[4]](#footnote-4) Assertive force is not a specific propositional content but a specific way in which propositional content is presented. Just as the same linguistic representation can be uttered in either an assertive or interrogatory mode (“this drink is mine” vs. “this drink is mine?”), so the same propositional content can be entertained in an assertive or interrogatory manner. In the latter case, one wonders whether p; in the former, it seems that p. The phenomenology of a state with propositional content and assertive force is called “forcefulness” and is sometimes described as “the feel of truth” or “felt-veridicality.” This is because, when one is in a forceful state, it feels as though that state is presenting its content as true. I have argued that this amounts to feeling as though one is directly aware of the correspondence between reality and the propositional content of one’s thought.[[5]](#footnote-5)

If we imagine this forceful presentation as a form of testimony, then phenomenal conservatism says that we are to respond to seemings with credulity.[[6]](#footnote-6) They, and their testimony, are to be implicitly trusted. The trust is implicit in that it is the default. Trust is not given once we have independently established the likelihood of the testimony or the reliability of the testifier. Trust is to be given automatically. This trust is not absolute—if there are reasons for doubting the truth of that testimony or the reliability of the testifier, then trust should be relinquished—but it is incredulity that must be substantiated and not the other way around.

Different phenomenal conservatives will encapsulate this common insight within different principles. My preferred formulation is:

*PC*—If it seems to S that p is true, then (because of that and to that extent) S has foundational evidence for p.

Foundational evidence, like all evidence, indicates the truth of something. But unlike other kinds of evidence, foundational evidence indicates the truth of that for which it is evidence *in and of itself*. For instance, the belief that someone’s fingerprint was on the murder weapon is evidence that he committed the crime only if we have lots of other evidence about how fingerprints work. Thus, that belief cannot be foundational evidence for anyone’s guilt. To be foundational evidence for something, a mental state must *intrinsically* indicate the truth of that thing. This, according to PC, is what seemings do. They are intrinsic truth-indicators of their own propositional content.

How does this relate to justification? Well, foundational evidence is the sort of thing that provides for *immediate justification*—justification that does not depend on having evidence or justification for anything else. The stronger the foundational evidence, the more immediate justificatory support it provides. In principle, a seeming could provide strong enough foundational evidence to immediately justify belief absent defeaters, though not all may be strong enough to do this. For convenience, assume that the seemings we discuss below are the sort that, given PC, are strong enough to immediately justify belief sans defeaters.

§3. The Phenomenal Conservative Solution to Bergmann’s Dilemma

How does phenomenal conservatism purport to resolve Bergmann’s dilemma? To begin, phenomenal conservatives need not contest the first horn of the dilemma. Strong awareness, we can concede, is too strong of a requirement on justification. Instead, the basic strategy of the phenomenal conservative solution is the blunt the second horn of the dilemma. This can be done by showing how weak awareness of seemings, absent defeaters, is sufficient on its own to ensure that belief in their contents is non-accidental from the subject’s perspective. The SPO would then motivate a weak awareness requirement and, subsequently, a form of mentalism about justification.

Return to Bergmann’s argument against weak awareness. The idea seems to be this: if subject S is aware of a justifier X for belief B, this means little unless S is also *aware of the connection* between X and B.[[7]](#footnote-7) After all, there are many things S is aware of that are notrelevant to the truth of B.

How is S’s awareness of X any different from awareness of these irrelevancies? Objectively, X may count in favor of B in a way these other things don’t but, from S’s perspective, there is nothing to distinguish them *unless* S is (or can become) aware of X’s relevance to B’s truth. We can extract from this reasoning the following principle:

*The Relevance Requirement*—A justifier X of belief B mitigates the accidental truth of B for S only if S is (or can become) aware of X as being in some way relevant to the justification or truth of B.

