**Abstract**: We regularly appeal to claims of the form *it seems that p* in defense of a claim *p*. When we do so, we typically take *it seems that p* to be a reason for thinking that *p* but also a reason that “gets at” a relevant body of facts and its support for *p*. Other things being equal, we should want to vindicate our ordinary beliefs on this matter. We should want to vindicate the claim that facts about things seeming certain ways can be reasons to think that things are that way while at the same time being somehow derivative reasons, that is, reasons only because they “get at” support from a certain body of facts. However, on the dominant view of how things seem—subjectivism—it is hard to see how to secure this result. Subjectivism takes how things seem to be a matter of how things do or would seem to some relevant subject. What we need is a defensible, nonsubjectivist account of how things seem. I propose and defend an account according to which, roughly, it seems that *p* iff the body of facts in the relevant perspective supports that *p*.

Published in K. McCain, S. Stapleford and M. Steup (eds) *Seemings: New Arguments, New Angles* (Routledge 2023), pp. 38-53.

3

Nonsubjectivism About How Things Seem

Matthew McGrath

3.1. Introduction

On a phone call with my friend, I listen to complaints and hear irritation in his voice about small matters. “You’re in a bad mood today, Seth,” I say. Challenged, I reflect that I could mention things he’s said, the way he said them, etc. Worrying that I couldn’t articulate a strong case in this way, instead I say, “you seem to be in a bad mood.” In saying this, I think of myself as giving a reason to think he’s in a bad mood, one that somehow “gets at” the “real” reasons, viz. those hard-to-articulate but observable facts about what he said, his tone of voice, etc.—facts that are not about me, let alone my mind, but about him—facts that others could have observed if they were listening in and knew my friend well enough to pick up on them.

Cases like this give us:

***Datum***: in a range of familiar cases, we cite *it seems/seemed that p* in defense of p, and in doing so, we see ourselves as “getting at” support for p provided by a relevant body of “worldly” facts—that is, facts not about us, let alone our minds, but about the objects and events relevant to *p*.

Other things being equal, in giving an account of *its seeming that p*, we should want to vindicate this datum. We should want our account to accommodate and explain how in such cases *it seems that p*, if true, very often is a *reason* to think that p, at least pro tanto and defeasibly. We should also want to explain how in citing *it seems that p* in such cases, we are somehow “getting at” worldly facts that support p.

Let’s now remind ourselves of the standard view of how things seem. The standard view, rarely articulated but often presupposed, is what I’ll call **simple subjectivism**. On this view, its seeming that p is a matter of its seeming to relevant subject(s) that p. This view might seem unavoidable. How could it simply *seem* that p? Mustn’t there be someone *to whom* it seems that p? Its seeming that p is like x’s being to the left. It needs saturation: it seems *to S* that p; x is to the left of *y*. The simple subjectivist grants that we often talk about how things seem without explicitly mentioning a subject. This is a convenient shorthand. When we assertively utter, “it seems that p,” what we say is true iff it seems to the relevant subject(s) that p. As a default, the relevant subject is the speaker, but only as a default. John Hawthorne and Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, for instance, claim that a defendant’s remark in a courtroom, “although it seems that I am guilty, I am innocent,” asserts something about how things seem to the jury or audience, not to the speaker.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Now consider *Datum.* According to simple subjectivism, when I claim to Seth, “you seem to be in a bad mood,” I’m citing a fact about myself, viz that it seemed to me that this is so—that I have a “seeming” to this effect. [[2]](#endnote-2) Is this fact a reason to think he’s in a bad mood? Unsupplemented with any claim about the reliability of my seemings, we might be skeptical. But even if it’s a reason, does it “get at” support from worldly facts? My seeming is caused by worldly facts, but this makes the relevant sort of “getting at” quite indirect. When I say, “you seem to be in a bad mood,” I feel I’m saying something *about* those facts and not about myself.

I don’t intend these considerations to come close to refuting simple subjectivism. But they should make us wonder whether there are defensible alternatives to it, ones that vindicate *Datum* more straightforwardly*.*

Simple subjectivism is a species of subjectivism. The core idea of subjectivism is that *its seeming to S that p* (for appropriate subject S) is explanatorily prior to *its seeming that p*. The simple subjectivist insists that when it seems that p there must be a subject to serve as a “witness” for its so seeming—an instance of its seeming that p to a subject S. The **sophisticated subjectivist**, by contrast, gives an account of its seeming that p in terms of counterfactual or dispositional claims about things seeming certain ways to subjects under certain conditions. This allows for unwitnessed cases of its seeming that p. Sophisticated subjectivism might seem to perform better on *Datum.* In citing its seeming that p we wouldn’t be citing a reason that concerns ourselves in the first instance but something closer to the worldly facts.

