Phenomenal Conservatism

Ch 2 of *Seemings and Justification*

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2. Phenomenal conservatism

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I introduce and analyse the tenets of phenomenal conservatism, and discuss the problem of the nature of appearances. After that, I review the asserted epistemic merits of phenomenal conservatism and the principal arguments adduced in support of it. Finally, I survey objections to phenomenal conservatism and responses by its advocates. Some of these objections will be scrutinized and appraised in the next chapters.

2.2 The basics of phenomenal conservatism

Phenomenal conservatism (also called *dogmatism*)[1] holds that *appearances* or *seemings* — namely, ways things appear to be — are sources of defeasible justification.[2] According to phenomenal conservatism, for instance, you can have defeasible justification for believing that the sun is rising simply because it seems visually so to you, or you can have defeasible justification for believing that 5 + 7 = 12 because this appears to be a priori true to you.[3] A key intuition of the phenomenal conservative is that one should grant that things are the way they appear to be unless one has reason to doubt it.

Phenomenal conservatism is chiefly associated with Michael Huemer's work. Other authors have nevertheless proposed similar views, though less articulated or narrower in scope. (For instance, Chisholm 1989, Audi 1993, Tolhurst 1998, Swinburne 1998, Pollock and Cruz 1999, Bealer 2000, Pryor 2000, 2004 and Chudnoff 2011). Huemer (2007) states the tenet of phenomenal conservatism as follows:

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[1] See for instance Tucker (2013).
[2] Good introductions to phenomenal conservatism are Tucker (2013) and Huemer (2019).
[3] Phenomenal conservatism must not be confused with *doxastic* or *epistemic* conservatism, which says that one's mere *believing P* gives one some defeasible justification for *continuing doing so*.

(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*. (30)

Huemer (2001) defends a stronger schema:

(PC) If it seems to *S* that *P*, in the absence of defeaters *S* thereby has justification *sufficient to believe P*. (Cf. 99)

Huemer has dropped (PC) because he found it too general: it is implausible that a *hazy, wavering* or *fleeting* seeming that *P* could give *S* justification sufficient to believe *P* (cf. 2007: 30n1). Huemer seems to concede that if *S*'s seeming that *P* is clear and firm, in the absence of defeaters, *S* has justification sufficient to believe *P*. Throughout this book I concentrate on (PC), rather than (pc), on the assumption that *S*'s seeming that *P* is clear and firm. (PC) so interpreted expresses the view actually at stake in most discussions on phenomenal conservatism. Hereafter, whenever I speak of a seeming or appearance, I always mean clear and firm seeming.

Let's dissect (PC). 'It seems' in (PC) must not be read in a way that expresses, for instance, a doubt ('it seems that *P* but I'm not so sure'), deception ('it seems that *P* but I know it isn't actually the case'), or a comparison ('when your dog barks it seems to me he's a wolf' meaning that the dog *resembles* a wolf).[4] The expression 'it seems' in (PC) is just meant to pick up a *mental state* of a general type, which we are supposed to be intimately familiar with, that comes about whenever things appear to us to be in a definite way. A mental state of this type is what phenomenal conservatives call *seeming* or *appearance*.

'Justification' in (PC) is intended as *ultima facie* (or *all things considered*) justification. (PC) can easily be re-phrased in terms of *prima facie* justification as follows:

[4] In the literature on appearances the semantic ambiguity of 'appears' was probably first noticed in Chisholm (1957). Huemer (2013) denies that 'appears' is semantically ambiguous.

If it seems to *S* that *P*, *S* thereby has *prima facie* justification sufficient to believe *P*.

Although (PC) is about *propositional* justification, it can be re-formulated as follows to concern with *doxastic* justification:

(PC^{D}) In the absence of defeaters, *S*'s belief that *P* is justified if it is based on *S*'s seeming that *P*. (Cf. Huemer 2019)[5]

The 'thereby' in (PC) signals that *S*'s justification for *P* rests *solely* on *S*'s seeming that *P*. So, *S*'s justification for *P* isn't based (even in part) on *S*'s justification for entertaining the seeming that *P*[6] or any belief of *S* — for instance, the belief that *S*'s cognitive faculties are working properly, or that no sceptical conjecture is true. Since *S*'s justification for *P* rests solely on *S*'s seeming that *P*, it is both *immediate* (cf. Pryor 2005) and *non-inferential* (cf. Huemer 2019) justification. Various sorts of things can count as defeaters of *S*'s seeming-based justification for *P.* This justification can be destroyed or weakened by, for instance, *S*'s evidence in favour of ¬*P*,[7] evidence that *P*'s truth is not ascertainable by *S*'s relevant faculty, evidence that this faculty is malfunctioning, and so on, where 'evidence' refers to another justified belief or a seeming of *S* (cf. Huemer 2006). In the next chapters, 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 ¬*P* can destroy *S*'s seeming-based justification for believing *P*.