It is at this point in the argument that Bergmann makes his central mistake. Bergmann assumes that awareness of X’s relevance must take the form of S’s *conceiving* of X as being relevant to B. This amounts to the assumption that the relevance requirement straightforwardly entails a strong awareness requirement—which we have already conceded is untenable. But couldn’t there be a different way of satisfying the relevance requirement?[[8]](#footnote-8)

This is where the phenomenal conservative will appeal to seemings. Seemings present their content as true and do so by virtue of their unique phenomenal character: their content *feels true*. Above, I identified this as the feeling that one is directly aware of the correspondence between a proposition and the reality it describes. The implication is that whenever the subject has a seeming that p, the truth of p is no longer an accident from that subject’s perspective so long as the subject also lacks defeaters. After all, the subject feels as though he is directly aware of p’s truth and has no reason to doubt this. While being in such conditions, it is impossible that the truth of the belief that p remains accidental for him. As regards the relevance requirement, our position must therefore be that whenever one is conscious of a seeming that p, then, in that very act of consciousness, *one is also aware of something as being relevant to the truth of p* and, thus, to the truth of belief in p. The awareness of its relevance to p is *built into* awareness of the seeming that p itself.

Two clarifications are in order. First, it is mere conscious awareness of a seeming that satisfies the relevance requirement. Conscious awareness is the sort of awareness one has of conscious states simply because they are conscious. Contrast this with reflective awareness in which one reflects on those conscious states on a second-order level. The claim is that simply *having* the seeming is enough to satisfy the relevance requirement. Second, having a seeming that p does not involve *conceiving of* (i.e., conceptually representing) anything as relevant to p’s truth. That would lead us right back to strong awareness and the first horn of Bergmann’s dilemma. Rather, when I say that a seeming involves “awareness of something as relevant to p’s truth,” the sort of awareness I have in mind is non-conceptual, something like direct acquaintance, where the fact at issue is laid bare to the conscious mind apart from mediation. Accordingly, it makes no sense to ask after the justification of this purported awareness given that it is not subject to norms of evaluation as beliefs are. There is no danger, then, in setting off a vicious regress akin to the one facing strong awareness.[[9]](#footnote-9)

My basic approach here is the one described by Rogers and Matheson (2011, 60−63). They write:

The central idea behind this strategy is that there are some internal states which are such that *merely being in* those states is enough to make it the case that it is no accident, from one’s own perspective, that the relevant belief is true; no higher-order *conceptualization of* such states as justifying the belief in question is required. (ibid, 63)

And they specifically identify “seemings” as internal states of precisely this sort. A significant deficiency in their response, however, is that they identify seemings as inclinations to believe rather than experiences with assertive force. They write:

Certain propositions *seem* true to us, where a given proposition’s seeming true to us consists in our being spontaneously inclined to form a belief in the proposition in response to being immediately acquainted with … some object of awareness. (ibid, 60)

They seem to think of these inclinations as involving some kind of phenomenology—they describe them as feeling “pushed” or “impelled” toward believing something (ibid, 61)—but they do not maintain that the content of seemings *feels true* in the manner described above. This severely weakens their case that merely possessing a seeming that p makes the truth of the belief that p non-accidental. For instance, Bergmann is right to complain: “They appear to take this implication to be obvious because they don’t defend it” (Bergmann 2013, 173). It *isn’t* obvious that being inclined to believe something is, in and of itself, sufficient to make the truth of that belief non-accidental. It’s not clear to me how merely feeling inclined to believe p counts in favor of p’s truth at all! On the other hand, it *does* seemobvious to me that feeling directly aware of p’s truth makes the truth of p non-accidental absent defeaters. At the very least, it’s a much more plausible position to hold.

In sum, the crucial principle in the phenomenal conservative solution to Bergmann’s dilemma is the following:

*The Sufficiency of Seemings—*Weak awareness of seemings is sufficient to ensure that the beliefs properly based on them are not accidentally true in the absence of defeaters.

Given the sufficiency of seemings, the SPO can be leveraged to argue for a weak awareness requirement (centered around seemings), thereby avoiding the excesses of strong awareness requirements while still motivating internalism.

§4. Objections to the Phenomenal Conservative Solution

Based on his response to a similar proposal, Bergmann may push back in something like the following manner: even if a seeming involves non-conceptual awareness of p’s truth, *the subject might still have no idea* *that he is aware of this*, in which case it is difficult to see how things are really improved from the subject’s perspective (Bergmann 2006, 30−31). To the contrary, the subject who enjoys a seeming that p might have “no idea” that he is aware of p’s truth only if we construe this to mean that the subject lacks any *belief* to this effect. But when construed so narrowly, the subject’s having “no idea” that he is aware of something’s truth is hardly the decisive knock the objection takes it to be. Once again, the objection relies on the undefended and implausible assumption that the only way for something to be relevant to p’s truth from the subject’s perspective is for the subject to *believe* that it is relevant. But plainly, things have improved from the subject’s perspective if, at one moment, he does not feel himself to be directly aware of p’s truth and, at the next moment, he does. The subject does not have to *reflectively acknowledge* the difference between being in those two conditions before it is so.

