

Reflective awareness, phenomenal conservatism, and phenomenal explanationism

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Abstract

According to Phenomenal Conservatism (PC), if a subject S has an appearance that P, in the absence of defeaters, S has justification for believing P by virtue of her appearance's inherent justifying power. McCain and Moretti (2021) have argued that PC is affected by the problem of reflective awareness: if S becomes reflectively aware of an appearance, the appearance loses its inherent justifying power. This limits the explanatory power of PC and reduces its anti-sceptical bite. This paper provides a novel argument to the same conclusion and contends that it does not apply to Phenomenal Explanationism, the appearance-based account of justification alternative to PC defended by McCain and Moretti (2021).

In McCain and Moretti (2021, Ch. 2.2) we argue that if a subject S becomes reflectively aware of an appearance—in the sense that S believes that she has that appearance as a result of some type of reflective acquaintance with the appearance itself—the appearance loses its justifying power. We call this the ‘problem of reflective awareness’.¹ More specifically, we argue that the problem of reflective awareness emerges insofar as the justifying power of an appearance is thought to be inherent in the appearance itself, as a direct product of its special phenomenological character, often called ‘forcefulness’ or ‘phenomenal force’. The idea that appearances have their justificatory power inherently is customarily accepted by advocates of *phenomenal conservatism* (PC), an influential theory of non-inferential or immediate justification.² Our argument in support of the problem of reflective awareness consists of a series of possible cases in which it is intuitive that an appearance loses its justifying power when S is aware of the appearance, accompanied by a general explanation of why this loss happens. We claim that if the appearance retained its justifying power in these circumstances, S would be able to illegitimately bootstrap. More precisely, S would be able to generate justification for believing that her appearance is accurate from the appearance itself and her reflective awareness of it, which seems impossible.

We are still happy with the cases illustrating the problem of reflective awareness described in McCain and Moretti (2021) but dissatisfied by the accompanying explanation. The reason being that that explanation basically consists of resolving a dilemma by rejecting one specific horn. Our present concern is that phenomenal conservatives could insist on rejecting the other horn, allowing S's appearance to retain its inherent justifying power in the face of S's reflective awareness. More explicitly, phenomenal conservatives might bite the

¹ Our arguments heavily draw on Moretti (2018 and 2020, Ch. 5.1).

² See in particular Huemer (2001 and 2007). Pryor (2000) introduced a very similar view called ‘dogmatism’.

bullet and insist that certain forms of bootstrapping must be allowed to let appearances justify beliefs.³ They might then deny that the problem of reflective awareness has been explained by McCain and Moretti (2021), or even that there is a problem of reflective awareness at all.⁴ To block this line of response, we would need an explanation of why the justifying power of an appearance vanishes once the subject is reflectively aware of it that does not depend on a dilemma such as the one described.⁵ In the following we supply this explanation. Further, we argue that while the problem of reflective awareness, thus framed, is a serious one for PC, it does not afflict the appearance-based account of justification, *phenomenal explanationism* (PE), defended in McCain and Moretti (2021). Hence, those who accept that appearances are a source of immediate justification would be better served by accepting PE rather than PC.

According to phenomenal conservatism,

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

Three remarks are in order: first, PC is meant to account for *internalist* justification.⁶ Second, the justification accounted for by PC is *propositional* rather than *doxastic*. In other words, PC is supposed to provide an account of when *S* has justification for believing *p* (whether or not *S* actually believes that *p*), not an account of when *S*'s belief that *p* is justified.⁷ Third, the 'thereby' in PC indicates that *S*'s justification for *p* only depends on *S*'s appearance that *p* (referred to by the expression 'seems') and the absence of defeaters. This type of justification is *immediate* because it does not rest on *S*'s justification for believing anything else (cf. Pryor, 2000).

Appearances are *experiential* states endowed with propositional content, a cognitive phenomenology—their forcefulness or phenomenal force—and, very often, a rich phenomenology, such as sensory phenomenology. Furthermore, appearances have a mind-to-world direction of fit (they are satisfied when their content corresponds to the world). In McCain and Moretti (2021) we identify different types of appearances and suggest that those that seem to present the truthmaker of their content to the subject—called 'presentational appearances'—in the absence of defeaters, provide the subject with knowledge-level justification (cf. p. 93). To have an example of a presentational appearance, think of a clear and firm visual experience as if a dog is in the trail before you. To avoid useless complications, let us focus on presentational appearances.

Our strategy to explain the problem of reflective awareness is this: we show that the phenomenal conservative's best case for PC—one that invokes the phenomenal force of appearances as the sole basis of their justifying power—when coupled with the assumption that the subject is reflectively aware of her appearance, produces the conclusion that the appearance's justifying power is undermined because its phenomenal force is undercut.

