

Phenomenal conservatism and the problem of reflective awareness

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ABSTRACT

This paper criticizes phenomenal conservatism—the view according to which a subject *S*'s seeming that *P* provides *S* with defeasible justification for believing *P*. It argues that phenomenal conservatism, if true at all, has a significant limitation: seeming-based justification is elusive because *S* can easily lose it by just reflecting on her seemings and speculating about their causes. The paper also argues that because of this limitation, phenomenal conservatism doesn't have all the epistemic merits attributed to it by its advocates. If true, phenomenal conservatism constitutes a unified theory of epistemic justification capable of giving everyday epistemic practices a rationale, but it doesn't afford us the means of an effective response to the sceptic. Furthermore, phenomenal conservatism doesn't form the general basis for foundationalism.

1. Introduction

The influential epistemological view called *phenomenal conservatism* is most commonly associated with Michael Huemer's work—in particular Huemer (2001 and 2007)—but other epistemologists—prominently James Pryor (2000 and 2004)—have proposed very similar views, though less general.¹ According to phenomenal conservatism, roughly, a subject *S*'s *seeming* or *appearance* that *P* provides *S* with defeasible, non-inferential justification for believing *P*. Phenomenal conservatism looks quite plausible to me, but I need not subscribe to it here. The thesis I defend is conditional: if phenomenal conservatism is correct, it has a significant limitation. In particular, seeming-based justification is *elusive*, in the sense that *S*'s becoming reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and wondering about its possible causes results in either just destroying *S*'s seeming-based justification for believing *P* or replacing this non-inferential justification with inferential justification. I call this phenomenon *the problem of reflective awareness*.² I argue that because of this limitation, phenomenal conservatism turns out not to possess all the epistemic merits that it has been claimed to possess. If true, phenomenal conservatism constitutes a unified

conception of non-inferential justification capable of providing everyday epistemic practices with a rationale. However, phenomenal conservatism cannot afford us the means of a forceful response to the sceptic, and it cannot constitute the general basis of foundationalism.

The remainder of this work is organized as follows: § 2 presents phenomenal conservatism and its alleged merits. § 3 articulates the problem of reflective awareness. § 4 draws consequences of this problem for phenomenal conservatism. § 5 concludes the paper.

2. Phenomenal conservatism and its asserted merits

The thesis that many of our beliefs are epistemically justified because they are based on our appearances or seemings—namely, ways things seem to us to be—looks quite plausible. For example, it looks plausible that I may have a reason³ for believing that an apple is on the table just because it *seems* visually so to me. Also, it looks plausible that I may have a reason for believing that I walked home yesterday just because I *seem* to remember walking home. It looks plausible that I have a reason for believing that $7+4=11$ just because this *seems* a priori true to me. Phenomenal conservatism aims to account systematically for the justifying force of seemings. Its defining principle says that:

(pc) If it seems to [a subject] *S* that *P*, then, in the absence of defeaters *S* thereby has some degree of justification for believing that *P*.

(Huemer 2007, p. 30)

Huemer (2001) defends a stronger principle according to which for any proposition *P*, if it seems to *S* that *P*, *S* has prima facie justification for *fully* believing *P*. In later work, however, he rejects this stronger principle because exceedingly general. It is implausible that, for instance, a *weak* and *wavering* seeming that *P* could give *S* justification for *fully* believing *P* (cf. Huemer 2007, p. 30n1). Huemer would seem to presuppose, nevertheless, that if *S* had a *clear* and *firm* seeming that *P*, in the absence of defeaters *S* would have justification for fully believing *P*. Hence, an important, special case of (pc) must be this:

(pc*) If *S* has a clear and firm seeming that *P*, then, in the absence of defeaters *S* thereby has justification for fully believing *P*.

One might contend, against (pc*), that it is dubious that *whenever S* has a clear and firm seeming that *P*, in the absence of defeaters *S* has justification for fully believing *P*. One might insist that *S*'s having justification for *believing P* requires *S* to be capable of entertaining the *belief* that *P*,⁴ and that *S* might be unable to do this in some cases. (Suppose *S* is affected by a kind of self-deception that inhibits beliefs of a certain sort.) Considering that humans can *ordinarily* entertain a belief that *P* when they have a seeming that *P*, a less objectionable variant of (pc*) is therefore this:

(PC) Ordinarily, if *S* has a clear and firm seeming that *P*, then, in the absence of defeaters *S* thereby has justification for fully believing *P*.

In the following, I will concentrate on (PC) rather than (pc), for I think (PC) expresses the view actually at stake in most discussion on phenomenal conservatism. Hereafter, whenever I speak of seemings (or appearances), I always mean *clear* and *firm* seemings. Furthermore, whenever I speak of believing a proposition, I always mean *fully* believing it.