We should also entertain the possibility of giving up subjectivism. This is the option I explore in this chapter. On the **nonsubjectivist** view I present, it seems that p iff (roughly) the relevant body of facts supports p. This view, in essence, takes *Datum* and builds an account around it. We can see how, in cases like the phone call or the detective, *it seems that p* “gets at” support from a relevant body of worldly facts on this sort of nonsubjectivist view. The truth of *it seems that p* in these cases trivially requires that such support obtains. And in cases in which the body of facts is germane to whether p, it’s plausible that the fact that this body of facts supports p can itself lend support to p. Thus, this sort of nonsubjectivism will vindicate *Datum.*

I say this view is *non*subjectivist. It does not explain *it seems that p* in terms of actual or possible facts of the form *it seems to S that p*. Still, it retains elements that might not qualify it as “objectivist,” including—but, as we’ll see, not limited to—the notion of a perspective, to which I appeal in explaining the *relevant* body of facts.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Many epistemologists take seemings to comprise one of the fundamental sources of epistemic justification for our beliefs.[[4]](#endnote-4) I do not argue directly against such views here. However, I suspect that these views lose some of their appeal once we are clearer on the nature of the reasons we cite when we cite *it seems that p* in defense of *p*. For, if I am right, we are not citing facts about our “seemings.”

Here is the plan for the chapter. In Section 3.1, I argue against subjectivism, both simple and sophisticated, without drawing directly on *Datum*. In Sections 3.2 and 3.3, I develop and defend a nonsubjectivist view.

3.2. Against Subjectivism

My case against subjectivism proceeds by way of an argument against **subjectivist semantics** about talking about how things seem. If this semantics is mistaken, then barring a special philosophical use of “seems”, subjectivism itself is mistaken, too. And I think we can put aside a special philosophical use here. In cases such as the phone call case, “seems” is not used in a special philosophical way.

The semantical accounts will concern bare “seem” sentences in English, that is, sentences of the form “it seems that p,” as well as ones that result from raising the grammatical subject of the embedded sentence such as “NN seems to be F” and “NN seems F,” and tensed variants.[[5]](#endnote-5) I employ contextualist semantics in formulating these accounts to provide flexibility about the relevant subject(s), as mentioned above.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Let’s start with **simple subjectivist semantics**, the semantical theory that pairs naturally with simple subjectivism. According to this theory, an utterance of a bare “seems” sentence is true iff it seems to the contextually relevant subject(s) that the target proposition is true. Setting aside any context-sensitivity associated with “p”, a sentence of the form “it seems that p” will be true in a context iff it seems that p to the relevant subject(s) at the time of the context.

I’ll raise problems for this theory, before turning to sophisticated subjectivist semantics in Section 1.4.

3.2.1. Disputes

You and a friend are together at a barbecue. You both pay attention to the host’s manner, his conversation, his expressions, etc., as the barbeque proceeds. As the two of you are leaving the barbeque, you say to your friend, “the host seemed arrogant.” Your friend disagrees: “No, he didn’t. He seemed reserved, not arrogant.” Each of you might cite certain features of his manner to back up your claim or counter the other’s. At a certain point, if the dispute isn’t resolved, one or both of you might simply agree to disagree. At this point, you might retreat to explicitly autobiographical claims: “well, he seemed arrogant *to me*.” And this is a retreat, not a restatement.

Or suppose Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are at an early stage of their investigation. Still, they might argue over whether it seems, at this point in their investigation, that Moriarty is the killer. Neither says outright that he is the killer, but Watson says, “as of now, it seems that Moriarty is the killer,” while Holmes disagrees, “no, it doesn’t.” Each cites evidence in their joint possession to support their case.

Such disputes are not about whether the relevant proposition seemed to be the case *to* one or both conversational parties or to anyone else. If they were, they would be decided once it became clear how things seem or seemed to the relevant people. But this doesn’t decide them. Nor are they disagreements merely over whether the target proposition is true. You and your friend are disputing how the host seemed, not, or at least not directly, whether he is arrogant. [[7]](#endnote-7) The existence of such disputes is evidence against simple subjectivist semantics.

3.2.2. Error

Even in the barbeque case, you and your friend each *think* the other is in error about how the host seemed. One of you really could be in error; perhaps your friend is a poor judge of the signs of arrogance and just is wrong about whether the host seemed arrogant. But let’s consider an even clearer case of error.