³ See for instance Pryor (2004) and Markie (2005). See also Cohen's (2005) reply.

⁴ We are indebted to Matthias Steup for this way of framing the phenomenal conservative's potential response.

⁵ Assuming, as the supporter of PC typically does, that this justifying power is based solely on the phenomenal force of the appearance.

⁶ Supporters of PC leave it unspecified whether internalism should be understood as a form of accessibilism or only mentalism. Mentalism holds that propositional justification is solely a matter of a subject's mental states. In other words, according to mentalism, if two subjects are alike mentally, then they must be alike justificationaly. The various forms of accessibilism add to mentalism that the subject must have certain kinds of access to her mental states in order to have justification. We think of *phenomenal explanationism* (which we introduce below) as a form of mentalism.

⁷ In light of this, our focus will be propositional justification.

Setting aside Huemer's controversial *self-defeat argument*,⁸ the best defence of PC has been provided by McGrath in the following passage:

Suppose it seems to you that p and you have no defeaters (i.e., no good evidence for $\sim p$ and no good evidence that this seeming is unreliable as to whether p). Which doxastic attitude would it be reasonable for you to have toward p ? Disbelieve p , without good evidence for $\sim p$? Withhold judgment on p ? It *does* seem to you that p , and you lack evidence for $\sim p$ and for the unreliability of the seeming with respect to p . The only reasonable attitude to take is belief. (McGrath 2013, p. 226)

To appreciate the force of McGrath's considerations, recall that the phenomenal conservative, as an internalist, tends to see a very tight connection between the attitudes that are epistemically justified for a subject and those that are epistemically rational from her standpoint. McGrath intends to show that when justification and rationality are tightly linked in this way, PC appears true or at least very plausible.

As said, appearances have forcefulness, described by Pryor (2004, p. 357) as 'the feeling of seeming to ascertain that a given proposition is true', and by Tolhurst (1998, pp. 298-299) as 'the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are'. Importantly, this 'feel of truth' is not conceived of by phenomenal conservatives as a mental state that *accompanies* the presentation of a content to the mind—for example, as a sort of psychological pressure to accept that content. Such psychological pressure may exist when there is forcefulness, but is not essential to it.⁹ Instead, forcefulness seems to be understood by phenomenal conservatives as a subjective mode of representing a content, the mode proper to appearances. Suppose for example you have a perceptual appearance of a red apple. Saying that this appearance has forcefulness is saying that the red apple is represented by your experience as *actually present* (cf. Kriegel, 2023). Forcefulness is not shared by other mental states—such as imagining, hoping, or desiring—which, unlike appearance, do not have the ability to justify their contents. Suppose for example you *imagine* a red apple. Again, you will mentally visualise a red apple, so you will have the experience of a red apple. This experience, however, will not represent the apple as present but, rather, as something merely possible (cf. Yablo, 1993) or absent (cf. Sartre, 1940/2004, p. 183).

⁸ This is a reconstruction of Huemer's (2007) argument:

- (1) All our beliefs (with a few irrelevant exceptions) are directly or indirectly based on our appearances.
- (2) If a belief that p is based on something that does not constitute a source of propositional justification for p , then the belief is doxastically unjustified.
- Therefore, from (1) and (2):
- (3) If no appearance confers justification on the proposition that constitutes its content, then no belief is doxastically justified.
- Furthermore:
- (4) If PC is false, then no appearance confers justification on the proposition that constitutes its content.
- Therefore, from (3) and (4):
- (C) If PC is false, then no belief is doxastically justified, including any belief that PC is false.

This argument has been targeted by several objections (see Moretti 2015 for an overview). Here we make one simple point to suggest that Huemer's argument is unsound. McCain and Moretti (2021) argue that *phenomenal explanationism* is preferable to PC and show that it can account for appearance-based justification at least as well as PC. Therefore, even if PC is false, it is still true that appearances can confer justification on the proposition that constitutes its content. So, premise (4) is false.

⁹ See for example Berghofer (2020).

In the above quotation, McGrath draws our attention to the fact that it appears *self-evident* that if one has an appearance that *p* and no contrary evidence, one should thereby believe that *p*. In other words, McGrath stresses that it seems self-evident that the forcefulness of one's appearance that *p*, in the absence of defeaters, can all by itself provide one with immediate justification for believing that *p*.¹⁰ If McGrath is right, forcefulness has a normative character, since it is intrinsically *prima facie* justifying.

