Phenomenal Conservatism, Justification, and Self-defeat

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that Phenomenal Conservatism (PC) is not superior to alternative theories of basic propositional justification insofar as those theories that reject PC are self-defeating. I show that self-defeat arguments similar to Michael Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC can be constructed for other theories of basic propositional justification as well. If this is correct, then there is nothing special about PC in that respect. In other words, if self-defeat arguments can be advanced in support of alternatives to PC, then Huemer's Self-Defeat argument doesn't uniquely motivate PC.

1. Introduction

Michael Huemer defends the principle he calls "Phenomenal Conservatism." According to this principle:

> (PC)   If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least
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> some degree of justification for believing that p.[1]

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[1] Michael Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30-55. See also Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Michael Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and the internalist intuition," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006): 147-158. Michael Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe," *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 1-13. Others who endorse a principle like PC include: Andrew Cullison, "What are seemings?" *Ratio* 23 (2010): 26-274 and Chris Tucker, "Why open-minded people should

In support of PC, Huemer puts forth an argument he calls "The Self-Defeat Argument" for PC, according to which "any theory [of basic propositional justification] that rejects PC is self-defeating, in the sense that if such a theory is true, it is (doxastically) unjustified."[2]

In his reply to DePoe,[3] Huemer himself reconstructs the Self-Defeat Argument for PC as follows:

(1) All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon appearances.

(2) A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.[4]

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endorse dogmatism," *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (2010): 529-545. See also Chris Tucker, "Seemings and justification: an introduction," in C. Tucker (ed.), *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1-30. For other versions of dogmatism, see James Pryor, "The skeptic and the dogmatist," *Noûs* 34 (2000): 517-549 and Michael Pace, "Foundationally justified perceptual beliefs and the problem of the speckled hen," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2010): 401-441. Pace considers a version of dogmatism according to which "If S has an experience as if p then S has foundational (defeasible) justification for believing that p" (Pace, "Foundationally justified perceptual beliefs and the problem of the speckled hen," 402). Pace argues that the problem of the speckled hen is a problem for this principle. Accordingly, PC can be thought of as a more general version of dogmatism insofar as it is supposed to cover not only perceptual appearances (or sensory seemings) but also intuitive appearances (or intellectual seemings). See, e.g., Elijah Chudnoff, "The nature of intuitive justification," *Philosophical Studies* 153 (2011): 313-333. On intellectual seemings, see Berit Brogaard, "Intuitions as intellectual seemings," in D. Sosa (ed.), Symposium on Herman Cappelen's *Philosophy without Intuitions*. *Analytic Philosophy* (forthcoming).

[2] Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe," 1. For critiques of PC, see Nathan Hanna, "Against phenomenal conservatism," *Acta Analytica* 26 (2011): 213-221; Clayton Littlejohn, "Defeating phenomenal conservatism," *Analytic Philosophy* 52 (2011): 35-48; Moti Mizrahi, "Against phenomenal conservatism," *The Reasoner* 7 (2013): 117-118; Moti Mizrahi, "Against phenomenal conservatism: a reply to Moretti," *The Reasoner* 8 (2014): 26. Hanna argues that "PC is false because it […] follows from PC that beliefs can confer foundational justification for believing their contents in cases where they should not be able to do so" (Hanna, "Against phenomenal conservatism," 220). Cf. Kevin McCain, "Against Hanna on phenomenal conservatism," *Acta Analytica* 27 (2012): 45-54. Like Hanna, Littlejohn also argues that PC "really does have abhorrent implications we know we should reject or the justification for PC has been undermined" (Littlejohn, "Defeating phenomenal conservatism," 37). For Littlejohn, however, the abhorrent implications of PC are also moral, not just epistemic.

[3] John DePoe, "Defeating the self-defeat argument for phenomenal conservatism," *Philosophical Studies* 152 (2011): 347-359. Against Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC, DePoe argues that Huemer's ("Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 39) premise to the effect that "when we form beliefs, with a few exceptions not relevant here [i.e., cases of self-deception and leaps of faith], our beliefs are based on the way things seem to us" is false. See also Michael DePaul, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 78 (2009): 205-212. For a defense of PC, see McCain, "Against Hanna on phenomenal conservatism," 45-54.

(3) Therefore, if appearances are not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that appearances are not a source of justification.[5]

The Self-Defeat Argument, according to Huemer, "is not directly an argument that Phenomenal Conservatism is true, but rather that epistemological theories that oppose Phenomenal Conservatism are self-defeating."[6] Accordingly, Huemer seems to think that being self-defeating is a strike against a theory of basic propositional justification. Since any theory of basic propositional justification that rejects PC is self-defeating, Huemer argues, PC is thus superior to other theories of basic propositional justification.