At the house of an acquaintance, Celia, I’m looking over a large record collection (Celia is otherwise occupied). Seeing a lot of recordings of Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff, and Stravinsky but no Bach, Mozart, Haydn, and none from any other 18th-century composers, I betray my ignorance of classical music by saying:

(C) It seems that Celia likes 18th-century classical music.

What I say is false. The only records in the room are of compositions by late 19th-century and later composers. It does seem *to me* that Celia likes 18th-century music. We can further suppose that the people with me are just as ignorant of classical music as I am. To them, too, it seems that Cecilia likes 18th-century classical music. Add, lastly, that this is how it seems to Celia herself. She knows that she does like this music, and she may be reflecting on her fondness of it at the same time as we are having our conversation. (It turns out that she keeps her record collection of 18th-century composers in a different part of the house.) The problem with simple subjectivist semantics is that it will incorrectly classify my statement C as true.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Such errors are found in non-perceptual cases as well. Dr. Watson may be wrong in his claim, “Moriarty seems to be the killer.” Suppose he focuses on one element of the case that points to Moriarty, neglecting several other elements known to him and Holmes that together undermine the force of the Moriarty-pointing elements. Watson’s statement is false. It would be false even if it seemed to Holmes, too, in a moment of clouded judgment, that Moriarty was the killer.

3.3.3. Its Seeming That p Without Its Seeming to Anyone That p

Finally, we can test simple subjectivist semantics by determining if there are true statements about how things seemed at times when there were no subjects to whom they seemed that way.

A prosecutor shows security camera video footage from a break-in. The person in the video didn’t act in ways one would expect him to act if he knew he was on film. The prosecutor then says, “the whole time he was in the shop the defendant seemed unaware of the security camera.” This statement is in the past tense. The relevant past time is not the time of the showing of the video but the time of the break-in. At that time, there was no one to whom it seemed that he was unaware of the camera, and yet the *seems* statement is true.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Think, second, of how natural it is to refer to how things seem when narrating true stories about past events.

Before The Cretaceous—Paleogene extinction event, dinosaurs had dominated the earth for millions of years. They had no serious rivals and were well adapted to their environments. It *seemed that dinosaurs were well-suited to dominate the earth for many years to come*. And then the asteroid hit!

It would not be a good objection to the highlighted statement that it must be wrong because no one had such a seeming at the time.

There are further incorrect predictions. Consider this dialogue:

A: I wonder how the accused, John, seemed the morning before the crime. Did he seem calm? agitated? It would be good to find out.

B: No one encountered him. So, he couldn’t have seemed any way at all.

B’s remark is absurd but is correct under simple subjectivist semantics, at least assuming, as is plausible, that John himself is not a relevant “S.”

3.3.4. Sophisticated Subjectivism

A natural fallback position is sophisticated subjectivism. This pairs with **sophisticated subjectivist semantics,** according to which bare *seem* statements are true at a time iff, at that time, it would seem to the right sorts of subjects in the right circumstances that p. What counts as the right sort of subject might vary with context, but often it would be a “normal” or “generic” subject. On this semantics, we can arguably find a point of disagreement in the barbeque case and an error in the record collection case, and we do not have to deny the possibility of things seeming ways at a time when they didn’t seem those ways to anyone at that time.

Consider again:

(D) It seemed that dinosaurs were well-suited to continue to dominate the earth for many years to come.

When uttered as in the earlier speech. It is not sufficient for the truth of D that it would *now* seem to normal people, upon having the relevant information, that dinosaurs would have continued to dominate the earth. D is in the past tense. What we would need is for it to be true *back then* that the relevant sorts of subjects with the relevant sorts of information would have been disposed to have the relevant seeming. This in itself is peculiar. (Could there have been subjects with the relevant concepts back then at all?))

Other statements create even more serious problems. Imagine I’m telling an episode of the history of an English village:

The Saxon hoard under the Medieval town church was completely unknown for centuries. It was very well hidden indeed. *It seemed that no one would ever have any idea of its existence*. But then, randomly, some local teens decided to build an underground hiding place beneath the church and made the discovery.

How could the underlined statement—call it “F”—be true on the sophisticated semantics? We would need to consider whether, at the relevant time(s), an appropriate subject given the relevant information, would be disposed to have it seem to them that *no one would ever have any idea of the existence of the Saxon hoard under the kirk*. But could a rational subject have such a self-falsifying seeming? In general, although it may have seemed that *no one would ever have any idea of the fact that p*, it can’t be true that a rational subject would be disposed to have a seeming to this effect*.* Thus, sophisticated subjectivism gets the truth-conditions for D and F wrong.[[10]](#endnote-10)

There are ways to attenuate subjectivism. Perhaps what counts is not whether the right sort of subject would have a seeming that p, but whether they would have a spectator-like seeming: *in that situation, p*. Such a view could potentially handle many of the cases we’ve considered, including the dinosaur and Saxon hoard cases—although it would still have to put subjects back at the time of the dinosaurs, etc. Perhaps this can be made to work. Rather than pursuing this line further, I want to try a different tack.