(PC) concerns *propositional* rather than *doxastic* justification (cf. McGrath 2013). Evidence *E* provides *S* with propositional justification for *P* just in case *E* gives *S* rational support for believing *P* *whether or not S believes P because of E, or believes P at all*. Furthermore, *E* provides *S* with doxastic justification for *P* just in case *E* gives *S* propositional justification for *P* and *S* *bases her actual belief that P on E*. Phenomenal conservatism has an *internalist* character because seeming-based justification depending on (PC) is determined only by mental states of *S* that are reflectively accessible to *S*—namely, *S*'s seeming that *P* and lack of defeating evidence.⁵

Huemer and most phenomenal conservatives hold that *S*'s having a seeming is a matter of *S*'s having a certain sort of *experience* provided with propositional content but *unanalysable in terms of belief*. According to this popular view, the experiences that constitute seemings are characterized by a distinctive phenomenology that makes them represent their contents *assertively*. This phenomenology can be described as the feeling of ascertaining that a given proposition is true,

or the feeling of being presented with the occurrence of a state of affairs (cf. Huemer 2001, § 4. Also see Tolhurst 1998 and Chudnoff 2011). Apparent perceptions, apparent memories, intellectual intuitions and introspective states would all be species of this broad type of experience. Although there are other conceptions of seemings in the literature, there is wide agreement that the experience view is the one afflicted by fewer difficulties and is possibly the only one coherent with (PC).⁶ Accordingly, I will take the expression “seeming that P ” to refer specifically to an (assertive) *experience* as if P .

(PC) entails that S 's seeming-based justification for P is *defeasible*. Different sorts of things can count as defeaters. S 's seeming-based justification for P can be defeated by, for instance, S 's evidence in favour of $\sim P$,⁷ evidence that P 's truth is, in the relevant circumstances, not ascertainable by S 's pertinent faculty (e.g., her perception or her memory), evidence that S 's faculty is malfunctioning, and so on, where evidence in all these cases is another belief or seeming of S . In the next section, I will argue that the conjunction of S 's having a reflective belief that she has a seeming that P and S 's conceiving of explanations of the same seeming that entail $\sim P$ can also defeat S 's seeming-based justification for believing P .

Note the “thereby” in (PC), which indicates that S 's justification for P is solely *based* on S 's seeming that P . For instance, S 's justification for P isn't also based on S 's justification for entertaining her seeming that P . Indeed, the claim that a *seeming* can be epistemically justified for a subject appears incongruous (at least when justification is conceived of by internalist lights). Internalist epistemic justification is often thought of in terms of S 's not being *epistemically blameworthy*. Accordingly, S has epistemic justification for having attitude A towards P just in case S couldn't be epistemically blamed for doing so. Another influential internalist conception is the *epistemic permissibility* one. Accordingly, S has epistemic justification for entertaining attitude A towards P just in case it is epistemically permissible for S to do so.⁸ Note that it would sound incongruous or meaningless to say that S is (not) epistemically blameworthy for having a given

seeming, or that it is (not) epistemically permissible for *S* to have a given *seeming* (cf. Pryor 2005 and McGrath 2013).

Saying that *S*'s justification for believing *P* is solely based on *S*'s seeming that *P* is also saying that this justification isn't based on any belief of *S*'s or *S*'s justification for believing any other thing—for instance that *S*'s cognitive faculties are working properly, or that no relevant sceptical conjecture is true.⁹ Given that *S*'s seeming-based justification for believing *P* is not based on any belief, it qualifies as *non-inferential* justification (cf. Huemer 2015).

An argument in support of (PC) by Huemer (2001, pp. 103-104) relies on Foley (1993)'s conception of epistemic rationality, according to which it is epistemically rational for *S* to do *X* if doing it would appear to *S* to be an effective way of satisfying the epistemic goal of believing the true and not believing the false. Suppose it *seems* to *S* that *P* is true, and *S* has no reason to doubt it. Then, believing that *P* would appear to *S* to be an effective means of pursuing the goal of believing the true and avoiding the false. Thus, on Foley's conception, *S*'s believing that *P* is epistemically rational and so epistemically justified, in accordance with (PC). A limitation of this vindication of (PC) is its very reliance on Foley's conception of epistemic rationality, which is controversial.¹⁰ Another drawback is that it cannot vindicate crucial applications of (PC). A reason of (PC)'s intuitive appeal is that it seems to vindicate ordinary attributions of epistemic justification to beings—such as small children—who couldn't have justification for ruling out sceptical conjectures or believing that their faculties are reliable, for they couldn't grasp these complex thoughts. These unsophisticated creatures would also be incapable of grasping the complex notion of an epistemic goal. This defence (PC), therefore, will fail if *S* in (PC) refers to one of them.¹¹

Quite independently of the above argument,¹² Huemer is convinced that if we adopt an internalist viewpoint in epistemology—one that sees a tight connection between what is epistemically justified and what looks reasonable to do for the subject—a principle like (PC) will emerge as self-evident (cf. 2001, pp. 104-105).¹³ A description of how this would happen has been given by McGrath:

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.¹⁴ (2013, p. 226)

I admit I find these considerations quite persuasive. It's also worth noting the following: we saw that the internalist often conceives of having epistemic justification in terms of not being epistemically blameworthy for doing something, or in terms of being epistemically permitted to do something. On both conceptions, (PC) appears intuitively true. For it looks plausible that if it seems to S that P and S has no defeaters, the only non-epistemically blameworthy attitude and epistemically permissible attitude for S to have towards P on the basis of her seeming is just belief.