In what follows, I argue against this latter claim. More explicitly, I argue that PC is not superior to alternative theories of basic propositional justification insofar as those theories that reject PC are self-defeating. I show that self-defeat arguments similar to Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC can be constructed for other theories of basic propositional justification as well. If this is correct, then there is nothing special about PC in that respect.[7] Constructing one

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[4] Here Huemer seems to accept the view that "Doxastic justification is what you get when you believe something for which you have propositional justification, and you base your belief on that which propositionally justifies it" (Jonathan Kvanvig, "Propositionalism and the perspectival character of justification," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 40 (2003): 3-17). See also John Pollock and Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 35-36. In what follows, I grant Huemer this assumption about the basing relation. Cf. Keith Korcz, "The causal-doxastic theory of the basing relation," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 30 (2000): 525-550.

[5] Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe," 1. See also Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 98-115.

[6] Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 41.

[7] Cf. Ali Hasan, "Phenomenal conservatism, classical foundationalism, and internalist justification," *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013): 119-141. Hasan argues, pace Huemer, that classical foundationalism "can avoid the charge of self-defeat" (Hasan, "Phenomenal conservatism, classical foundationalism, and internalist justification," 120). In this paper, I do not argue that other theories of basic propositional justification can avoid the charge of self-defeat. Rather, I argue that self-defeat arguments similar to Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC can be constructed for

such argument, of course, is sufficient in order to show that self-defeat arguments similar to Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC can be constructed for other theories of basic propositional justification as well. So, in the next section, I sketch a parallel self-defeat argument for a simple version of evidentialism and then defend its main premise. If Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument supports PC, then this parallel self-defeat argument supports evidentialism as well. If this is correct, however, then there is nothing special about PC as far as being the only non-self-defeating theory of basic propositional justification.[8]

2. A self-defeat argument for evidentialism

In this section, I sketch a self-defeat argument for a simple version of evidentialism. For present purposes, I take evidentialism to be "the view that the epistemic justification of a belief is determined by the quality of the believer's evidence for the belief."[9] More explicitly:

> S's belief that p at time t is justified (well-founded) iff (i) believing p is justified for S at t; (ii) S believes p on the basis of evidence that supports p.[10]

Fantl and McGrath put it this way:

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alternative theories of basic propositional justification. In that respect, then, there is nothing special about PC as far as self-defeat is concerned.

[8] DePoe argues that "Huemer's self-defeat argument for phenomenal conservatism is unsound" (DePoe, "Defeating the self-defeat argument for phenomenal conservatism," 348). In this paper, I do not argue that Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC is unsound. Rather, I argue that PC is not superior to other theories of basic propositional justification as far as self-defeat is concerned, since parallel self-defeat arguments can be constructed for alternative theories of basic propositional justification.

[9] Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15-34.

[10] Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 46.

Evidentialism. For any two subjects *S* and *S`*, necessarily, if *S* and *S`* have the same evidence for/against *p*, then *S* is justified in believing that *p* iff *S`* is, too.[11]

Now, here is a self-defeat argument for Evidentialism:

(1*)   All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon *evidence*.[12]

(2)   A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.

(3*)   Therefore, if *evidence* is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that *evidence* is not a source of justification.

Premise (1*) is a simple variation on premise (1) of Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC; instead of "appearances" as in premise (1) of Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC, we now have "evidence" as the basic source of propositional justification. If the phenomenal conservative is entitled to premise (1), then the evidentialist is entitled to premise (1*). Indeed, Huemer invokes appearances in support of PC when he says that "We should accept Phenomenal Conservatism […] because Phenomenal Conservatism just *seems* right" (emphasis added).[13] Premise (2) remains unchanged. Consequently, from premises (1*) and (2), conclusion (3*) is supposed to follow, just as conclusion (3) is supposed to follow from premises (1) and (2) in

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[11] Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "Evidence, pragmatics, and justification," Philosophical Review 111 (2002):67-94. See also Dorit Ganson, "Evidentialism and pragmatic constraints on outright belief," *Philosophical Studies* 139 (2008): 441-458.

[12] As in Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC, the "in relevant cases" clause is meant to rule out beliefs that are "based upon self-deception, faith, or the like" (Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe," 1, footnote 1).

[13] Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 54.

Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC. Like Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC, this parallel self-defeat argument is not directly an argument that Evidentialism is true, but rather that theories of basic propositional justification that oppose Evidentialism are self-defeating.

It might be objected that premise (1) of Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC is more plausible than premise (1*) of the parallel self-defeat argument for Evidentialism. But I do not think that is the case. To see why, recall that, as in Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC, the "in relevant cases" clause is meant to rule out beliefs that are "based upon self-deception, faith, or the like."[14] That is, the "in relevant cases" clause rules out accepting certain claims on faith or without (adequate) evidence. The relevant cases, then, are beliefs that are based on (adequate) evidence, whatever that may be. In other words, the relevant beliefs are taken to be beliefs that are based upon an adequate source of justification. The question is what that source is. For Huemer, the source is appearances. For evidentialists, the source is evidence. In that respect, evidentialists might even accept that appearances are a form of (defeasible) evidence, and yet reject the internalist and foundationalist elements of PC. That is, evidentialists could argue that appearances, understood as defeasible evidence rather than as the subject's internal mental states,[15] can be used to inferentially justify beliefs.