3.3. A Nonsubjectivist Account

Go back to the phone call case. Suppose my statement, “you seem to be in a bad mood” is true. Let’s consider how a sophisticated subjectivist would try to secure this result. This will point us toward a form of nonsubjectivism. What sort of information will the relevant generic subject have? It will have to be information about what Seth said and his manner on the phone call. This information corresponds to a *perspective* occupied by me during the phone call. We can imagine Seth’s partner at their office has also truly said at around the same time, “Seth’s in a good mood today,” thinking about his smile and the cheerful emails he’s sent her today. For his partner’s statement to be true, we’d need the generic subject to have a different body of information, corresponding to a different perspective. The sophisticated subjectivist needs to appeal to bodies of information in perspectives. She then adds claims about which seemings generic subjects with such information would have.

I propose to appeal directly to the information—to the set of facts in the perspective—and to do without generic subjects and their seemings, in favor of what those facts support. I think there is something phenomenologically attractive about going this way. When I think “it seems that p,” I feel I am thinking about what the relevant facts support, rather than how things would seem to some generic subject, let alone a pure spectator looking down on our world.

To start, consider a simple nonsubjectivist semantics, according to which “it seems that p,” is true in context C iff the facts in the C-relevant perspective support p. This account accommodates many cases we have considered. But it could be usefully elaborated a bit further. Do the facts about which recordings Celia has in her music library support the idea that she likes 19th- and 20th-century Russian classical music? Yes, but arguably only given certain background information, for example, about a person’s music collections generally reflecting their musical tastes.

This gives us:

“It seems that p” is true in context C iff the body of facts in the C-relevant perspective, together with the C-relevant body of background information, supports p sufficiently.[[11]](#endnote-11)

3.4. More Details

In this section, I fill in some further details in response to some natural questions:

• What is a perspective? What is it to occupy a perspective?

• Why must the “information” in a perspective consist of *facts* rather than *propositions*, which could be true or false? Must the background information also consist only of facts?

• Can the facts in the relevant perspective ever be about the psychological states of the speaker?

• How does context determine truth-conditionally relevant perspectives?

3.4.1. Perspectives and Occupation

We can model a perspective as a pair of a body of facts and a time. A subject occupies a perspective either by having knowledge of or by having the right sort of access (e.g., perceptual) to the information at the time. In the barbeque case, the perspective includes, in its informational component, facts that were observable for guests at the event. Its time is the time of the event. You and your friend occupy it insofar as this information at the time is perceptually accessible to you. In the case of Holmes and Watson discussing their murder case, the relevant perspective consists of a body of focal information about the crime. They occupy the perspective, not by virtue of being in a position to access it perceptually, but by knowing it. And we can have intermediary cases in which a subject occupies a perspective in part by knowing some of the contained information and in part by being positioned to access other parts of it.

This notion of perspective is an abstraction from the notion of a subject’s epistemic position. A subject at a time might know certain facts and have perceptual or other forms of access to other facts. We can then take these facts—or a *subset* of them—together with time as a perspective.

Some perspectives are not only unoccupied but also unoccupiable. Consider a perspective whose informational component includes the fact that no thinking subjects exist (at the time). A thinking subject couldn’t occupy this perspective. But the facts in the perspective can still support certain propositions.[[12]](#endnote-12)

3.4.2. Facts vs. Propositions

Suppose Roger is sure of the truth of the (false) claim that the US 2020 election was rigged for Biden; this is something he takes himself to know. Suppose he expresses this belief aloud and adds, “thus, it seems that Biden was not legitimately elected.” What Roger says is false. It’s false even if his interlocutors add his claim about a “rigged” election to the common ground of the conversation. If false propositions could enter into the information of a perspective, the content of my false belief would enter here, in which case Roger’s *seems* statement would be true, which it isn’t. Again, if any old false but believed “information” could enter into the background information, it would enter in for our original Celia case, and so “it seems Celia likes 18th-century classical music” would be true, which it isn’t.