The objector may grant that *something* about the subject’s position with respect to p has improved simply by coming to feel aware of p’s truth but deny that this is what is at issue in the SPO. That is, the phenomenal conservative solution is plausible only if we depart from the specific sense of “accidentality” operative in discussions of the SPO. Let’s return to Norman the Clairvoyant. As BonJour explains it, the problem with Norman is that the status of his belief is “as far as [he] can tell no different from that of a stray hunch or arbitrary conviction” (BonJour and Sosa 2003, 32). Running with this account, Bergmann defines the SPO in the following way:

*The BonJour-Bergmann SPO—*If the subject holding a belief isn’t aware of what that belief has going for it, then she isn’t aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn’t a justified belief. (Bergmann 2006, 12)

On this account of the SPO, what is required for Norman’s belief to be non-accidental is that Norman be (potentially) aware of how the status of his belief differs from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction; and it is reasonable to assume that awareness of this specific sort requires Norman to (be able to) *conceive* of his first-order belief as having a particular sort of positive epistemic status. At least, this seems to be how both BonJour and Bergmann take it. But if this is correct, then removing the accidentality of belief requires strong awareness as Bergmann contends. And since seemings do not make a strong awareness requirement any more palatable, they do not provide any means for phenomenal conservatives to take advantage of the SPO.

The issue with this objection is that it treats BonJour as the final authority on the SPO and how it is interpreted. Cases like Norman’s elicit a shared intuition that *something* is wrong with his belief—something that people generally agree is captured well enough by saying that it is, from Norman’s perspective, “an accident” that his belief is true. It is, however, up for debate how exactly this accidentality should be understood and what it would take to rectify it. The BonJour-Bergmann account is *one* plausible interpretation, but it is not the only one. As Logan Gage writes, “Surely [Bergmann’s account] is not the only viable understanding of what it means for a belief to fail to be accidentally true from a subject’s perspective” (Gage 2016, 54).

As an alternative, phenomenal conservatives can argue that the problem with Norman’s belief is not that he fails to *conceive* of any justifier as being relevant to the truth of his belief but that he fails to be aware *in any form or fashion* of a justifier as being relevant to the truth of his belief. Indeed, he fails to be aware of any justifier *at all!* If this is the correct diagnosis, then seemings do provide a proper remedy. In other words, phenomenal conservatives can claim the SPO as support for internalism to the extent that the following account of the SPO is plausible:

*The PC-Friendly SPO—*If the subject holding a belief that p isn’t aware of any justifiers for p—specifically, indicators of p’s truth—or isn’t aware of them (conceptually or otherwise) *as* indicators of p’s truth, then there is nothing counting in favor of her belief’s truth from the subject’s point of view. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn’t a justified belief.

Many, I think, will find the above account a fair and compelling description of what is missing in cases like that of Norman.[[10]](#footnote-10)

A different way of challenging the phenomenal conservative solution is to use the case of Norman to attack the sufficiency of seemings directly. Imagine that instead of Norman’s belief being baseless, he bases that belief on a seeming:

*Norman the Phenomenal Clairvoyant—*Norman, under certain conditions which usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day Norman *it strongly seems to Norman that the President is in New York City, and he comes to believe it on this basis*, though he has no evidence either for or against this belief. In fact the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

Does the addition of the seeming change things? Is the truth of Norman’s belief no longer an accident from his perspective? Several epistemologists have thought that the answer is “no.” Ali Hasan remarks:

When we add to the Norman case that it *seems* to Norman that the president is in NY… and leave everything else in the case as is, this intuitively makes no difference to Norman’s epistemic perspective. (Hasan 2013, §4)

Jack Lyons agrees, writing:

Norman the clairvoyant is appeared to the-president-is-in-New- York-ly. … [D]o we—does the internalist—want to say that anyone thus appeared to is prima facie justified in believing the president is in New York? … This does not strike me as the sort of view an internalist would want to endorse; nor is it very plausible in its own right. (Lyons 2013, 26)

Andrew Moon adds that, at the very least, such cases “seem to be just as challenging to seeming internalism as they are to reliabilism” (Moon 2018, 253). Finally, and for good measure, John DePoe states: “Those who are convinced that Norman lacks the relevant perspective on the truth of his belief with clairvoyance only should see no improvement on his perspective once we add a seeming experience to Norman’s noetic structure” (DePoe 2012, 417).[[11]](#footnote-11) According to these philosophers, whatever is wrong with Norman’s belief isn’t something that is fixed simply by adding a seeming.