Whether or not (PC) proves self-evident to all those who lean towards internalism, there seem to be at least four general reasons why endorsing (PC) would be epistemologically advantageous according to (PC)'s advocates. To begin with, (PC) is claimed to provide a rationale for widespread epistemic practices. Our reasons for holding many ordinary beliefs, for instance, don't seem to include thoughts about, say, the trustworthiness of our experiences or the reliability of our faculties (cf. Tucker 2013). Rather, we seem to take ourselves to have justification for entertaining many ordinary beliefs just because of how things *appear* to us to be. Furthermore—as already stressed—we often attribute reasons for entertaining beliefs to beings—such as small children—who couldn't have the complex thought that their faculties are reliable (cf. Pryor 2000).

(PC) is perceived to be philosophically appealing also because it appears to offer a *unified* account of the non-inferential justification of beliefs of very different types. (PC) or cognate principles have been invoked to explain the justification of, for example, perceptual (Pryor 2000, Huemer 2001 and Lycan 2013), a priori (Bealer 2000 and Chudnoff 2011), moral (Huemer 2005), mnemonic (Pollock and Cruz 1999) and religious (e.g., Tucker 2011) beliefs.

A third motive of (PC)'s asserted philosophical significance is that it would afford us the means of a thoroughgoing response to the *sceptic*—in particular, the sceptic who assumes that the

subject *S* must have independent justification for ruling out any relevant sceptical alternative in order to possess (even only defeasible) justification for believing ordinary things. Epistemologists do agree that this assumption fosters some of the most virulent forms of scepticism (cf. Pryor 2000, Wright 2004 and Schiffer 2004). The phenomenal conservative can adduce (PC) and argue that *S* doesn't actually need the independent justification that the sceptic assumes *S* must have. For instance, suppose *S* entertains a visual experience as if *P*—say, as if there is a hand. The sceptic might argue that *S*'s experience as if *P* can give *S* defeasible justification for believing *P* only if *S* has independent justification for ruling out the sceptical alternative according to which, say, *S* is a disembodied soul with the mere hallucination of a hand caused by a malicious demon. The sceptic will insist that *S* cannot possess this independent justification. Suppose, however, that *S*'s having the visual experience as if *P* is interpreted as *S*'s having a visual seeming that *P*. If *S* has this seeming, and (PC) is correct, in the absence of defeaters *S* will normally have defeasible justification for believing *P* even if *S* has no independent justification for ruling out any sceptical alternative (cf. Huemer 2001 and Pryor 2000 and 2004).¹⁵ Mnemonic scepticism can be rejected in similar way. Whenever *S* seems to remember that *P*, if (PC) holds true, in the absence of defeaters *S* will normally have defeasible justification for believing that *P* even if *S* has no independent justification for ruling out, say, the Russellian conjecture that the world was created just an instant ago. Other forms of scepticism can be addressed along these lines.

A fourth asserted reason of why (PC) is philosophically significant is that this principle would be capable of constituting the general basis of fallible *foundationalism*—a view that many epistemologists find natural and plausible in itself. The claim is, precisely, that (PC) explains how beliefs of very different types can be *basically*—namely, non-inferentially—justified. It is our seemings, according to this view, that put an end to the regress of justified beliefs when we search for a basis for the justification of all our beliefs (cf. Huemer 2001, p. 102).¹⁶

Needless to say, (PC) has been targeted by various objections. Some argue that (PC) is problematic because it makes the justification of controversial philosophical theses excessively easy

to attain and enable people to justify crazy beliefs (e.g., Tooley 2013). Other epistemologists contend that principles like (PC) are dubious because they are in various ways incompatible with Bayesian reasoning (e.g., White 2006 and Wright 2007) or because they produce *easy justification*—namely, justification for ruling out sceptical alternatives in an implausibly easy way (cf. Wright 2007). (PC) has also been argued to be false because seemings *cognitively penetrated* (i.e., partly caused) by irrational or unjustified mental states would be unable to justify beliefs (e.g., Siegel 2012, Brogaard 2013 and McGrath 2013). Finally, some insist that (PC) is false because seemings would be able to justify beliefs only if there is higher order justification for believing that they are reliable (e.g., Bergmann 2013). Huemer and advocates of (PC) or cognate principles have addressed these and other objections.¹⁷ (PC) is certainly affected by various difficulties but it is far from clear that it has been *lethally* struck by any of these arguments.