Still, there are cases that I find difficult to accommodate without allowing for some falsehoods to enter background information. Consider Simpson’s paradox. To use Titelbaum’s (2021) illustration of it, suppose I’m told player A’s success rate is higher than player B’s for 2-point basketball shots as well as for 3-point shots. I might then say, “so, it seems that A’s overall success rate has to be higher, too.” We could secure the truth of my statement if we allowed as part of the background the false assumption that A and B took 2- and 3-point shots at the same rate. If we don’t allow this, it is harder to see how it could be true. One option, then, is to allow for certain false assumptions to figure in the background “information.”

The crucial thing, I think, is to capture the intuitive idea that *it seems that p* is true iff the relevant facts provide *support for p.* The support can be defeasible. When I claim, “it seems A and B must have the same overall success rate,” I do so because I think there is this support. The hard question is whether there really is such support or not. Obviously, if there is, it is defeated. But is it there at all? I am not sure. But we can say this: if there is such support in this case, then we may need to allow certain reasonable-by-default but false assumptions into the background. This doesn’t mean opening the floodgates. The relevant facts in the Celia case do not support the claim that she likes 18th-century classical music.

I am tempted to say the following: A probability pro could reply to me, “no, it doesn’t seem A has to have the same overall success rate as B,” and then explain how this requires an assumption that is not stated as true in the example. His claim is plausibly *true.* In response to this, I might retreat instead to “it seemed to me.” That is certainly true.

However, I will leave this issue open. How we resolve it, I think, hinges on how we understand a body of facts supporting a proposition. If there can be support in some cases when that support depends on a false assumption, then we should let false assumptions of the relevant sorts into the background. If, as I’m inclined to think, there can’t be such support, we should insist on the background consisting only of truths.[[13]](#endnote-13) (The next section will be relevant to these issues as well.)

3.4.3. Perspectives and Mental States

Can facts about mental states be elements of a perspective? Yes. For instance, when we say we seem to remember that p, the relevant facts are presumably psychological, such as a feeling as if one remembers or a memory image. The same goes for “I seem to see.” However, often psychological elements are not included in the contextually relevant perspective. When I look at the darkening sky and hear the thunder, my statement “it seems it’s going to rain” is in virtue of facts about the observable signs of rain, not in virtue of facts about my experience or psychological states. And that is why it is correct to add counterfactuals denying dependence on one’s psychological phenomena “and so even if I wasn’t here it would still seem it’s going to rain.” The same goes for the barbecue case and the recollection collection case.

Nevertheless, it is possible to introduce psychological elements into a perspective. In thinking about radical skeptical hypotheses, I might reason like this: “I have visual experiences, auditory experiences of being before a fire. I have experiences as of heat. So, it seems a fire is in front of me.” Here, the final statement is plausibly true and remains true even if we imagine a brain in a vat doing the reasoning. My preceding remarks help determine the relevant perspective as one that includes my psychology. One can do this for the Simpson’s paradox case, too: “I have a strong intuition that A and B must have the same overall success rate. It seems it must be true.”

3.4.4. Contextual Determination of Relevant Perspectives

How is the truth-conditionally relevant perspective determined in context? The usual sorts of answers are these: salience (i.e., by which perspectives are salient); relevance (by which perspectives are such that their support of p would matter for the purposes of the conversation); accommodation (i.e., by which perspectives make the speaker’s remark come out true); and normative factors (i.e., by which perspective the speaker or relevant subject should or is expected to occupy).

Two comments here. First, these factors can pull in different directions. Suppose a member of a Congressional committee neglected to acquaint himself with the information in the files that members were charged to examine. At the hearing, he relies on only a small subset of this information and says, “it seems there was no wrongdoing by the President.” Suppose the total information in the files overall clearly supports the claim that there *was* wrongdoing by the president. Then relevance and normative factors outweigh accommodation: what the Congressman says is false. The relevant perspective includes all the information in the files, even though the speaker doesn’t possess that information. He doesn’t occupy the perspective, but he should.

Second, again, the contextually relevant perspective needn’t include the speaker’s total perspective, nor does it even need to include the total perspective determined by the common ground of the conversation.[[14]](#endnote-14) This is what makes possible cases in which one truly says, “although it seems that p, we know that not-p.” It is an interesting question under what conditions such statements can be true. As [Brogaard (2018](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_52_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3ABrogaard%2C%20Berit%20%282018%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CPhenomenal%20Dogmatism%2C%20Seeming%20Evidentialism%20and%20Inferential%20Justification%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20K.%20McCain%20%28ed.%29%20Believing%20in%20Accord%20with%20the%20Evidence%3A%20New%20Essays%20on%20Evidentialism.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A55%20PM)) puts it, some seemings “go away” in the presence of counterevidence, while others don’t. To put it in terms of my account, while it may be true to say “it seems that Jane is not at the party,” after being told by partygoers of this, it is extremely hard to say it truly again when Jane appears right before us. By contrast, we can truly say, “it seems the stick is bent,” despite it being common knowledge that it is straight. A question I won’t try to answer here is whether, simply by appealing to the four factors above—salience, relevance, accommodation, and normativity—we can explain why some perspectives can become contextually relevant easily while others cannot at all or cannot at least without great effort.[[15]](#endnote-15)

3.5. Objections

I have space to discuss only a few objections.