[5] *S* has *propositional* justification for *P* just in case *S* has a justifier of *P* whether or not *S* actually believes *P* on the basis of the justifier or at all. *S* has *doxastic* justification for *P* just in case *S* has propositional justification for *P* and bases her belief that *P* on the justifier of *P* (cf. Kvanvig 2003). On these standard characterizations, (PC) entails (PC^{D}).

[6] Supposing there could be such a justification. Indeed, the claim that a seeming conceived as an *experience* (see below) can be epistemically justified appears incongruous (cf. Pryor 2005).

[7] Where '¬'is logical negation.

Internalism about epistemic justification is the view that justification is entirely determined by factors "internal" to the subject *S*. More precisely, *accessibilism* holds that the only factors relevant to justification are those that *S* can find to be present (or absent) by mere reflection. Whereas *mentalism* holds that justification supervenes on (non-factive) mental states of *S*. *Externalism* about epistemic justification, on the other hand, just denies both accessibilism and mentalism (cf. Pappas 2014). For example, according to an influential form of externalism called *process reliabilism*, what makes a belief of *S* justified is its being produced by a statistically reliable process (where the reliable process need not be reflectively accessible or mental). Phenomenal conservatism — at least the version defended by Huemer — is an *internalist* (both *accessibilist* and *mentalist*) view of justification.[8] In fact (PC) fits with, though doesn't entail, the assumption that *S*'s justification depends only on *mental* factors *reflectively accessible* to *S* — namely, *S*'s seemings and the absence of defeating evidence. Huemer (2006) defends internalism and argues that it is the position that better than any other accounts for the central internalist intuitions.

2.3 The nature of seemings

Seemings are a genus that includes many species. (PC) or close variants have been invoked to account for the justification of beliefs of different types — perceptual (Pryor 2000, Huemer 2001 and Tucker 2010), introspective (Huemer 2007 and Audi 2013), mnemonic (Pollock and Cruz 1999 and Audi 2013), a priori (Bealer 2000 and Chudnoff 2011, 2013) and moral (Huemer 2005). These accounts assume that there exist perceptual, introspective, mnemonic, intellectual (or rational), and moral *seemings*.[9] I gave examples of perceptual and intellectual seemings at the beginning of §2.2. These are examples of the remaining types: it seems to me that I'm cheerful (introspective); it seems to me to recall that Mary went to China (mnemonic); it seems to me that torturing animals for fun is abominable (moral).

[8] For externalists variants of phenomenal conservatism see Goldman (2008) and Bergmann (2013a).
[9] Tucker (2011) also posits *religious* appearances and Brogaard (2018) *auditory-semantic* seemings.

Philosophers have taken at least four different views about the general nature of seemings. According to the *belief* view — endorsed for instance by Lycan (1998: 165-66), Hanna (2011) and somewhat Swinburne (2001: 141-142) — a seeming that *P* is nothing but a spontaneous, non-inferential belief that *P*. The basic problem of this view is that *S*'s having a seeming that *P* doesn't require *S*'s believing *P* (cf. Huemer 2007, 2019 and Cullison 2010). Suppose for example *S* is aware of having an optical illusion that *P*. *S* will have an appearance that *P* but won't believe *P*. (See Lyons 2009: 71-72 and Hanna 2011 for responses, and McCain 2012 and McAllister 2017 for counterarguments.)

This difficulty doesn't afflict the *disposition* view, which identifies a seeming that *P* with a conscious disposition or inclination to believe *P*. This view is endorsed by, for example, Swinburne (2001: 141-142), Sosa (2007: 258-259), Rogers and Matheson (2011) and possibly Taylor (2015). The disposition view doesn't support (PC) because *S*'s mere conscious inclination to believe *P* cannot give *S* justification for believing *P*. The disposition view appears implausible for independent reasons (cf. Tolhurst 1998, Huemer 2007, 2019 and Cullison 2010). To begin with, it seems possible that *S* could be aware of having a misleading appearance that *P* and be so accustomed to it that she may even lack the inclination to believe *P*. (Imagine *S* is a psychologist that routinely tests patients with the same optical illusions.) Moreover, *S* might be consciously disposed to believe a proposition that doesn't actually seem true to her — e.g. out of her wishful thinking. Finally, *S*'s seeming that *P* could explain *non-trivially S*'s conscious inclination to believe *P*. If *S*'s seeming that *P* were *the same* as *S*'s conscious inclination to believe *P*, this would be impossible. (See Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009 and Taylor 2015 for responses, and McAllister 2017 for counterarguments.)