I argue that these assessments are mistaken. Adding a seeming makes all the difference to whether Norman’s belief is accidentally true, and this becomes plain once we get clear on certain salient features of the case.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We must first note that the sufficiency of seemings principle, despite the name, does not say that weak awareness of a seeming is sufficient to ensure that one’s belief is non-accidental. In addition to having weak awareness of a seeming, one must also (i) properly base one’s belief on that seeming and (ii) lack any defeaters for that belief. However, if Norman has anything like the sorts of background evidence that normal adults have, then he will have several reasons for doubting the truth of his belief and the reliability of the seeming on which it is based. First, normal adults have strong evidence against the existence of clairvoyance. More generally, normal adults reasonably take themselves to have an accurate inventory of their rational abilities. Thus, any seeming that does not stem from established rational faculties will, for that reason alone, come with an undermining defeater. Second, normal adults understand that the prior probability of the President being in New York is quite low since the President is usually in some other place like Washington DC.[[13]](#footnote-13) In short, any normal adult will have both undercutting and rebutting defeaters for a belief like that of Norman’s. Whether or not normal adults ever *think* about such things (they typically don’t) is beside the point—those defeaters are present within their total evidence even if they never draw them out.

Despite stipulations that Norman does not have any such defeaters, it is reasonable to assume that many those reading the description of Norman’s situation will nevertheless be thinking of him as having something approximating the basic understanding of the world shared by normal adults and so as having both rebutting and undermining defeaters of the sort just mentioned. It is easy to *say* that Norman “has no evidence either for or against this belief” and “possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power or for or against the thesis that he possesses it,” but it is actually quite hard to envision what Norman’s epistemic situation would have to be like for this to be true and I am skeptical that the typical reader will have followed it out to its logical extent. To begin, we would have to envision Norman as having no idea what the prior probability is of the President being in New York. This means he must know virtually nothing about the United States government or geography. In fact, he would have to lack even the most primitive understanding of the material world as containing more places where the President can be present that are without New York than within.[[14]](#footnote-14) Norman would also have to lack even an elementary understanding of which rational abilities humans typically enjoy and the extent of these abilities. Only then would he truly have no reason to be suspicious of his clairvoyant seeming. Essentially, we would have to envision Norman as being in an epistemic situation close to that of an infant or very young toddler. I suspect that many of those who intuit that Norman’s belief is still accidental despite the presence of his clairvoyant seeming are not thinking of Norman as a giant toddler but something more like an average adult who simply hasn’t thought a lot about clairvoyance. If that is the case, however, then their intuitions are not actually in conflict with the sufficiency of seemings.

In fact, once we get an accurate sense of Norman’s epistemic position, it is no longer clear that his belief remains accidentally true for him. After all, Norman enjoys a purported revelatory experience of the world which presents something to him as being the case, and he genuinely has *no reason at all* to doubt what this experience is telling him about the world. It does not seem odd to him that he can “just tell” that the President is in New York—no more than his ability to “just tell” that there are medium-sized physical objects in his immediate environment. Accordingly, my intuition is that Norman’s belief is *not* accidentally true anymore (see also Rogers and Matheson 2011, 61 and McCain and Moretti 2021, 72). How can Norman’s belief be, from his own perspective, accidentally true when he feels as though he is directly acquainted with its truth and believes it on precisely that basis?

In summary, the intuition that Norman’s belief is still accidental despite the presence of a clairvoyant seeming does not count against the sufficiency of seemings if (as we are wont to do) we are thinking about Norman as having an understanding of the world that approximates that of a normal adult. For if that is Norman’s epistemic situation, then he has defeaters for his belief and the no defeater condition will not have been met. On the other hand, if we succeed in envisioning Norman as lacking any and all defeaters by returning him to an infant-like state, then our intuitions begin to support the sufficiency of seemings. At the very least, our intuitions do not run strong enough in the other direction to mount an objection to the sufficiency of seemings.