3. The problem of reflective awareness¹⁸

To forestall possible confusion, let me distinguish between “*S*’s having (or entertaining) a seeming that *P*” and “*S*’s being reflectively aware of a seeming that *P*”. These two expressions don’t refer to the same mental states. The first expression refers to a mental state of *S*—her seeming that *P*—which can exist in *S*’s mind even if *S* doesn’t reflect on her own mental states. The second expression refers to a more complex state of *S*, one that encompasses at least three items. That is to say: (1) *S*’s seeming that *P*, (2) *S*’s reflective acquaintance with her seeming that *P*,¹⁹ and (3) *S*’s reflective belief that she has the seeming that *P* (i.e., *S*’s belief that she has the seeming that *P* based on her acquaintance with her seeming that *P*).²⁰

Suppose (PC) is true to the effect that *S* actually has defeasible, non-inferential justification for believing *P* on the basis of her seeming that *P*. The problem of reflective awareness can be described as follows: as *S* becomes *reflectively* aware of her seeming that *P* and realizes that its existence can potentially be explained by hypotheses entailing $\sim P$, *S*’s seeming-based justification for believing *P* will be either just destroyed or replaced with inferential justification. As it will be

clarified in the next section, this is a problem for phenomenal conservatism not because it shows that (PC) is false or dubious but, rather, because it diminishes (PC)'s philosophical significance.

Here is a more detailed description of the problem of reflective awareness. Suppose that at time t_1 S has a seeming that P and no defeating evidence. To make the description more tangible, take P to be a *perceptual* seeming—for instance, a visual seeming that there is a cat on the mat. (The same conclusions would follow, however, for seemings of different types with minimal changes in my description.) If (PC) is true, at t_1 S will normally have justification for believing P . This looks quite reasonable (at least by internalist lights): since at t_1 S has a clear and firm seeming that P and no defeating evidence, S could not be epistemically blamed if she believed P . Furthermore, it looks intuitive that at t_1 S is epistemically permitted to believe P .

Suppose, however, that at t_2 S reflects on her mental states and becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that P for the first time. At t_1 S didn't entertain the belief that she had a seeming that P , whereas at t_2 S does have this belief. At t_1 S was thus incapable of wondering whether her seeming that P —of which she wasn't reflectively aware—was *veridical* or *deceptive*; whereas at t_2 , S can easily ask herself this question. Let's suppose that at t_2 S does actually ask herself this question. S will be able to conceive of a number of (at least logically) possible alternative explanations of how her seeming that P has been produced. To begin with, S can hypothesize that her seeming that P is the effect of her actually perceiving that P . Let's call the proposition saying that S 's seeming that P has been produced in a way that makes P true the *veridical hypothesis*. Furthermore, S can hypothesize that her seeming that P is nothing but an illusion or a hallucination produced by, say, a clever camouflage, LSD inadvertently consumed by herself, an incipient brain tumour, the Matrix, the Cartesian Evil Demon, and so on. Let's call any proposition entailing that S 's seeming is deceptive to the effect that P is false a *deception hypothesis*.

As a consequence of S 's reflective awareness and ensuing reasoning, at t_2 S will realize that her seeming that P is a state that can possibly be produced by various sets of circumstances that make P *false*. This would happen if any of the deception hypotheses that S has conceived of were

true. Suppose that at t_2 S doesn't have independent justification for ruling out some deception hypotheses she has conceived of. Consequently, at t_2 S would become epistemically blameworthy if she still believed P . By the same token, it is intuitive that at t_2 it will no longer be epistemically permissible for S to believe P .²¹ In conclusion, it appears true that (from an internalist viewpoint at least) whenever S is reflectively aware of her seeming that P and S conceives of some relevant deception hypotheses but doesn't have independent justification for rejecting all these hypotheses, S 's seeming-based justification for believing P will be destroyed.

The above conclusion doesn't entail that if S becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that P and conceives of some relevant deception hypothesis, S can no longer have justification for believing P . Quite the opposite, it is true that if S is reflectively aware of her seeming that P and conceive of some relevant deception hypothesis, S may still have justification for fully believing P . This happens, presumably, when S has independent justification for ruling out the deception hypotheses she has conceived of. However, in these cases S 's initial *non-inferential* justification for believing P , based on S 's seeming that P , will be supplanted by *inferential* justification for believing P . Furthermore, S 's seeming that P will only play an *indirect* role in sustaining S 's new inferential justification for P . Let me explain why all this happens by adducing some example.

Imagine again that at t_2 S comes to entertain, by reflection, the belief that she has a seeming that P and realizes that the existence of this seeming admits of possible explanations implying that $\sim P$. However, suppose now that at t_2 S also possesses, say, statistical or inductive evidence for concluding that any of the deception hypotheses entailing $\sim P$ she has thought of is more likely to be false than the veridical hypothesis, which entails P . Or imagine that at t_2 S does realize that the veridical hypothesis is simpler and more natural than any rival deception hypothesis, and suppose that this provides S with evidence to conclude that the veridical hypothesis is more likely to be true than its rivals. It is intuitive that in both cases, at t_2 S would still have justification for believing P more than $\sim P$ and, possibly, for fully believing P .

