

Are Seemings Trustworthy? A Reply to Piazza

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To address Moretti's (2013, "Mizrahi's Argument against Phenomenal Conservatism," *The Reasoner* 7(12):137-139) objection against my original argument (Mizrahi, 2013, "Against Phenomenal Conservatism," *The Reasoner* 7(10):117-118), I (2014, "Against Phenomenal Conservatism: A Reply to Moretti," *The Reasoner* 8(3):26) revised my *reductio* against Phenomenal Conservatism as follows:

1. (PC) If it seems to S that p , then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p . [Assumption for *reductio*]
2. It seems to S_1 that p and it seems to S_2 that $\neg p$, independently of each other.
3. \therefore In the absence of defeaters, S_1 has some degree of justification for believing p and S_2 has some degree of justification for believing $\neg p$. [From (1) & (2)]
4. If a Method of Fixing Belief (MFB) produces distinct pieces of evidence of the same type that provide some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs, then it's untrustworthy.
5. \therefore Appealing to seemings (MFB_s) produces distinct pieces of evidence (a seeming that p and a seeming that $\neg p$) of the same type (seemings) that provide some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs. [From (3)]
6. \therefore MFB_s is untrustworthy. [From (4) & (5)]

Piazza (2014, "Mizrahi and Moretti on Seemings and Trustworthiness," *The Reasoner* 8(6):64-65) finds (4) problematic and offers these alternative readings:

(4.1) A trustworthy MFB should not supply the same subject S —or two different subjects S_1 and S_2 , when they are similar in all relevant respects—under circumstances of approximately the same type with prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs.

(4.2) A trustworthy MFB, independently of the features of their epistemic situations, should not supply S_1 with prima facie justification for believing p , and S_2 with prima facie justification for believing $\neg p$.

For Piazza (2014: 64), replacing (4) with (4.2) makes my *reductio* unsound, since (4.2) is false when applied to an MFB like sensory perception, whereas replacing (4) with (4.1) makes my *reductio* invalid, since (1) and (2) "do not entail that MFB_s generates evidence supplying prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs for the same subject under circumstances of approximately the same sort." To salvage my *reductio*, Piazza argues (2014: 65), one must "show that MFB_s possibly supplies, if not one and the same subject, at least two distinct but relevantly similar subjects, acting under circumstances of approximately the same sort, with justification for believing contradictory propositions." Piazza (2014: 65) claims that the "prospects of [showing that] seem dim."

I think that my *reductio* can be salvaged. First, I think that Piazza is too quick to dismiss the possibility that a subject can have prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs under circumstances of approximately the same sort. Consider ambiguous images like Figure 1.

Figure 1. Hill's "My Wife and My Mother-in-Law" (1915), *Library of Congress*, <http://loc.gov/pictures/resource/ds.00175/>.



Looking at Figure 1, it seems that this woman is old or that she is young. By (PC), the seeming that this woman is old is prima facie evidence that she's old, whereas the seeming that this woman is young is prima facie evidence that she's young. Granted, the contents of these seemings (<this woman is old> and <this woman is young>) are incompatible, not flat-out contradictory. But the fact that one can have incompatible seemings, I submit, shows that it's not impossible for seemings to provide for a subject prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs.

Second, I think it can be shown that seemings can provide "prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs for two distinct but relevantly similar subjects acting under circumstances of approximately the same sort" (Piazza 2014: 65). In fact, I think that's precisely what my examples show. They are examples of users of an MFB who get contradictory results when they use it even though they are "relevantly similar" insofar as they are equally competent users of that MFB. For instance, Jackson and Dennett are both accomplished professional philosophers, similarly trained, well-versed in the same body of literature, and equally skilled at pumping intuitions. And yet, when they consider the Mary thought-experiment, they have contradictory seemings. "To Jackson, it seems that Mary learns something new, whereas to Dennett it seems that she doesn't" (Mizrahi 2013: 117). [N.B. Since seemings are intellectual appearances, Jackson's belief that Mary learns something new and Dennett's belief that she doesn't are based

on what intellectually appears to them when they consider the Mary thought-experiment. In that respect, even if they later support their beliefs with other claims, it's still the case that things intellectually appear a certain way to them upon considering the Mary thought-experiment and that these intellectual appearances provide the initial basis for their beliefs about Mary. The question is whether or not such intellectual appearances are trustworthy.] Although Jackson and Dennett are "relevantly similar subjects" insofar as they are equally competent at intuition-pumping, they form contradictory beliefs by using MFB_s. Accordingly:

- (a) If two equally competent users of an MFB form contradictory beliefs when they use that MFB, then that MFB is untrustworthy.
- (b) Equally competent professional philosophers form contradictory beliefs when they use MFB_s.
- ∴ (c) MFB_s is untrustworthy.

If this argument is sound, then, pace Piazza (2014: 65), seemings can provide prima facie justification for contradictory beliefs even for "relevantly similar subjects."

Piazza (2014: 65) would probably reject (b), since to him "it seems prima facie plausible that S_1 and S_2 , to the extent to which their seemings conflict, *are not* relevantly similar and *have* acted under epistemic circumstances that are *not, not even approximately*, of the same sort." So he would move by *modus tollens* from (a) to the conclusion that the users are not equally competent. That is:

- (a) If two equally competent users of an MFB form contradictory beliefs when they use that MFB, then that MFB is untrustworthy.
- (c*) MFB_s is trustworthy.
- ∴ (b*) It's not the case that the users are equally competent.

Note, however, that there are two problems with this move. First, it's rather *ad hoc*, particularly of the "no true Scotsman" variety. That is, for any two users of MFB_s that form contradictory beliefs, they could simply be dismissed as being unequally competent. Second, this move amounts to simply asserting that MFB_s is trustworthy, i.e., (c*). But the question is precisely whether or not MFB_s is trustworthy.