Another conception of the nature of seemings, which Tucker (2013) calls *evidence-taking* view, holds that *S* has a seeming that *P* just in case *S* believes or is consciously inclined to believe that she has a mental state *M* that counts in favour of *P*'s truth (see Tooley 2013 and Conee 2013[10]).

[10] Conee only discusses but doesn't endorse this view.

On this view, for instance, it could seem to *S* that there is a tiger before her in the sense that *S* could believe or be consciously inclined to believe that her sensory image of a yellow-brown coat striped with black before her is evidence that there is a tiger. The evidence-taking view doesn't sustain (PC). For *S*'s mere believing or being consciously inclined to believe that she has a mental state that supports *P* couldn't give *S* justification for believing *P* (cf. Conee 2013). The evidence-taking view isn't beset with the difficulties discussed before. Nevertheless, it has problems on its own. One is that it takes *S*'s having a *second-order* mental state or conscious disposition to be a necessary condition for *S*'s having an appearance, but it is intuitively plausible that *S* could have an appearance without having any second-order mental state or conscious disposition — and even without being able to have them.[11] The evidence-taking view looks thus over-intellectualized and farfetched. Another problem is that *S* could come to believe or consciously tend to believe that her mental state *M* supports *P* even if *P* doesn't actually seem to be true to *S*. This might happen when *S wishfully* believes that *P* on the basis of *M*. It also appears possible that *S* could have a seeming that *P* without believing or consciously tending to believe that any mental state of her counts in favour of *P*. Think of a committed sceptic who admits that it *seems* to her that there are external things, though she neither believes nor is consciously inclined to believe that her mental states count in favour of the existence of these things (cf. Huemer 2013; see McAllister 2017 for further criticism).

The most popular conception of the nature of seemings is the *experience* view. Its advocates include Bealer (2000), Pryor (2000, 2004), Huemer (2001, 2007, 2013), Cullison (2010, 2013), Chudnoff (2011), Brogaard (2013),[12] Lycan (2013), Markie (2013), McGrath (2013), Skene (2013), Tucker (2010, 2013) and McAllister (2017). On this view, seemings are *experiences with propositional content* (some prefer to say *sui generis propositional attitudes*), *a mind-to-world*

[11] Suppose *S* is a small child.

[12] To be accurate Brogaard contends that certain seemings, which she calls *epistemic*, are beliefs.

direction of fit and a *distinctive phenomenology*. Perceptual, introspective, mnemonic, a priori, and moral appearances have all these features.

A first motive for supposing that seemings have propositional content is that we refer to them by using *that-clauses* (e.g. we say 'it seems to me *that*...'). It would be odd if expressions such as '*S* desires that' and '*S* believes that' expressed a relation between a subject and a proposition but the expression 'it seems to *S* that' did not. A more decisive reason to think that seemings have propositional content is that they are the sorts of things that can be *accurate*. Suppose it seems to you that the cat is on the mat, but the cat is a hologram. Your appearance is inaccurate. Your seeming couldn't be inaccurate if it didn't embed something capable of being true or false. Since propositions are the primary bearers of truth and falsehood, seemings probably have propositional content (cf. Cullison 2013).[13]

The content of a mental state — including the one of seemings — may fit or fail to fit how things are. If a seeming's content fails to fit how things are (so it is false or inaccurate), the seeming is considered defective. The same happens with beliefs. That's why seemings and beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit. Intentions and desires, on the other hand, have a world-to-mind direction of fit, for they are taken to be defective if *the world* fails to fit their contents (cf. Tolhurst 1998).

Part of what makes seemings different from and irreducible to any other representational state — like hoping, believing or imagining — is their distinctive phenomenology. Tolhurst characterizes it as 'felt veridicality' or 'the feel of truth'. According to Tolhurst,

> Seemings have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are. (1998: 298-299)

[13] Crane (2009) argues that the fact that perceptual experiences have accuracy conditions is insufficient to show that they have *propositional* contents. A parallel case could probably be made for seemings. See Cullison (2013) for a response. Importantly, Siegel (2013) emphasizes that even if the contents of perceptual appearances and the contents of beliefs differed in structure, they could often be close enough to assure that the first provides immediate justification for the latter. For discussion see Siegel and Silins (2015).