As these examples show, once *S* becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and realizes that its presence can be explained by a range of alternative hypotheses, *S* can still have justification for believing *P*—more than $\sim P$ or in full—only if *S* is able to conclude that the veridical hypothesis is the more probable or plausible explanation. Note that *S* would get to that conclusion through *reasoning*—that is to say, through an *inference* to the more probable or plausible explanation. Consequently, *S*'s justification for believing the veridical hypothesis—and thus *P*—would in this case be *inferential*. Inferences don't connect *seemings* with beliefs, they connect *premises* with conclusions—namely, *beliefs* with other beliefs.²² In the case at stake, *S*'s inference would be one from *S*'s *reflective belief* that she has a seeming that *P* to *S*'s belief that the veridical hypothesis is probably or plausibly true. Therefore, in this case, it would be *S*'s reflective belief that she has a seeming that *P*—rather than *S*'s seeming that *P* itself—that would provide the basis of *S*'s justification for believing *P*. In this epistemic setting, *S*'s seeming that *P* would only play an indirect role: *S*'s acquaintance with this seeming would form the antecedent basis for the non-inferential justification of the *premise* of *S*'s reasoning—namely, *S*'s reflective belief that she has a seeming that *P*.

To summarize, (PC) says that, normally, when *S* has a seeming that *P*, in the absence of defeaters *S*'s seeming supplies *S* with non-inferential justification for believing *P*. I have argued that seeming-based justification (if existing at all) is elusive in the sense that *S* can easily be bereaved of it. In particular, whenever *S* becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and conceives of possible explanations of it incompatible with *P*, *S*'s justification for believing *P* will be just destroyed or replaced with inferential justification.

4. Consequences of the problem of reflective awareness

I now investigate the bearing of the problem of reflective awareness on the asserted merits of phenomenal conservatism summarized in § 2. To begin with, (PC) has been argued to supply a rationale for ordinary epistemic practices. In particular, in everyday life we seem to take ourselves

to be justified in holding many beliefs just because of how things appear to us to be. (PC) has been claimed to substantiate this attitude. I don't think the arguments canvassed in § 3 can jeopardize this claim. The defeasible justification licensed by (PC)—supposing (PC) is true—is one that would be destroyed if we became reflectively aware of our seemings and speculated about their possible causes. However, it is a matter of fact that we seldom engage in the practices that would destroy our seeming-based justification in everyday life, as we customarily don't reflect on our seemings and don't speculate about their cause. As mentioned in § 2, the ordinary epistemic practices that (PC) apparently grounds include crediting small children with justification for believing various things. It is unclear how the arguments articulated in § 3 could jeopardize this thesis. Small children cannot reflect on their seemings and speculate about their causes. Consequently, the problem of reflective awareness doesn't affect them.²³

Someone might suggest, however, that we (adults) *should* regularly reflect on our seemings and speculate about their causes on pain of being *epistemically irresponsible* (and so blameworthy). The thought might be this: since we could easily reflect on our appearances and wonder about their causes, which might bring in further relevant evidence, we are rationally required to do so. But this argument would be wrong-headed because enforcing systematically a requirement of this type would come at intolerable cognitive costs. We are all incessantly swamped with several concurrent seemings. Consequently, if we were required to become reflectively aware of each of them and speculate about their causes, this would encumber if not just paralyze our ordinary cognitive activities.

A second reason why (PC) is claimed to be philosophically valuable is that this principle gives us a unified account of non-inferential justification. That we can destroy our seeming-based justification by reflecting on our seemings and speculating about their causes doesn't imply that seeming-based justification is not unified. Therefore, this asserted merit of (PC) is not threatened by the problem of reflective awareness. If true, (PC) would give us a unified account of various types of non-inferential justification crucial to our ordinary beliefs.

A third proclaimed virtue of (PC) is that it affords us the means of a forceful response to the sceptic. Since (PC) deals in epistemic justification, this should be intended in the sense that (PC) affords us the means of a forceful response to the sceptic who questions that we have epistemic justification. A response of this type would be *forceful* only if—I submit—it enabled a committed thinker *S* who engaged with sceptical arguments that questioned her possession of epistemic justification to reject or seriously challenge those arguments. (An example of such a committed thinker might be Descartes in his *Meditations*.) It appears to me, however, that (PC) *doesn't* allow for this kind of response to the sceptic.

It is easy to see why this is so. Suppose *S* has an experience as if *P* and does engage with a sceptical argument that questions the claim that *S* has defeasible justification for believing *P* because of her experience. The sceptical argument says—precisely—that since *S*'s experience as if *P* can possibly be caused by a sceptical scenario *SH* entailing $\sim P$, *S* could have defeasible justification for believing *P* only if she had independent justification for ruling out *SH*. The argument's conclusion says that since *S* doesn't have this independent justification, *S* doesn't possess justification for believing *P*. Note that this sceptical argument is just an argument of the type that (PC) is claimed to enable us to defuse (see § 2 above). The crucial question is—therefore—whether *S* can actually respond successfully to this argument by adducing (PC) and contending that, insofar as her experience as if *P* consists of a seeming that *P*, *S* has defeasible justification for believing *P* even though *S* doesn't have justification for ruling out *SH*. Unfortunately for the phenomenal conservative, the answer is negative. Consider in fact that *S* can actually engage with the sceptical argument under consideration only if she grasps the way in which *SH* puts her justification for *P* at risk. *S* can do this only if *S* becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and acknowledges that its existence can possibly be explained by the deception hypothesis *SH*. We saw in the former section that when both these conditions are satisfied, even if (PC) holds true, *S* can have defeasible justification for believing *P* *only if S has independent justification for ruling out SH*. Thus, if *S* claimed that in these very circumstances she possesses defeasible justification for

believing P even though she doesn't have justification for ruling out SH , S would simply assert the false.

