

# **Introduction**

## Ch 1 of *Seemings and Justification*

Luca Moretti  
University of Aberdeen  
[l.moretti@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:l.moretti@abdn.ac.uk)

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

# 1. Introduction

In this introduction I present the topic of the investigation carried out in this book and the central theses defended in it. I also clarify some assumption of my research, specify the intended audience of this book and summarize its structure.

This work aims to introduce, dissect and evaluate the important but controversial epistemological position called *phenomenal conservatism*. Variants or special versions of this position have been lingering in the views of various philosophers in the last forty years, until Michael Huemer (2001) has introduced phenomenal conservatism officially into epistemology, using this name.<sup>1</sup> Ever since, the popularity of this position has increased dramatically.

Phenomenal conservatism maintains that our *appearances* or *seemings* — the ways things appear to us to be — have the inherent power to justify our beliefs. According to the phenomenal conservative, for example, if it appears to you, say, that it is raining outside, that  $15 - 7 = 8$ , or that Hitler was a wicked man, you thereby have a good reason to believe these things. This reason or justification is nevertheless defeasible — it can be destroyed by further evidence indicating that the appearance is unreliable or the belief false. Appearances are conceived of by the phenomenal conservative as *experiences* — so, not as beliefs or other doxastic states — provided with propositional content.

Phenomenal conservatism looks very natural and comes with a number of apparent epistemological benefits. For instance, it supplies a clear account of where our justification — perhaps *all* our epistemic justification — basically comes from: it originates from our seemings. It also illuminates the rationality of ordinary epistemic practices in which we take ourselves and others to have reasons to entertain beliefs just because of how things appear to be. Phenomenal

---

<sup>1</sup> James Pryor (2000, 2004) has simultaneously introduced a very similar view, though less general, called *dogmatism*.

conservatism also shields us from sceptical threats, for we don't need antecedent guarantee that our appearances are reliable to get justification from them.

As other interesting philosophical views, phenomenal conservatism has been praised for its merits but also targeted with various objections. My research aims to show that phenomenal conservatives can dismiss some of the most worrisome challenges raised against their view. In particular, I will argue that if seemings were *penetrated* (i.e. partly caused) by other cognitive states of the subject, they would not lose their inherent justifying power. So, against the recent claims of certain epistemologists, the possibility of cognitively penetrated appearances is not a threat to phenomenal conservatism. Furthermore, I will show that it hasn't actually been proven that phenomenal conservatism clashes with Bayesian methodology. Hence, in spite of what various philosophers think, phenomenal conservatism isn't objectionable in this sense. I will also show that phenomenal conservatism doesn't sanction suspicious procedures that seem to produce justification in an *excessively easy* way. Thus, in contrast to an apparently forceful and recurring criticism, phenomenal conservatism isn't problematic in this sense either.

I will nevertheless contend that phenomenal conservatism has an important limit: seeming-based justification is *elusive*: it fades away as the subject becomes reflectively aware of the relevant seeming. I will clarify some senses in which this fact limits the actual explanatory role of phenomenal conservatism and its antisceptical bite.

Phenomenal conservatism could virtually be connected to indefinitely many issues and debates in philosophy. In this short monograph I have selected only some of the issues discussed in current literature and I have introduced some novel questions. In the final part of the book, I suggest further areas of investigation that scholars interested in phenomenal conservatism might want to explore.

As any other philosophical investigation, my work rests on some assumptions. One of the most crucial is this:<sup>2</sup> I assume that justification is an *internalist* notion. In other words, I assume that when a subject *S* has justification for entertaining some propositional attitude, what produces this justification is a factor reflectively accessible to *S*, or a mental state of *S*.<sup>3</sup> There may be various reasons to endorse internalism about justification. My view is that the *new evil demon* argument (Lehrer and Cohen 1983 and Cohen 1984) gives it a strong support.<sup>4</sup>

Although I will generally introduce and clarify the philosophical notions that I use in my analyses and arguments, the discussion carried out in the next chapters will typically be rather “technical” and so quite advanced. Accordingly, this book is suitable for an audience of postgraduate students and scholars of analytic philosophy who have already a background in epistemology and want to be introduced to phenomenal conservatism and/or intend to go deeper into some of its more or less problematic features and implications.

This is the structure of the book. In §2 I present phenomenal conservatism and the notion of seeming or appearance, I review asserted epistemic merits of phenomenal conservatism and some preliminary difficulties of it. In §3 I discuss the conjecture that appearances are cognitively penetrable and evaluate and reject a number of objections to phenomenal conservatism hinging on this conjecture. In §4 I criticize and reject a celebrated argument to the effect that phenomenal conservatism is incompatible with Bayesianism. I also contend that seeming-based justification is elusive in the way described before. In §5 I argue that since seeming-based justification is elusive, the antiseptical bite of phenomenal conservatism is limited but phenomenal conservatism isn’t actually affected by easy justification problems. In § 6, I draw the conclusions of my work.

---

2 These are other assumptions of mine: I will work with an *invariantist*, *non-relativist* and *non-pragmatically* encroached notion of epistemic justification (although these assumptions might ultimately not be necessary to the soundness of my arguments).

3 Although I’m very sympathetic to *accessibilism*, I prefer to leave open the possibility that internalism could find its best characterization when interpreted as *mentalism*. (For a characterization of accessibilism and mentalism see §2.)

4 Littlejohn (forthcoming) and Williamson (forthcoming) have recently challenged this argument. See however Madison (2017)’s rejoinder.

## References

- Cohen, Stewart. 1984. Justification and truth. *Philosophical Studies* 46: 279-295.
- Huemer, Michael. 2001. *Skepticism and the veil of perception*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lehrer, Keith and Stewart Cohen. 1983. Justification, truth, and coherence. *Synthese* 55: 191-207.
- Littlejohn, Clayton (forthcoming). A plea for epistemic excuses. In *The New Evil Demon*, eds. Julien Dutant and Fabian Dorsch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Madison, Brent. 2017. On justifications and excuses. *Synthese* 195: 4551-4562.
- Pryor, Jim. 2000. The skeptic and the dogmatist. *Nous* 34: 517-549.
- . 2004. What's wrong with Moore's argument? *Philosophical Issue, 14, Epistemology*: 349-378.
- Williamson, Timothy (forthcoming). Justifications, excuses, and sceptical scenarios. In *The New Evil Demon*, eds. Julien Dutant and Fabian Dorsch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.