Pryor describes this phenomenology as 'the feeling of seeming to ascertain that a given proposition is true' (2004: 357). He stresses that

> Our [appearances] represent propositions in such a way that it 'feels as if' we could tell that those propositions are true — and that we're perceiving them to be true — just by virtue of having them so represented. (2000: 547)

In sum, in virtue of their particular phenomenology, seemings represent their content as *actualized* or *verified.* This special feature is called *phenomenal force* by Pryor (2000), *forcefulness* by Huemer (2001), and *assertiveness* by Tucker (2010). The forcefulness (or phenomenal force or assertiveness) is present, for example, when it *seems* to you that 1 + 1 = 2,[14] or when it *seems* to you that the cat is on the mat. But it is absent when, for example, you *conjecture* that 854 – 77 = 777, or when you *imagine* that your phone is ringing. The last two mental states — as the first two — do have a propositional content, but they don't give you the feeling of ascertaining that this content is true. Importantly, *belief* as such also lacks the forcefulness of seemings. For you can believe something — perhaps based on calculation or testimony — that doesn't feel true or even feels false to you (cf. McAllister 2017).

The experience view of appearances is immune to the problems described before that afflict rival views. For instance, if seemings possess forcefulness, this explains — non-trivially — why they normally incline us to believe their content (cf. McAllister 2017). The experience view supports (PC) because it isn't implausible that experiences with propositional content are capable of justifying beliefs (cf. Tucker 2013). Some advocates of phenomenal conservatism (or cousin views) maintain that the source of the justifying power of appearances is their phenomenal force. The

[14] Note that forcefulness doesn't seem to require any *sensible* representation. In other words, it is characterized by *cognitive* qualia but not necessarily *non-cognitive* qualia. The latter involve colours, sounds, flavours, and so on. The former are qualia present in certain types of mental processes, such as thinking and understanding.

intuition is that if you have the distinct feeling of ascertaining that *P*, you do have a prima facie epistemic reason to believe *P* (cf. Pryor 2000, 2004 and Berghofer 2018).

A complaint sometimes raised against the experience view says that the notion of forcefulness (or phenomenal force or assertiveness) can be illuminated only partly through metaphors and examples, but it is actually unanalysable. Hence, this notion is obscure and suspect (cf. Conee 2013 and Tooley 2013). I don't see this as a problem. The forcefulness of appearances has been acknowledged as quite a familiar feature of these mental states by very many epistemologists and philosophers of mind (cf. McAlister 2018). Also, it is worth stressing that we can talk intelligently about things without having a precise or complete analysis of them. (A prominent philosophical example is the notion of knowledge.) We shouldn't forget that not any notion is suitable to philosophical analysis — some notions are just *fundamental.* They can be illuminated only ostensively by examples and by disclosing relations they entertain with other notions. Forcefulness might be one of these basic notions. In the remaining of this book I presuppose the experience view of appearances.

Before concluding this section, let's dwell on *perceptual* appearances. Although seemings of this kind are those frequently mentioned in examples and arguments, there are divergences about their composition even among advocates of the experience view. Tolhurst (1998), Huemer (2001, 58-79) and, more recently, Chudnoff and DiDomenico (2015) — among others — insist that perceptual seemings are just sensations or perceptions.[15] According to these authors, for instance, when it visually seems to you that (*R*) the phone directory is on the desk, your seeming that *R is* your perception that *R*. On the other hand, Tucker (2010, 2011), Brogaard (2013) and Cullison (2013) — among others — contend that seemings are distinct from sensations or perceptions, and that perceptual seemings are constituted by perceptions *and* seemings.[16] For instance, these authors

[15] Throughout this work 'perception' and 'to perceive' refer to a *non-factive* state or acts.

[16] Tucker (2010) thinks that *perceptual* seemings and sensations might come apart. For example, in (scientifically tested) cases of blind sight, the subject would have seemings of objects before her accompanied by no visual sensation. The reverse would also happen: subjects affected by certain pathologies that make them incapable of recognizing very ordinary things could have standard visual sensations but lack the usually correlated seemings.

would claim that when it visually seems to you that *R*, you actually entertain a perception — e.g. a visual image of two rectangularly shaped objects with different sizes, colours and locations[17] — together with a seeming — i.e. a propositional attitude with phenomenal force having *R* as its content.[18] Brogaard (2013) suggests that perceptual seemings are kind of *interpretations* of correlated sensations. Brogaard (2013), Cullison (2013) and Tucker (2013) also think that perceptual seemings can be *caused* by appropriate sensations. These philosophers argue that telling apart perceptual seemings and sensations helps us explain some psychological phenomena, such as the one of the enhanced perceptual skills of experts, and solve epistemological puzzles such as the *speckled hen* one (see mainly Tucker 2010). For counterarguments see Chudnoff and DiDomenico (2015).