Huemer argues that "the rejection of Phenomenal Conservatism is self-defeating"[16] and that "alternative theories are self-defeating."[17] If Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC shows

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[14] Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe," 1.

[15] T. Ryan Byerly, "It seems like there aren't any seemings," *Philosophia* 40 (2012): 771-782. Byerly argues that "the central motivations for positing seemings are insufficient" (Byerly, "It seems like there aren't any seemings," 772).

[16] Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 32.

[17] Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 54.

that theories of basic propositional justification that reject PC are self-defeating, however, then the aforementioned parallel self-defeat argument for Evidentialism shows that theories of basic propositional justification that reject Evidentialism are self-defeating as well. If this is correct, then, contrary to what Huemer claims, PC is not superior to Evidentialism in terms of being non-self-defeating, for the same sort of self-defeat argument that Huemer puts forth in support of PC can be made in support of Evidentialism. The parallel self-defeat argument for Evidentialism shows that PC is not special in that respect.

I think that the reason why parallel self-defeat arguments can be made for alternative theories of basic propositional justification, such as Evidentialism, and hence why PC is not special in that respect, is quite simple. Any theory of basic propositional justification, such as PC, classical foundationalism,[18] or Evidentialism, which identifies *X* as a basic source of justification would have to appeal to *X* in order to justify itself *on pain of self-defeat*. To see why, consider the following question:

> *If beliefs are justified in virtue of being based on evidence that supports them, then what justifies the belief that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based on evidence that supports them?*

If Evidentialism is true, then the answer ultimately has to be:

> *The belief that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based on evidence that supports them is justified in virtue of being based on evidence that supports it.*

on pain of self-defeat. More generally:

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[18] Cf. Hasan, "Phenomenal conservatism, classical foundationalism, and internalist justification."

If beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon X, then what justifies the belief that

beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon X?

If it is true that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon *X*, then the answer ultimately

has to be:

The belief that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon X is justified in virtue of

being based upon X.

on pain of self-defeat. This general point about theories of basic propositional justification

applies to PC as well. To see why, consider the following question:

If beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon appearances, then what justifies the

belief that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon appearances?

If PC is true, then the answer ultimately has to be:

The belief that beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon appearances is justified

in virtue of being based upon appearances.

on pain of self-defeat. In fact, as mentioned above, Huemer himself invokes appearances in

support of PC when he says that "We should accept Phenomenal Conservatism […] because

Phenomenal Conservatism just *seems* right" (emphasis added).[19]

For this reason, self-defeat arguments, if they work at all, work for theories of basic

propositional justification other than PC as well. In other words, I submit that any basic source of

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[19] Huemer, "Compassionate phenomenal conservatism," 54.

propositional justification (e.g., "evidence" as in Evidentialism, "basic/non-inferential beliefs" as in classical foundationalism, "seemings" as in PC) can be plugged into the following argument scheme instead of *X*:

> All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon *X*.
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> A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.
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> ∴ If *X* is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that *X* is not a source of justification.

This is so because any theory of basic propositional justification that identifies *X* as a basic source of justification would have to appeal to *X* in order to justify itself *on pain of self-defeat*. Since the "in relevant cases" is supposed to rule out beliefs that are clearly not justified, the remaining beliefs must be justified in virtue of being based upon *X*. This is a general point about theories of basic propositional justification. PC is no exception, which is why the Self-Defeat Argument for PC fails to show that PC is superior to alternative theories of basic propositional justification insofar as those theories that reject PC are self-defeating.

Of course, Huemer could simply abandon the Self-Defeat Argument for PC and argue that there are other reasons for accepting PC.[20] In that case, I will have done my job. For my aim in this paper is to expose the problems with Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC. In particular, Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC does not uniquely support PC, since similar

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[20] For instance, Huemer argues that PC can accommodate the internalist intuition better than other theories of basic propositional justification can (Huemer, "Phenomenal conservatism and the internalist intuition," 147-158). Cf. Hasan, "Phenomenal conservatism, classical foundationalism, and internalist justification," 119-141.

self-defeat arguments can be made to support alternative theories of basic propositional justification, such as Evidentialism. Moreover, if Huemer were to take this line of defense (namely, claim that there are other reasons for accepting PC), it would simply make salient the problems with his Self-Defeat Argument for PC. Recall that, for Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument to go through, one needs to assume that appearances are a basic source of justification (i.e., the first premise of Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC) and that *that* is what matters as far as doxastic justification is concerned (i.e., the second premise of Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument for PC). If one accepts these assumptions, however, it is not clear what work is left for the Self-Defeat Argument for PC to do. As an argument for PC, Huemer's Self-Defeat Argument thus becomes redundant.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Phenomenal Conservatism (PC) is not superior to alternative theories of basic propositional justification insofar as those theories that reject PC are self-defeating. I have sketched a parallel self-defeat argument for an alternative theory of basic propositional justification, namely, Evidentialism. This shows that self-defeat arguments can be advanced in support of alternatives to PC. If this is correct, then Huemer's Self-Defeat argument doesn't uniquely motivate PC.