An example might be helpful at this juncture. Suppose that S takes herself to have justification for believing that (P) she had granola for breakfast, for she seems to remember that P . However, imagine that a sceptic comes forward and presents S with an argument that adduces the Russellian conjecture (RC) that the world was created just a few seconds ago together with S 's apparent memory. The sceptic's argument says—precisely—that since S 's apparent memory that P can be explained by RC , which entails $\sim P$, S can have defeasible justification for believing P only if she has independent justification for ruling out RC . The argument concludes that since S doesn't have this independent justification, S doesn't possess justification for believing P . Suppose that S engages with this argument. S will thereby become reflectively aware of her mnemonic seeming that P and will acknowledge that its existence can possibly be explained by the deception hypothesis RC . As we have seen, it is reasonable to maintain that even if (PC) holds true, in these circumstances S can have defeasible justification for believing P only if S has independent justification for ruling out RC . Suppose that, nevertheless, S responded to the sceptic that, given that her apparent memory that P is a *mnemonic seeming*, in these very circumstances S does have defeasible justification for believing P even though she doesn't have independent justification for ruling out RC . This response would be flawed and thus unsuccessful.

The lesson taught by this example generalizes to all cases of seeming-based justification apparently licenced by (PC). (PC) doesn't afford us the means of a forceful response to the sceptic because our very engaging with the sceptic's arguments would make our recourse to (PC), as a means to respond to those arguments, immaterial and thus ineffective.

A fourth asserted virtue of (PC) says that this principle constitutes the general basis for fallible foundationalism, as (PC) allows for a straightforward account of our having basic beliefs of any type. Suppose a subject S has undefeated justification *for believing* a proposition P because—in accordance with (PC)—she has a seeming that P in ordinary conditions. If this seeming actually

caused a belief that P in S 's mind, this belief would be for S non-inferentially justified by that seeming. Advocates of phenomenal conservatism contend that the basic beliefs of our doxastic systems are generally seeming-based beliefs (cf. Huemer 2001, § 5).

My view is that (PC), if true at all, could actually validate a form of foundationalism that explains the non-inferential justification of doxastic systems proper to subjects who are incapable of reflecting on their seemings and speculating about their possible causes, or proper to intellectually more sophisticated subjects who, nevertheless, don't have reflective habits. This means—in other words—that (PC) could vindicate a form of foundationalism that accounts for the basic beliefs of small children and those proper to many ordinary people in everyday life.

It is quite dubious, however, that (PC) could *on its own* validate a form of foundationalism that explains the non-inferential justification of doxastic systems proper to *reflective* subjects—that is to say, individuals who reflect systematically on some of their seemings and speculate about their causes (to obviate cognitive errors or for other reasons).²⁴ Consider first that whenever S is reflectively aware of a seeming that P and speculates about its causes, S 's non-inferential justification for believing P will be destroyed or supplanted with inferential justification. Thus, even if S 's seeming that P caused a belief that P in S 's mind, in this case S 's belief that P would not be justified by that seeming for S . Furthermore, as suggested in § 3, when S is reflectively aware of a seeming that P , S 's reflective belief that she has a seeming that P will be based on S 's *reflective acquaintance with that seeming*. Thus, if foundationalism is true, when S is conceived of as a reflective creature, many of S 's non-inferentially justified beliefs should presumably be accounted for by a version of *acquaintance theory*.

Before concluding let me address a possible response to my last criticism. To defend the claim that (PC) vindicates foundationalism in general, one might insist that S 's non-inferential justification for entertaining reflective beliefs about her own seemings is in fact licenced by (PC). One might claim—more exactly—that when S reflects on her seeming that P , rather than being *reflectively acquainted* with it, S comes to entertain a *reflective* or *higher order seeming* that she has

a seeming that P , and that this higher-order seeming provides S with non-inferential justification for reflectively believing that she has a seeming that P , in accordance with (PC).²⁵ This ingenious reply wouldn't prove very convincing, though. For the explanation of S 's non-inferential justification for entertaining a reflective belief that she has a seeming that P that appeals to S 's reflective acquaintance with her seeming that P admittedly looks simpler, less ad hoc and thus more plausible than the explanation that appeals to a higher-order seeming of S .²⁶

5. Conclusions

I have focused on phenomenal conservatism—the view that our seemings provide us with defeasible, non-inferential justification for believing their contents. I have argued that seeming-based justification, if existing at all, proves elusive in an important sense: it will be destroyed or supplanted with inferential justification whenever the subject reflects on her seemings and speculates about their causes. I have shown that because of this feature of seeming-based justification, phenomenal conservatism doesn't have all the epistemic merits that it is usually claimed to have. If true, phenomenal conservatism constitutes a unified theory of non-inferential justification that vindicates ordinary epistemic practices. However, phenomenal conservatism doesn't enable us to respond effectively to pernicious forms of scepticism, and it doesn't constitute the general basis for foundationalism.