2.4 Supporting phenomenal conservatism

Phenomenal conservatism is philosophically alluring for many reasons. To start with, (PC) provides a rationale for widespread epistemic practices. Our reasons for holding many ordinary beliefs 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, we often attribute reasons for entertaining beliefs to small children, who couldn't have the complex thought that their faculties are reliable or that scepticism is false (cf. Pryor 2000).

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[17] How perceptions should be conceived of is also controversial within this view of perceptual seemings. Cullison (2013) thinks of perceptions as *raw* sensations without propositional content. Whereas Tucker (2010) and Brogaard (2013) think of them as states capable of having contents on their own, which don't necessarily match the contents of the correlated seemings. For example, Brogaard writes: 'If I am giving a talk to fifty-four people, my perceptual experience... represents fifty-four people in the room but it doesn't... *seem* to me that there are fifty-four people in the room. At best, it seems to me that there are many people' (2013: 276, my emphasis).

[18] I have used an example of *visual* seemings but this view also applies to other types of perceptual seemings. Visual seemings involve — according to these authors — a seeming and a visual image. Auditory seemings would involve a seeming and a mental sound, and so on for the other senses. A view of this type could be applied in other domains. For instance, one might argue that *recalling* a directly experienced event involves a seeming accompanied by a mental image of that event, or that *moral judgments* are typically based on seemings accompanied by emotions such as revulsion or admiration (cf. Tucker 2013).

Phenomenal conservatism is perceived to be attractive also because it offers a *unified* account of the non-inferential justification of beliefs of very different types (e.g. perceptive, introspective, a priori, mnemonic and moral). Indeed, (PC) has been asserted to constitute the general basis of fallible *foundationalism* — a view that many epistemologists find natural and plausible in itself (cf. Huemer 2001: 102). The claim is that (PC) explains how beliefs of very different types can be *basically* — i.e. 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.[19]

Another celebrated virtue of phenomenal conservatism is that it affords us the means of a thoroughgoing response to the *sceptic* — specifically, the sceptic who assumes that a subject *S* must have independent justification for ruling out any relevant sceptical alternative in order to possess justification for believing ordinary things (cf. Huemer 2001, 2019). Epistemologists agree that this assumption fosters virulent forms of scepticism (cf. Pryor 2000, Wright 2004 and Schiffer 2004). The phenomenal conservative can adduce (PC) and argue that *S* doesn't need the independent justification the sceptic assumes *S* must have. For instance, suppose *S* entertains a visual experience as if (*P*) there is a hand. The sceptic might argue that *S*'s experience as if *P* gives *S* justification for believing *P* only if *S* has independent justification for ruling out that (*SH*) *S* is a disembodied soul in an immaterial world with the hallucination of a hand caused by a demon. The sceptic will insist that since *S* cannot possess this independent justification, *S* doesn't have justification for believing *P*. Suppose, however, that *S*'s experience as if *P* is a *seeming* that *P*. If (PC) is true, *S* has prima facie justification for believing *P* even if *S* has no independent reason to rule out *SH* (cf. Huemer 2001 and Pryor 2000, 2004). Mnemonic scepticism can be addressed in similar way. Whenever *S* seems to remember that *P*, if (PC) is true, *S* possesses prima facie justification for believing *P* even if *S* has

[19] The acquaintance theory of justification (see for instance Fumerton 1995) provides an alternative explanation. Huemer (2006, 2007, 2011) argues against the acquaintance theory.

no independent justification for ruling out, say, the Russellian conjecture that the universe popped into existence an instant ago. Other forms of scepticism can be addressed along these lines.[20]

Quite independently of these asserted virtues, phenomenal conservatism appears plausible once one adopts a broadly internalist perspective about epistemic justification. Internalists tend to see a very tight connection between the attitudes that are epistemically *justified* for a subject and those that are epistemically *rational* from her standpoint (cf. Huemer 2001: 22). When justification and rationality are tightly linked in this way, (PC) looks true. McGrath has explained why:

> Suppose it seems to you that *P* and you have no defeaters (i.e. no good evidence for ¬*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 ¬*P*? Withhold judgment on *P*? It *does* seem to you that *P*, and you lack evidence for ¬*P* and for the unreliability of the seeming with respect to *P*. The only reasonable attitude to take is belief. (2013: 226, edited)

Provided that epistemic rationality (or reasonability) is or entails epistemic justification, McGrath's conclusion validates (PC). I find this argument persuasive.

Huemer (2001: 103-4) has a similar argument that relies, more specifically, on Foley (1993)'s instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality. According to Foley, it is epistemically rational for *S* to do *X,* if doing *X* would appear, from *S*'s standpoint, to be an effective way of satisfying the central epistemic goal of believing the true and not believing the false. Suppose it seems to *S* that *P* and *S* has no reason to doubt *P*. From *S*'s standpoint, believing *P* would appear to be an effective means of pursuing the central epistemic goal. Hence, *S*'s believing *P* would be epistemically rational, and so epistemically justified.