3.5.1. Too Weak?

One objection is that my account gives the wrong result in cases of complicated but cogent arguments. In such a case, if a person hasn’t grasped any argument for p from that information, the person might say, “it doesn’t seem that p.” The objection is that this can be true, even though the information in the perspective does support p.

I am unsure of the force of the objection. Suppose Dr. Watson says after such an investigation, “it doesn’t seem Moriarty did it.” Suppose the connection between the information and Moriarty’s guilt is so complicated that only a brilliant detective like Holmes can piece it together. Still, if Holmes is in the conversation, he can reply, “no, Watson, it does seem Moriarty did it,” and then proceed to outline the reasoning. What Holmes says can be true.

However, if we do want to amend my account to cope with “hard-to-discern” support relations, we can do so as follows: We can say that “it seems that p” is true in C iff facts in the C-relevant perspective, relative to the C-relevant background, provide strong enough support that is also *suitably accessible*. What counts as suitably accessible might itself vary with context.

3.5.2. Too Strong?

We have already discussed the most pressing objection that my account is too strong (see the discussion of Simpson’s paradox in Section 3.2). But there is a second sort of objection worth discussing as well. Don’t we regularly say, “it seems that p” off-the-cuff, with little serious thought? If we were thinking about what the facts of the relevant perspective support, presumably we wouldn’t be so cavalier.

We do occasionally give quick assent to “it seems that p.” Sometimes we’re just wrong in what we say. We can be corrected, “no, it doesn’t seem that way,” followed by an explanation of how the relevant information doesn’t support p. However, it matters a great deal which body of information is the relevant one. Sometimes the relevant body is very limited. And it can sometimes be a simple matter to determine whether a small sliver of information provides support. As the body of information grows, off-the-cuff answers may become less reasonable.

3.5.3. Sloppiness over “to S”

Often, we are happy to exchange “seems to me” for “seems.” If there were such a big difference between these, as there is in my view, why would we be so cavalier about it?

There are big differences in meaning between “I think that p” and “p,” and yet in conversation we’re often sloppy about which we utter. The difference in meaning nevertheless shows up in several ways. If one says “p,” one sticks one’s neck out: if p is false, the statement was incorrect. We can argue about whether p is the case, but not (or not as easily) about whether you believe it. The same goes for “it seems that p” at least as compared to “it seems to me that p.” The differences in meaning are real, even if in many conversations we don’t in fact bother with the differences.

Another point is relevant as well. We often want to focus on the full perspective that we ourselves occupy (perhaps this is the default). We take ourselves to know certain information, and we’ll inquire about whether that information supports p. In this sort of case, the key difference between “it seems to me that p” and “it seems that p” is that the latter endorses the existence of a supportive relation, whereas the former hedges. If there is no support, “it seems that p” is false, but “it seems to me that p” could still be true.[[16]](#endnote-16)

3.6. Conclusion

If what I have argued here is correct, facts about how things seem are not “subjectivist.” They are not, and are not explained by, facts about how things do or would seem to actual or possible subjects. Rather, they concern what the facts of the relevant perspective sufficiently support. How this affects epistemology is a question I leave for another day. But I suspect it does affect it. In many cases in which it is hard to find reasons for our beliefs, we have a reason in “that’s how it seems.” This reason isn’t about our minds in the typical case, but about the world. The reason is that some portion of the world *backs up* what we believe.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Notes