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Notes

1. A list of advocates of phenomenal conservatism and cognate views is in the next section.
2. I use the term “elusive” in a sense *similar* to one used Lewis (1996) to describe that which he thought was an important feature of knowledge. This similarity doesn’t commit me to endorsing Lewis’ views.
3. I follow many in taking expressions like “epistemic reason” and “epistemic justification”, as well as “epistemic rational” and “epistemically justifiable”, to be very close in meaning and thus safe-changeable in many contexts of discussion.
4. This claim is controversial. See for instance Smithies (2012).
5. Phenomenal conservatism thus arguably satisfies internalism as both *mentalism* and *accessibilism*. As Huemer clarifies: “The main justification-conferring condition in this theory is the condition of its seeming to one that *P*. This condition is internal in the sense that it is a mental state of one’s own [and] it is, plausibly, a condition that the subject can become aware of, and introspectively aware at that... The no-defeater condition alluded to in the statement of Phenomenal Conservatism [i.e., (PC)] is perhaps harder to classify. But if defeaters themselves are characterized in terms of how things appear to the subject, or the subject’s beliefs, or something generally along those lines, then the no-defeater condition will be similarly internal.” (2006, pp. 148-149).
6. The *belief* view identifies seemings with spontaneous non-inferential beliefs. This view looks false because *S* could have a seeming that *P* without believing *P* (e.g., if *S* is aware of having an *optical illusion* that *P*.) The *disposition* view identifies a seeming that *P* with a disposition to believe *P*. This view doesn’t harmonize with (PC) because it is implausible that *S*’s mere disposition to believe that *P* could give *S* justification for believing *P*. This view is also implausible because *S* could be so convinced that her seeming that *P* is illusory that she may lack the disposition to believe *P*. On the other hand, *S* could be disposed to believe a proposition that doesn’t seem true to her (e.g., because of her wishful thinking). Also, it is intuitive that *S*’s seeming that *P* can *explain* *S*’s disposition to believe *P*. If seemings were dispositions to believe, this couldn’t be the case. According to the *evidence-taking* view, *S*’s having a seeming that *P* is the same as *S*’s believing or being disposed to believe that a mental state *M* of *S* is evidence for *P*. This view is implausible because *S* could believe or tend to believe that *M* is evidence for *P* (e.g., because of her wishful thinking) when *P* doesn’t seem to be true to *S*. Also, this view doesn’t cohere with (PC), for it is dubious that *S*’s mere believing or being inclined to believe that she has evidence for *P* could give *S* justification for believing *P*. See Tucker (2013) for further discussion.
7. Where “~” is logical negation.
8. I’m not endorsing any of these views as the *correct* characterization(s) of epistemic justification—I’m just using them as popular examples. For a survey of conceptions of epistemic justification and their problems see Silva (forthcoming).
9. I would say that Huemer doesn’t even require *S*’s *attention to be concentrated on a seeming that P* in order for *S* to have propositional justification for believing *P* from that seeming.
10. Locus classicus is Kelly (2003).
11. A very similar concern is raised in Hasan (2011, pp. 133-134).
12. Huemer (2001 and especially 2007) also delivers a *self-defeat argument* to the effect that the belief that (pc) is false cannot be doxastically justified. The argument is roughly as follows: (i) if *S* believed that *P* (where *P* stands for virtually any proposition including the one that (pc) is false), *S* would do so *on the basis of S’s seeming that P*, or *on the basis of S’s seeming that Q*, where *P* has been inferred by *S* from *Q*. But (ii) *S*’s belief is doxastically justified only if *its basis* is a source of propositional justification. Therefore, (iii) if (pc) were false, *S* would have no justified belief that *P*

for almost any *P*. Thus (iv) *S* would not even have the justified belief that (pc) is false. I set this argument aside because it is irrelevant to the concern of this paper and it is extremely controversial even among advocates of phenomenal conservatism. See Moretti (2015b) for a survey of objections. 13. Huemer (2006) also argues that a principle like (PC) fleshes out the *internalist intuition* better than any other view.

14. According to Tucker (2013), McGrath's considerations don't vindicate (PC) because "reasonable" in the quotation can be read by the internalist as just "rationally committable" rather than "justifiable". In substance—according to Tucker—everything McGrath says is compatible with the thesis that if *S* has a clear and firm seeming that *P*, in the absence of defeaters *S* is (only) *rationally committed* to believing *P*. This wouldn't vindicate (PC) because *S* can be rationally committed to believing *P* even if *S* has no epistemic justification for believing *P*. Rational commitment is a sort of lack of incoherence between *S*'s propositional attitudes that doesn't require the attitudes to be justified. It is my opinion, however, that the discussion in McGrath (2013, § 2) answers Tucker's concern.