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[20] See Tucker (2010) for further asserted merits of phenomenal conservatism.

A drawback of this argument — which doesn't afflict McGrath's — is that it cannot substantiate important applications of (PC). As said, a reason of (PC)'s appeal is that it vindicates attributions of epistemic justification to small children who couldn't conceive of sceptical alternatives. A problem of Huemer's argument is that small children would be incapable of grasping the complex notion of an epistemic goal.[21]

Tucker (2013) doesn't find McGrath's case convincing.[22] He suggests that since 'reasonable attitude' in McGrath's conclusion can be interpreted as '*non-incoherent* attitude'— rather than '*justified* attitude' — the argument doesn't support (PC). Suppose for instance you *believe Q* (whether or not you have justification for *Q*). If you also *disbelieved* or *withheld belief* about the disjunction *Q v R,* these attitudes would be *incoherent* with your attitude towards *Q*. So they would be — in this sense — *irrational*. The only non-incoherent and — in this sense — *rational* attitude for you to have towards *Q v R* is *believing* it. This type or rationality that depends on coherence is called *rational commitment*. Since you believe *Q*, you are rationally committed to believing *Q v R*. Rational commitment to believing a proposition doesn't entail epistemic justification for doing it. For example, if you believe *Q without justification*, you are still rationally committed to believing *Q v R*, but this doesn't give you justification for believing *Q v R*. Tucker thinks that the conclusion of McGrath's argument doesn't rule out this possibility: your having a seeming that *P* and no defeater only *rationally commits* you to believing *P* without providing epistemic justification for it. Therefore — Tucker contends — McGrath's argument doesn't vindicate (PC).[23]

This ingenious objection is flawed. The problem is that there are defeaters that, if undefeated, necessarily harm the type of rationality described in McGrath's case, but they may not harm rational commitment. So it is implausible that the type of rationality described in McGrath's case is identical to rational commitment. The defeaters I have in mind are evidence indicating that the *basis* of your justification may be inappropriate. Suppose you initially believe *Q* with

[21] A similar concern is raised in Hasan (2013: 133-134).

[22] See also Ghijsen (2016).

[23] McGrath (2013) gives this criticism a response, which Tucker (2013: 12n27) finds dubious.

justification. This gives you justification for believing *Q v R* and commits you to believing *Q v R*. Imagine that you then acquire evidence *D* that *Q* is false with probability ½. If undefeated, *D* will defeat your justification for believing *Q,* and thus your justification for believing *Q v R*. However, *D* won't necessarily defeat your rational commitment. If after acquiring *D*, you obstinately keep believing *Q* (perhaps out of wishful thinking), your justification for *Q v R* is destroyed, but your *rational commitment* to believing *Q v R* stands *undefeated*. This shows that *D,* if undefeated, necessarily harms your justification for *Q v R* but not necessarily your rational commitment to believing *Q v R*.

Now take again McGrath's argument. If you have a seeming that *P* and no defeater, it is rational for you to believe *P*. Imagine that you then acquire evidence *D** that your seeming is inaccurate with probability ½. *You still have that seeming*, but at this point it is for you no longer rational — in McGrath's sense — to believe *P.* Note that the defeated rational support must be epistemic justification. For if it were rational commitment, it would stand undefeated.[24] This shows that seemings do supply epistemic justification.

To conclude the section, let me dwell on Huemer's infamous *self-defeat* argument (see mainly Huemer 2007), which aims to show that the belief that (PC) is false *cannot be doxastically justified*. This is a reconstruction of it:

(1) All our beliefs (with a few irrelevant exceptions)[25] are based on our seemings.

(2) If a belief that *P* is based on something that doesn't constitute a source of propositional justification for *P*, then the belief is doxastically unjustified.

(3) Therefore, if no seeming confers justification on the proposition that constitutes its content, then no belief is justified.

[24] If seemings *also* produce rational commitment, there must be a sense in which it is for you still rational to believe *P*.

[25] The exceptions concern cases of self-deception and leaps of faith — these are irrelevant because opponents of (PC) would not base their belief that (PC) is false on such sources. (cf. Huemer 2007: 39n14).

(4) But if (PC) is false, then no seeming confers justification on the proposition that constitutes its content.