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1. This example is given in an early draft of their (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A word about terminology: in discussing how things seem to a subject, I will use the jargon of “seemings.” It seems to S that p iff S has a “seeming” with the content that p. I take these seemings to be mental states, but I make no assumptions about exactly what sort they are, for example, beliefs, inclinations to believe, sui generic presentational states. I also don’t assume that all such seemings are of the same sort. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I draw on [Conee (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_55_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3AConee%2C%20Earl%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CSeeming%20Evidence%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20C.%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%2052%E2%80%9370.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A56%20PM)) and especially Hawthorne and Lasonen-Aarnio (2021), though without the subjectivism implicit in their work. See also [Cappelen’s (2012](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_54_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28ManLink%29%3ACappelen%2C%20Herman%20%282012%29.%20Philosophy%20without%20Intuitions%20%28Oxford%3A%20Oxford%20University%20Press%29.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%206%3A23%3A17%20PM), ch. 2) and [Tooley’s (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_64_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3ATooley%2C%20Michael%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CPhenomenal%20Conservatism%20and%20the%20Principle%20of%20Credulity%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%20306%E2%80%93327.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A35%3A01%20PM)). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Philosophers who see seemings, or some subset of seemings, as a source of justification include [Bergmann (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_50_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3ABergmann%2C%20Michael%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CExternalist%20justification%20and%20the%20role%20of%20seemings%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20Philosophical%20Studies%20166%20%281%29%3A%20163%E2%80%93184.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A55%20PM)), [Brogaard (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_53_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28ManLink%29%3ABrogaard%2C%20Berit%20%28%20_____________%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CA%20Sensible%20Dogmatism%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20C.%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%20270%E2%80%93292.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%206%3A23%3A29%20PM)), [Chudnoff (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_57_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3AChudnoff%2C%20Elijah%20%282013%29.%20Intuition.%20Oxford%3A%20Oxford%20University%20Press.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A58%20PM)), [Cullison (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_58_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3ACullison%2C%20Andrew%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CSeemings%20and%20Semantics%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20C.%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%2033%E2%80%9351.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A59%20PM)), Huemer (2001), [Pryor (2000](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_63_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3APryor%2C%20James%20%282000%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CThe%20Skeptic%20and%20the%20Dogmatist%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20No%C3%BBs%2034%284%29%3A%20517%E2%80%93549%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A35%3A00%20PM)), and [Tucker (2010](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_66_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28ManLink%29%3ATucker%2C%20Christopher%20%28%20______________%20%282010%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CWhy%20Open-Minded%20People%20Should%20Endorse%20Dogmatism%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20Philosophical%20Perspectives%2024%20%281%29%3A%20529%E2%80%93545.%202010.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%206%3A23%3A44%20PM)). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. One clarification here. In some cases, “to S” is elided. Suppose I ask you, “how did Jack seem to you?” You answer, “he seemed happy.” This is presumably a case of elision. The sentence uttered includes “to me.” What is uttered, then, is not a bare “seem” sentence. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Some philosophers of language might accept a close relative of subjectivist semantics, but for assertoric content rather than semantic content. I leave such technical matters to the side here while noting that, as far as I can see, my main arguments will apply equally well against such views. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In some cases, we’re not trying to get at how things are at all, only at how they seem. If you’re trying out for a certain acting role, such as the role of an arrogant person, the question of whether you really are arrogant won’t arise at all—only whether you seemed arrogant during your tryout. Two casting agents might disagree over whether you seemed arrogant in your tryout. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For readability, I will often allow myself below to speak loosely of “statements”about how things seem, using this term in some cases for bare “seem” sentences in context and in others for the propositions expressed by such sentences in context. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Vary the case a bit. Imagine there was a security officer remotely monitoring the footage in real time. The officer truly said at the time of the break-in, “he seems unaware of the camera.” When the prosecutor later says, “he seemed unaware of the camera,” she says the same thing; they both state a fact about how things seemed. So far, so good for the simple subjectivist; after all, there was a contemporaneous *seeming* at the time (the security officer’s seeming). But what the prosecutor says in *this* example is presumably the same as what the prosecutor says in the original example, in which a contemporaneous seeming is lacking. One could insist that what the prosecutor says in the original example is false, but it would be exceedingly odd for someone to protest against the prosecutor, even in making a picky point, “that isn’t right, because he didn’t seem that way to anyone at the time of the break-in.”

Think, also, about how the detectives might talk about what can be learned from the video as they’re about ready to view it for the first time. “Was the thief aware of the camera? We should be able to tell if he seemed aware of it or not. Let’s roll the tape!” What is to be found out is naturally presumed to be something already true, not something that will become true as it’s found out. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a yet more fanciful version of the problem, imagine a time at which it was highly unlikely, given what was happening then, that life would ever arise in the universe. At that time, it seemed life would never arise. And since seemings, as mental states, require life, it was also true that it seemed then that there would never be a case of its seeming to anyone that something was the case. Presumably, we do not want to explain the truth-conditions for *it seemed at the time that seemings would never be enjoyed* in terms of dispositions to enjoy seemings to the effect that no one would ever have any seemings. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A few words on the relationship between this account and that of [Conee (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_55_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3AConee%2C%20Earl%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CSeeming%20Evidence%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20C.%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%2052%E2%80%9370.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A56%20PM)) and [Hawthorne and Lasonen-Aarnio (2021](15032-6591-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22LStERROR_75%22%20%5Co%20%22Goto%20error%20report)). [Conee (2013](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_55_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28AutoLink%29%3AConee%2C%20Earl%20%282013%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CSeeming%20Evidence%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20in%20C.%20Tucker%20%282013%29%3A%2052%E2%80%9370.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%205%3A34%3A56%20PM)) considers only what is “conveyed” by claims about how things seem to a subject. But I follow him in appealing to the notion of support from evidence. My account owes much to Hawthorne’s and Lasonen-Aarnio’s. I follow them (in their early draft) in distinguishing bare seemings statements from those that specify a subject of the seeming. I follow them as well in claiming that which body of information is relevant for the truth of a claim about how things seem varies with context. However, as I read them, they take the truth-conditions to be subjectivist. They write:

An alternative idea is that “seems” claims say roughly that a proposition has positive epistemic status from a certain subject’s perspective (perhaps simpliciter, perhaps relative to a salient subset of the subject’s evidence), while falling short of ascribing outright belief. (Here it is useful to compare seems-constructions to various other so-called hedge constructions such as “I have the impression that,” “It strikes me that,” and so on.)

(2021, 2n6)

For them, it is still the relevant subject’s evidence that counts, rather than a body of facts from a (possibly unoccupied) perspective. In my view, the issue of “approximating” outright belief is not relevant to bare *seems* statements, though it is relevant to *seems to S* statements: the latter are of a kind with ascriptions of outright belief but fall short of it, whereas the former ascribe no mental state at all. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. As those in the consciousness debate will know, some philosophers employ the notion of a perspective or point of view in arguing for theses about the subjectivity of experience. But as [John Biro (2006](15032-6591-FullBook.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22Ref_51_FILE150326591PI003%22%20%5Co%20%22%28ManLink%29%3ABiro%2C%20John%20%282006%29.%20%5C%E2%80%9CA%20Point%20of%20View%20on%20Points%20of%20View%2C%5C%E2%80%9D%20Philosophical%20Psychology%2019%281%29%3A%203%E2%80%9312.%20UserName%20-%20DateTime%3A%20user1-8/28/2023%206%3A24%3A08%20PM)) has pointed out, there is little in such notions by themselves to back this up. The clearest notion of a point of view, according to Biro, is that of a location of a sort that is occupiable by a subject, where the location may be straightforwardly spatial but may also be an element in a different sort of “space”, such as “attitudinal space.” Applied to attitudinal space—or, for my purposes, “epistemic space”—the notion of a point of view or perspective is content-based rather than owner-based. It is individuated by reference to contents rather than by occupants. Indeed, as Biro points out, using the content-based notion, we can truly say that there are unoccupied points of view. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This may reduce the force of *it seems that p* as a reason to think *p* in some situations, but it is consistent with there being significant force in many situations, especially when the relevant background information is known to be true. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. [Hawthorne and Lasonen-Aarnio (2021](15032-6591-Ref%20Mismatch%20Report.docx%22%20%5Cl%20%22LStERROR_74%22%20%5Co%20%22Goto%20error%20report)) make this point. See Note 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. I have proposed a full-on nonsubjectivism about how things seem, relying on a nonsubjectivist semantics for bare “seems” statements. It would be interesting to explore a weaker position about how things seem based on the weaker semantical view that bare “seems” statements *sometimes* have nonsubjectivist truth-conditions. Such a view is worth exploring, but I lack the space to do so here. Drawing epistemological conclusions from such a view might be a more subtle affair. Thanks to Kevin McCain for his comments on this issue. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. In future work, I hope to give an account of the relationship between how things seem and how things seem to a subject. The idea I plan to pursue is that the truth-conditions for “it seems to S that p” *subjectivize* the truth-conditions of “it seems that p.” The relevant perspectives and the background are composed not of genuine information but of putative information; the support condition becomes S’s *finding* the putative information to support p, relative to the putative background. Here, *finding x to be F* doesn’t entail that *x is F*. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Warm thanks go to Jeremy Fantl, Allan Hazlett, Dave Liebesman, Maria Lasonen-Aarnio, Kevin McCain, Ernest Sosa, Scott Stapleford, and Chris Willard-Kyle for their written comments, as well as to members of the epistemology groups at Rutgers and at Washington University in St. Louis and an audience at the 2022 *Seemings* conference at the University of St. Thomas in Fredricton, New Brunswick. Special thanks to John Hawthorne for many vigorous discussions of these issues in the fall of 2018. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)