The final objection to consider comes from Bergmann himself. Bergmann attacks the sufficiency of seemings (though not under that name) using the following sort of case:

[I]t is possible to hold that the belief that p for a silly reason and at the same time to be aware of the seeming that p, all the while (because of severe malfunction) not recognizing any connection between the seeming that p and the truth of the belief that p. In such a case, the believer will have a conscious seeming that p and yet it will be an accident from that person’s perspective that her belief that p is true. (Bergmann 2013, 171−172)

First off, we must clarify what Bergmann means when he says that the subject is “not recognizing any connection between the seeming that p and the truth of the belief that p.” I take him to mean that the subject does not *conceive of* any connection between her seeming and her belief. She does not form any higher-order belief about her seeming and its relevance to her first-order belief. If we do not understand it this way, then we should not admit the possibility of this scenario. As argued previously, awareness of a seeming necessarily involves recognizing the relevance of that state to the truth of one’s belief in a non-conceptual way. Thus, it would not be possible to be aware of a seeming that p and lack *any* recognition of its relevance to the belief that p. Let us assume, then, that what the subject lacks is simply the belief that her seeming is relevant.

So understood, Bergmann’s scenario poses no objection to the sufficiency of seemings. As Gage points out, the described scenario is one in which the subject’s belief is not properly based on her seeming; but the sufficiency of seemings principle only maintains that seemings render beliefs non-accidental *when those beliefs are properly based on them* (Gage 2016, 53−54).[[15]](#footnote-15) Phenomenal conservatives should therefore agree with Bergmann that the subject’s belief remains accidentally true in at least one important sense. No one claims otherwise. But then Bergmann’s scenario does not raise even a prima facie challenge to the sufficiency of seemings.

It could perhaps be made into a challenge if one adds the further assertion that belief cannot be properly based on seemings without conceiving of those seemings as relevant to the truth of those beliefs. Alas, this assumption is false. To be sure, if one is to properly base a belief on a seeming, it is perfectly reasonable to require *some sort of* *recognition* that the former is relevant to the latter. If the subject was completely unable to appreciate any connection between the seeming and her belief, then it is hard to see how proper basing could occur. However, there is no reason to think that this recognition must consist specifically in the *conception of* the seeming as relevant to the belief. To the contrary, there is much to recommend against such a requirement. For one, it would threaten to set off the same sort of regress that plagues strong awareness: for S to properly based belief B1 on a seeming M1, S would have to form the belief B2 that M1 is relevant to B1; and B2 could be properly based on M2 only if S has a belief B3 about the relevance of M2 to B3; etc. For another, many (if not most) instances of properly based beliefs taken from everyday life involve no higher-order beliefs of the proposed sort.[[16]](#footnote-16) It seems that my dog is on the floor and that perceptual seeming directly brings about my belief that he is in the room. There is no reflection on the fact that I have a perceptual seeming nor on its relevance to my belief. Nevertheless, my perceptual belief meets the conditions for proper basing if anything does.

§5. Conclusion

The phenomenal conservative solution to Bergmann’s dilemma is based on two key insights. The first is the realization that one can be directly aware of, in a way that isn’t mediated by concepts, the relevance of a justifier to the truth of a belief. The second is recognizing that seemings provide for precisely this sort of direct awareness. A seeming’s relevance to the truth of its content is *displayed* in the very act of being conscious of it. Putting these together, we see that seemings tend to make their content, and so also belief in their content, non-accidental simply by our being conscious of them. No reflection on these seemings is needed.

I’d like to end by resituating our conclusion within broader discussions of internalism. Phenomenal conservatism eliminates the importance of reflective awareness for immediate justification—merely being consciously aware of seemings is enough. As such, it fits naturally with a kind of internalism that defines “internal states” (the ones that are normatively relevant) as those of which we are conscious rather than those to which we have reflective access. What this paper argues is that phenomenal conservatism can enable transition toward this sort of mentalism without losing out on what we found alluring about internalism in the first place. We can respect the intuition that, to be justified, the subject must be aware of a truth-indicator for p, and even come to recognize it *as* a truth-indicator for p, by acknowledging that all this is carried out within the unique phenomenology of seemings. Internalists who incline toward mentalism instead of access internalism would thus find welcome aid, here and elsewhere, in adopting phenomenal conservatism.