Therefore,

(C) If (PC) is false, then no belief is doxastically justified, including any belief that (PC) is false.[26]

While Huemer (2019) acknowledges that this argument is controversial, other supporters of phenomenal conservatism have explicitly distanced themselves from it (e.g. Tucker 2013: 9 n22 and Lycan 2013). Indeed, the self-defeat case has been targeted by numerous objections. For instance, Huemer claims that (1) is *empirically true* but DePaul (2009) and Markie (2013) complain that he doesn't give enough evidence for believing so. Note that if a belief that (PC) is false could be based on something other than appearances, against (C), the belief might prove doxastically justified. Some have attacked (1) contending that our doxastically justified beliefs aren't or might not be based on seemings. For instance, DePoe (2011), Hasan (2013) and Tooley (2013) insist that *the facts with which the subject S is directly acquainted with,* rather than *S*'s seemings, are the bases of the *S*'s beliefs in general or in some cases.[27] Conee (2013) suggests that the doxastic justification of all our beliefs may depend on an *evidentialist* condition that assigns no basing role to appearances. Another problem of (1) is that it may be questioned that *inferential* beliefs and *testimonial* beliefs are based on seemings (cf. Conee 2013).

A different group of objections targets (4). DePaul (2009), Tooley (2013) and Markie (2013) contend that (4) is false because if (PC) were false but a *restricted version* of (PC) were true, seemings could still confer defeasible justification on their contents. For instance, Markie (2013) rejects (PC) and proposes a restrained variant according to which *S*'s seeming that *P* gives *S* prima

[26] As Huemer (2007) and Markie (2013) note, from (C) we can get to the conclusion that (PC) is true by adding the premise that our beliefs aren't generally unjustified.

[27] The acquaintance theory of justification holds, in its most elementary version, that *S*'s belief that *P* is doxastically justified if *S* is acquainted with the fact that *P*. Acquaintance is a kind of direct awareness of facts. Acquaintance is *factive.* So *S*'s being acquainted with the fact that *P* — unlike S's having a seeming that *P* — *entails* that *P* is true. Possible objects of acquaintance include facts about one's own mental states and abstract entities.

facie justification for believing *P* only if it results from a special type of knowledge-how that *S* has. (I return to this in §3.5.) In accordance with this view, most of our seemings still confer defeasible justification on their contents, and the belief that (PC) is false can be doxastically justified without incoherence.

For further objections see Mizrahi (2014) and Beillard (2016). Although Huemer (2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2019) and Skene (2013) have endeavoured to addressed many of these challenges, my impression is that the self-defeat argument remains quite shaky.

2.5 Criticism of phenomenal conservatism

Phenomenal conservatism has been struck by diverse objections. Philosophers — e.g. Siegel (2017) — have argued that seemings don't actually have intrinsic justifying power because they might be *cognitively penetrable*. Formal epistemologists — e.g. White (2006) — have contended that phenomenal conservatism is flawed because it is incompatible with Bayesianism. Other epistemologists — e.g. Cohen (2002) — have claimed that phenomenal conservatism is problematic because it yields versions of the problem of *easy justification* (or *easy knowledge*). I myself have argued that that the antisceptical bite of phenomenal conservatism is weaker than expected, for phenomenal conservatism is affected by what I've called *the problem of reflective awareness* (cf. Moretti 2018). I'll return to these four objections in the next chapters. Let me now touch upon a number of somehow minor criticisms of phenomenal conservatism.

Byerly (2012) contends that phenomenal conservatism doesn't provide an adequate explanation of the source of non-inferential or immediate justification. For there is no good reason to rule out that what terms like 'seeming' and 'appearance' refer to is, not *one* kind of sui generis propositional attitude, but a range of *heterogeneous* mental states. So there is no good reason to exclude that 'seeming' and 'appearance' denote a *disjunctive* kind.[28] As McAllister (2017) has

[28] Note that this criticism *doesn't* say that (as suggested in §2.2) 'appearance' and 'seeming' can be used in a variety of different senses — for instance, dubitative, comparative or epistemic. The existence of these alternative usages has no bearing on the possibility that there is *one* type of mental state that is always present when something seems to be the

noted, however, the virtues of ontological simplicity and unification do supply this reason: *ceteris paribus*, we should rationally prefer a simple and unified conception of seemings to a less simple and non-unified conception of them.

DePaul (2009), Markie (2005, 2013) and Tooley (2013) maintain that phenomenal conservatism is unacceptable because it enables any sort of *odd* or *crazy* appearances to justify their own contents. Markie (2005) imagines the following possibility: as *S* sees a walnut tree, it just seems to *S* that (*P*) the walnut was planted on April 24, 1914. This is not so because *S* reads a date-of-planting sign or recalls the date. *S* just happens to have this seeming. If we accept (PC), we must conclude that *S* has prima facie justification for *P*. But this conclusion — Markie claims — looks counterintuitive. Littlejohn (2011) and Tooley (2013) suggest that phenomenal conservatism enables seemings to justify dangerous beliefs. Imagine it seems to *S* that (*Q*) God wants her to kill all non-believers, or that (*R*) cannibalism is morally permissible. If we endorse (PC), we must conclude that *S* has prima facie justification for *Q* and *R.* But this looks absurd.