It is important to note that in the above passage, McGrath does not presuppose that you (the subject) are reflectively aware of your appearance that *p*. In other words, he does not assume that you have a belief that you have an appearance that *p* produced by some type of reflective acquaintance with your appearance. The situation that McGrath appears to have in mind is simply one where you are seemingly presented with the fact that *p* without any reflective awareness of a mental intermediary. Appearances are *transparent*—one does not need to realise that one has an appearance that *p* when one has an appearance that *p*. McGrath is simply emphasising that if you are seemingly presented with a fact that *p* and you do not possess other relevant information, you should believe that *p*. What else should you do? This may look straightforward—it seems that we have reached the bottom of all explanations and can go no further than this.

Why do we hold that, in the above quotation, McGrath does not presuppose that you are reflectively aware of your appearance that *p*? First, because McGrath does not *say* that you are reflectively aware of your appearance that *p*. Second, and more importantly, because if it is assumed that you are reflectively aware of your appearance that *p*, it is no longer self-evident that you should thereby believe that *p*.

Consider a slight modification of McGrath's scenario: you have a visual appearance that *p* but are also reflectively aware of having it. This means that your appearance is in a sense no longer transparent to you. Now you are aware that you have a *subjective* state that makes you feel as if you are presented with the fact that *p*. You still visualise the fact that *p*, but now you see that this visualisation takes place through a mental representation, which is not the fact that *p* itself. An illustration may help clarify the situation. Consider a case where you apparently see that (*p*) a dog is in the trail before you, and you are reflectively aware of your apparently seeing this. Your awareness of your visual appearance comes with an understanding that what is actually given to your consciousness is a *representation* of a dog in the trail. Since you understand that representations can be inaccurate or deceptive, in these

¹⁰ Tucker (2013) objects that McGrath's considerations do not suffice to show that you have epistemic justification for believing that *p* rather than a mere *rational commitment* to believing that *p*, where rational commitment is a sort of coherence between a subject's propositional attitudes that does not coincide with epistemic justification. Suppose you believe that *q* without justification. Then, as a matter of coherence, you are committed to believing the disjunction *q* or *r* (if you think about it). However, in this case, you do not have *epistemic justification* for believing this disjunction (assuming that you don't have epistemic justification for believing *r*). Tucker suggests that, in the same way, your appearance that *p* could give you only a rational commitment to believing *p*, rather than epistemic justification. We do not find this criticism convincing because it is unclear that appearances can rationally commit one to beliefs (in a sense different from epistemically justifying beliefs). Rational commitment is typically defined as a *hypothetical* relation between *doxastic* attitudes, and not between *non-doxastic* attitudes (e.g. appearances) and doxastic attitudes (e.g. beliefs). Here is, for instance, how Pryor understands rational commitment:

Take a belief the subject happens to have, e.g., his belief in P. Consider what would be the epistemic effects of his having (decisive) justification for that belief. ... If one of the effects is that the subject has decisive justification to believe Q, then his belief in P counts as rationally committing him to the belief in Q—regardless of whether he really does have any justification to believe P. (2004, p. 364).

Since appearances cannot be justified in the first instance, it seems that the notion of rational commitment does not apply to them.

circumstances you no longer have ‘the feeling of seeming to ascertain that a given proposition is true’. You still have the visual image of a dog in the trail, yet you no longer experience the dog and the trail as present but, rather, as things that may or may not be there. The forcefulness of your appearance has gone.¹¹ Thus, it is no longer self-evident that you should believe that p . Insisting that you should believe that p on the basis of your appearance alone would be question-begging in this case. In order to believe that p , now you need a reason to take your representation that p to *correspond* to the fact that p . It may still be true that you should believe that p , but now this cannot depend solely on an intrinsic property of the appearance. In this case, some other condition must be satisfied—for instance, your possessing independent evidence that all relevant error hypotheses incompatible with p —e.g. hallucinatory hypotheses—are false or improbable, or p being the best potential explanation of why you have that appearance. In these circumstances your justification for believing that p (assuming that you are still justified) can no longer rest solely on your appearance that p . Reflective awareness makes it salient that when we have appearances, we are only given representations of facts. And once this has been brought to the fore, we need reasons to trust those representations.

Note that our explanation of the problem of reflective awareness does not consist of resolving a dilemma by rejecting one horn and accepting the other. We are not arguing that if S is reflectively aware of her appearance that p , the appearance cannot retain its justifying power because S would otherwise be able to illegitimately bootstrap. We are not contending that if one is presented with the incompatible claims that, on the one hand, S ’s appearance that p retains its inherent justifying power and, on the other, that S cannot bootstrap, one needs to accept the latter claim and reject the former. Our point is simply that if S becomes reflectively aware of her appearance that p , this appearance is no longer forceful, so the appearance cannot justify S ’s believing that p without the satisfaction of some additional condition.