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1. As another example, I argue in McAllister 2023 that the idea of justification being *up to us—*that it is always within our control to ensure that our beliefs our justified no matter what environment we find ourselves in—can be freed from access internalist assumptions and reclaimed as an argument for mentalism (of a very specific sort). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bergmann also considers the requirement that S be aware of the justifier in a way that is conceptual but non-doxastic. He concludes that the application of a concept must itself be justified in a way that sets off the same sort of vicious regress (Bergmann 2006, 17−18). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See McAllister 2024, 210−212, on historical and contemporary support for phenomenal conservatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See McAllister 2018 and, especially, 2024, Ch. 4, for a full description and defense of this view against alternatives. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Classical foundationalists like Richard Fumerton (1995) will speak of direct acquaintance with (i) a thought, (ii) a fact, and (iii) the correspondence between them—something which has come to be called “triple acquaintance.” My position is that forcefulness is the feeling associated with the satisfaction of this third condition, though I must add two qualifications. First, one can feel acquainted with the correspondence between one’s thought and the world in a general way without feeling directly aware of any specific truth-maker for that thought. Some seemings do involve this (those called “presentational seemings”), but not all do. Second, one can *feel as though* one is acquainted with the correspondence between one’s thought and the world without *actually being* acquainted with it, and it is the former that should be identified with forcefulness. Hence, seemings are something like the non-factive versions of triple acquaintance states. A nice result is that this puts phenomenal conservatives in a position to answer Bergmann’s dilemma in a way similar to classical foundationalists (see especially DePoe 2012). Thus, those sympathetic to those proposed classical foundationalist solutions should find the phenomenal conservative solution defended herein similarly plausible. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See McAllister 2024, Ch. 2, for a more complete account of phenomenal conservatism. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. To be more precise, all that is required is that S *feels as though* S is aware of the connection between X and B. Whether S is in the factive state of awareness or some non-factive state that is phenomenally indistinguishable from awareness makes no difference since it is solely the subject’s perspective that matters and, from that first-person point of view, whether S is in the factive or non-factive state is inconsequential. S can’t tell the difference. For the sake of convenience, however, I will generally use the terminology of “S’s being aware of the relevance of X to B” rather than “S feeling as though S is aware of the relevance of X,” though it is really the latter that I mean. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I’m not the first to point out this mistake, of course. See, for instance, DePoe 2012, 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. It is legitimate to ask whether one’s felt awareness of p’s truth is to be trusted, but the central idea behind PC is that it is to be credited even absent verification of its veridicality. Regress only looms if we deny this, but to deny it is simply to deny PC itself. Hence, this does not cast any doubt on whether PC offers the resources to resolve Bergmann’s dilemma for those who find PC independently plausible. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Let us also not get overly attached to the name “SPO”. If someone insists that this term refers to BonJour’s particular way of leveraging the case of Norman, then I’ll happily relinquish it. The fact would still remain that there is a different and equally legitimate way of using the case of Norman within an argument for internalism that does not fall prey to the concerns raised by Bergmann. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also Reiland 2015, 524–525. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I have argued for a similar position at greater length in McAllister forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Consistent with the approach in McAllister 2024, 56-57, I am treating low priors as a kind of defeater. If someone objects to this, then we can accommodate it by adding another condition to the sufficiency of seemings principle that the priors not be too low. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Otherwise, the principle of indifference would lead him to assign a prior probability to the President’s being in New York of less than .5 (much less than .5 if the number of places where the President might be without New York far exceeds the number of places where the President might be within it). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Consider the distinction between propositional and doxastic justification. All that is required to have propositional justification for believing p is evidence which indicates the truth of p to a sufficient degree. We signal the possession of propositional justification by saying “S has justification *for believing* that p.” In contrast, to have doxastic justificationone must not only have propositional justification for believing p but also rationally baseone’s belief on the evidence that propositionally justifies it. We signal the possession of doxastic justification by saying “S has a *justified belief* that p.” Phenomenal conservatives only take beliefs to be doxastically justified by seemings when those beliefs are properly based on seemings that propositionally justify their contents. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See the description of belief formation in McAllister 2023, §2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)