15. A concern might be that (PC) is actually ineffective against scepticism because (PC) is *compatible* with the requirement (R) that *S*'s having independent justification for ruling out any sceptical alternative is *necessary* (though *not basing*) for *S*'s having seeming-based justification for *P*. Pryor (2000, p. 545n33) suggests, however, that principles like (PC) undercut the most natural line of reasoning that the sceptic can adopt to support (R). This line of reasoning says that *S* needs independent justification for ruling out any sceptical alternative because *S*'s seeming-based justification for *P* also needs to be *based* on this independent justification.

16. There are other—perhaps minor—asserted merits of (PC), which I set aside here. For instance, (PC) has been claimed to provide solutions to the problem of expert recognition (cf. Brogaard 2013) and the speckled hen problem (cf. Tucker 2010).

17. Here is an incomplete list of papers that respond to these objections. Crazy beliefs objection: Huemer (2015). Bayesian objection: Silins (2007), Kung (2010) and Moretti (2015a). Easy knowledge objection: Pryor (2004). Cognitive penetration objection: Tucker (2010) and Huemer (2013). Higher order justification objection: Rogers and Matheson (2011) and Moretti and Piazza (2015). For more comprehensive surveys of objections to (PC) and responses see Tucker (2013), Huemer (2015) and Moretti (2015b).

18. I have discussed a local version of the problem of reflective awareness (applied to perceptual appearances only and interpreting inferential justification as high probability) in Moretti (2015a, § 6).

19. Where "acquaintance" should be intended as a form direct awareness in Fumerton (1995)'s sense.

20. There is a *third* expression that one might want to distinguish from the above two expressions, that is to say: "*S*'s directing her attention to a seeming that *P*". Arguably, *S* may have more than one seeming at the same time (for instance, *S* might simultaneously entertain the visual seeming that there is a book on the desk and the acoustic seeming that a radio is on). This third expression refers to *S*'s act of selecting just one of her concurrent seemings. This act of *S* doesn't seem to require *S* to become reflectively aware of—in the sense clarified above—the selected seeming.

21. As suggested by a reviewer of this Journal, a supporter of (PC) might try to respond by insisting that since *S* doesn't have any seeming (or other evidence) that some deception hypothesis *SH* is true at t_2 , *S*'s immediate justification for *P* stands undefeated. However, this response wouldn't work. For it is intuitive that once *S* becomes reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and realizes that there are possible explanations of its existence incompatible with *P*, *S*'s mere feeling to ascertain that *P* is true will cease to be *by itself* a good reason to believe *P* for *S*. And this will be so whether or not *S* has any seeming (or other evidence) that some *SH* is true.

22. Let's set aside *conditional* proofs.

23. These considerations naturally suggest a view about *epistemic justification* that parallels Sosa's celebrated thesis there are two different kinds of *knowledge*. According to Sosa, "One has *animal*

knowledge about one's environment, one's past, and one's own experience if one's judgments and beliefs about these are direct responses to their impact—e.g., through perception or memory—with little or no benefit of reflection or understanding... [Furthermore,] one has *reflective knowledge* if one's judgment or belief manifests not only such direct response to the fact known but also understanding of its place in a wider whole that includes one's belief and knowledge of it and how these come about." (1991: 240. See also Sosa 2007 and 2009). Animal knowledge is mere *reactive* knowledge, whereas reflective knowledge is mainly *unifying* or *integrating* knowledge. If (PC) is true, we could distinguish between *animal justification* and *reflective justification*. *S*'s animal justification for believing *P* can be identified with *S*'s non-inferential justification for *P* based on *S*'s seeming that *P*. Justification of this type has essentially the function of certifying the rationality of *S*'s reactive beliefs—namely, directly caused by *S*'s appearances. *S*'s reflective justification for believing *P*, on the other hand, can be identified with *S*'s inferential justification for believing *P* based on *S*'s reflective belief that she has an appearance that *P*. Justification of this type stems from *S*'s ability to *explain* her appearance that *P* by adducing the truth of *P* in conjunction with the truth of many other propositions about *S*'s environment and cognitive faculties. Justification of this type has the function of certifying the rationality of *S*'s beliefs that aim at a unified and integrated view of the world.

24. To have some examples, think of microscopists, birdwatchers, pilots, witnesses in courts of law, and epistemologists.

25. Note that *S*'s being *reflectively acquainted* with a seeming that *P* and *S*'s having a *higher-order seeming* that she has a seeming that *P* are two different mental states, for only the former is *factive* but not the latter.

26. One might additionally argue that this response is flawed because the problem of reflective awareness applies to *S*'s *higher order* seemings as well. For the existence *S*'s higher order seeming that *S* has a seeming that *P* can possibly be explained by a deception hypothesis—that is to say, an explanation that entails that *S*'s reflective belief that she has a seeming that *P* is false. I'm not sure, however, that this would be a good argument, as I'm not sure that deception hypotheses of this sort are really conceivable.

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