A way to play down the unpalatable implications of these thought experiments is emphasizing that *S*'s ordinary background knowledge would probably *defeat S*'s seeming-based justification for propositions like *P*, *Q* and *R. S* would know, for instance, that people can't normally tell when a tree was planted by just looking at it, that mystic experiences of the type described are symptomatic of mental disorder, and that cannibalism is unanimously thought of as incompatible with civilization (cf. Huemer 2019). One could retort that it is intuitive that in the envisaged scenarios *S* shouldn't possess even *prima facie* justification for believing *P*, *Q* and *R*. Phenomenal conservatives may respond that since scenarios like these are highly unusual and thus hard to imagine vividly, people's intuitions about them are untrustworthy (cf. Huemer 2019). Phenomenal conservatives could insist that when it comes to strange scenarios like these, our intuitions can be taken to indicate, at very best, that *S* lacks *some* epistemic status but not

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case *in one particular sense*.

necessarily *justification*. *S* might for instance lack *knowledge* or *warrant*.[29] We tend to believe that *Q* and *R* are false. Since knowledge is factive, it is no surprise that we think that *S* cannot *know Q* or *R*. Furthermore, it would be unnatural to suppose that in scenarios like Markie's there is *reliable link* between *S*'s belief that *P* and *P*'s truth. Hence, it is quite natural that we think that *S* doesn't *know P*. In conclusion, it is dubious that these thoughts experiments show that phenomenal conservatism is flawed or seriously problematic.

Let's turn to a last criticism. Some contend that phenomenal conservatism is false because if *S*'s belief that *P* were based on *S*'s seeming that *P,* this wouldn't suffice to give *S* prima facie justification for believing *P*. *S* should also possess *metajustification* — namely, justification for taking her seeming to be a reliable indicator of *P*'s truth. This is a reason often adduced: if *S*'s seeming-based belief that *P* proved true but *S* hadn't metajustification, *P*'s truth could at best count as an *accident* from *S*'s viewpoint, which is incompatible with *P*'s being justified for *S* (cf. Bonjour 2004 and Bergmann 2013b).[30]

It is far from clear, however, that if *P appeared true* to *S* and this *caused* a belief that *P* in *S*'s mind, *P*'s truth could at best count as an accident from *S*'s perspective if *S* hadn't metajustification.[31] Many epistemologists — including myself — don't have this intuition; they think that in this case *P*'s truth would be *non-accidental* from *S*'s perspective even if *S* hadn't metajustification (cf. Rogers and Matheson 2011, Moretti and Piazza 2016 and Gage 2016). See Huemer (2013 and 2019) for an alternative response.

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[29] This is additional property that a true belief needs to have to become knowledge.

[30] Bergmann (2013) formulates a *dilemma* for the phenomenal conservative (which is special version of Bergmann 2006's dilemma for the internalist). According to it, the phenomenal conservative either sticks to the *false* belief that the justifying power of seemings needs no metajustification, or she admits that the justifying power of seemings requires metajustification. This commits the phenomenal conservative to a potential infinite regress leading to scepticism.

[31] To support this thesis, Bergmann (2013: 171-172) adduces a thought experiment in which (i) *S* has a seeming that *P* but (ii) due to a cognitive impairment, *S* is incapable of thinking of her seeming as a reliable indicator of *P*'s truth and thus *S* cannot have metajustification, finally (iii) *S* forms the true belief that *P independently of her seeming* and without any actual reason for doing it. Bergmann claims that it is intuitive that the truth of *S*'s belief that *P* would be accidental from *S*'s perspective in this case. I agree. Note that this result cuts no ice because, due to (iii), *S*'s belief that *P* is *not* caused by *S*'s appearance that *P* (cf. Moretti and Piazza 2016).

2.6 Conclusions

In this chapter I have introduced and analysed phenomenal conservatism, the internalist view to the effect that appearances, conceived of as sui generis propositional attitudes, supply defeasible justification for our beliefs. I have shown that phenomenal conservatism is intuitive, prima facie plausible and promissory of significant philosophical outcomes, such as affording a unified theory of non-inferential justification and defeating scepticism. I have suggested that phenomenal conservatism very probably survives a number of initial objections. To carry out a thorough appraisal of phenomenal conservatism, in the next chapters I will inspect further and more complex objections.

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