All this strongly suggests that that insofar as PC can be vindicated, reflective awareness must count as a defeater of appearance-based justification: as S becomes reflectively aware of an appearance that p , the appearance loses its forcefulness, and thus the power to independently justify S ’s belief that p . This explains the problem of reflective awareness.¹²

¹¹ It is important to note that forcefulness does not appear to depend on *sensory* data or impressions. Forcefulness is in fact characterised by *cognitive* qualia—i.e., qualities present in certain types of mental processes, such as thinking and understanding—but not necessarily non-cognitive qualia, such as colours, shapes, sounds, and flavours. Cf. McCain and Moretti (2021, p. 61). Hence, the forcefulness of an experience can vanish upon the subject’s re-conceptualisation of it, although the experience’s rich phenomenology remains the same.

¹² Huemer (2001, pp. 103-104) makes a case in support of PC that appeals to an instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality, inspired by Foley (1993), according to which, it is epistemically rational for S to do X , if doing X would appear to S to be an effective way of satisfying the central epistemic goals of believing what is true and not believing what is false. Suppose it seems to S that p and S has no reason to doubt p or her appearance’s reliability. From S ’s standpoint, believing p would appear to be an effective means of pursuing the central epistemic goals. So, S ’s believing p would be epistemically rational and justified. A possible drawback of this argument—which does not afflict McGrath’s—is that it is controversial that epistemic rationality is a form of instrumental rationality. At any rate, note that if S becomes reflectively aware of her appearance that p , it does not seem to be true that believing p would appear to be an effective means of pursuing the central epistemic goals. Once S realises that her appearance is a representation of the (possible) fact that p , she will need evidence to take her representation to correspond to the fact that p . If S proceeds to believe p without this additional support, she would be privileging believing what is true over avoiding false beliefs. Few even contend that believing the truth and avoiding false beliefs are equally valuable as this would mean that believing that p is justified whenever the balance of evidence even very slightly favours p over $\sim p$. (Feldman and Conee, 2018, have this view.) Most would likely think that avoiding false beliefs should be privileged over believing truths. After all, putting things probabilistically, most would agree that it is not enough that $\text{Pr}(p) > .5$ in order for

The problem of reflective awareness limits the explanatory power of PC and reduces its antisceptical bite. Reflective individuals may have justification for believing many things, but this justification cannot rest on the inherent justifying power of their appearances, when these individuals reflect on them. Furthermore, individuals who engage with sceptical arguments that question the reliability of their own appearances cannot successfully appeal to PC to respond to these arguments. For these arguments make the individuals reflectively aware of their appearances, which undercuts their justifying power.¹³

Phenomenal explanationism (PE), as defended in McCain and Moretti (2021), unlike PC does not hold that appearances have *inherent* justifying power (e.g. justifying power depending solely on their characteristic phenomenal force). Rather, according to PE, an appearance that *p* provides S with some degree of immediate justification for believing *p* just in case the truth of *p* is a non-redundant part of the best *potential* explanation of S's appearance that *p* (whether or not S is or can be aware of this), once S's total evidence has been factored in. The best *potential* explanation is the explanation that has the best complement of explanatory virtues (simplicity, explanatory power, etc.). Following Lipton (2004), we might put the point this way: the best *potential* explanation of a body of evidence is the explanation that would, if true, provide the most understanding of the evidence in question. In McCain and Moretti (2021) we claim that if the appearance that *p* is presentational, it provides S with knowledge-level justification. The reason for this is that the best potential explanation of an appearance that seemingly presents S with a truth-maker for *p* includes the claim that *p* is true, in the absence of contrary evidence. PE seems to be immune to the problem of reflective awareness. Suppose S has an appearance that *p*, and it is the case that *p* is a non-redundant part of the best potential explanation of S's appearance that *p*, once S's total evidence has been included. Imagine that then, S becomes reflectively aware of her appearance that *p*. Although S acquires new evidence—the belief that she has an appearance that *p*—this new evidence is irrelevant. The claim that *p* is true remains a non-redundant part of the potential best explanation of S's appearance that *p*.¹⁴ Thus, there is no reason to think that S's justification for believing *p* is undermined.

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believing that *p* to be justified. Rather, it is common to think that in order for believing that *p* to be justified $\Pr(p) > x$, where *x* is significantly higher than .5. Hence, it seems plausible that S cannot justifiedly believe that *p* in this case without some reasons for thinking that her appearance is accurate.

¹³ Cf. Moretti (2018 and 2020, Ch. 5.1) and McCain and Moretti (2021, Ch. 7.1)

¹⁴ Unless S has some very specific background information, which is not the case most of the time.

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