

Concluding Remarks

Ch 6 of *Seemings and Justification*

Luca Moretti
University of Aberdeen
l.moretti@abdn.ac.uk

PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION

6. Concluding remarks

In this chapter I draw the conclusions of my investigation into phenomenal conservatism. I argue that phenomenal conservatism isn't actually plagued by serious problems attributed to it by its opponents, but that it neither possesses all the epistemic merits that its advocates think it has. I suggest that phenomenal conservatism could provide a more satisfactory account of everyday epistemic practices and a more robust response to the sceptic if it were integrated with a theory of inferential justification. I also identify questions and issues relevant to the assessment of phenomenal conservatism to be investigated in further research.

Phenomenal conservatism is the internalist theory of immediate, non-inferential justification based on the principle (PC), stating that if a subject *S* has a seeming that *P*, in the absence of defeaters, *S* thereby has justification for believing *P*. Throughout this work I have assumed the soundness intuitions and arguments that attest that epistemic justification is internalist. Once epistemic internalism is adopted, (PC) appears plausible: if *S* has a seeming that *P* and no reason to distrust it, the only epistemically justified attitude for *S* to take towards *P* is — intuitively — belief. Phenomenal conservatism has been celebrated for having an array of epistemological merits. The following are possibly the most significant. Phenomenal conservatism supplies ordinary cognitive practices with a rational explanation. Indeed, in everyday life we seem to take ourselves to have justification for entertaining many beliefs just because of how things appear to us to be, in accordance with (PC). Moreover, phenomenal conservatism is claimed to form the basis of fallible foundationalism. For it looks plausible that it is our appearances that put an end to the regress of inferentially-justified beliefs, when we search for an ultimate justification of our beliefs. Finally, phenomenal conservatism is said to help us overcome scepticism. For if (PC) is true, we can get many beliefs justified on the basis of our appearances even if we lack independent reasons to rule out any sceptical conjecture. Since phenomenal conservatism looks plausible and promising of a variety of epistemological benefits, it is

important to investigate whether it actually keeps its promises and withstands apparently forceful objections raised against it. In this book I have carried out such an investigation to some extent.

In §3 I have scrutinized a number of views opposing phenomenal conservatism which entail that cognitively penetrated appearances would in many cases lack the power to justify their propositional contents even *prima facie*. I have rejected all these views as implausible, incoherent or counterintuitive. I have suggested that (undetected) cognitively penetrated appearances wouldn't lose their inherent justifying power, and that the intuitions that seem to indicate otherwise confound the property of being a belief produced by a faculty that doesn't function properly with the property of being an unjustified belief. In §4 I have refuted an apparently forceful case made to discredit (PC), according to which (PC) is incompatible with Bayesian methodology. I have shown that the conclusion that (PC) conflicts with Bayesianism follows from a specious formalization of the intuitive notion of seeming-based justification. In §4 and 5 I have found seeming-based justification to be elusive: when *S* becomes reflectively aware of a seeming that *P*, *S* loses the justification for *P* based on the seeming. For *S*'s justification based on *S*'s reflective belief that she has that seeming overrides *S*'s seeming-based justification. In §5, I have shown that since seeming-based justification is elusive in this way, (PC) is unaffected by easy justification problems.

Although the above difficulties raised against phenomenal conservatism have turned out to be insubstantial, in §5 I have shown that the fact that seeming-based justification is elusive limits the antisceptical efficacy of (PC). When *S* engages with an argument questioning *her own* having immediate justification, phenomenal conservatism doesn't give *S* the means to rebut that argument. The contribution of phenomenal conservatism to the fight against scepticism is thus more modest than expected. Alternative responses to the sceptic — for instance, abductive and hinge-proposition replies¹ — don't seem to be subject to limitations of this sort. When *S* engages with an argument questioning her own having justification of the relevant type, these responses — if working at all — enable *S* to rebut the argument. It is worth noticing, nevertheless, that the elusiveness of seeming-based

¹ For critical surveys of recent responses see for instance Greco (2007), Klein (2019) and Pritchard (2019).

justification curbs but doesn't *obliterate* the antisceptical bite of phenomenal conservatism. Thanks to (PC), individuals *who don't reflect on their seemings* can still gain seeming-based justification for their beliefs even if they have no independent justification for ruling out sceptical conjectures. These subjects are presumably the large majority. We can draw similar conclusions about the asserted capacity of phenomenal conservatism to provide ordinary epistemic practices with a rationale: phenomenal conservatism can account for quotidian justification of *unreflective* individuals, but it cannot account for the justification of subjects who *reflect* on their appearances (think for instance of microscopists, birdwatchers, pilots, witnesses in courts of law and epistemologists). These considerations suggest that phenomenal conservatism would provide a more forceful response to the sceptic and a more comprehensive account of ordinary cognitive practices — inclusive of those proper to reflective individuals — if it were integrated with a theory of *reflective* — and so *inferential* — justification. What theory would be suitable for this role and how phenomenal conservatism could actually be integrated with it are questions to be thoroughly investigated.

Further work on phenomenal conservatism should address other issues that I have not explored in this short monograph. To begin with, my response to the Bayesian objection calls for further investigation: an important question is whether there is an adequate formal model of the notion of seeming-based justification that does justice to (PC).² The existence of such a formalisation would bring further support to phenomenal conservatism. Let's consider a last issue. The fact that seeming-based justification is elusive doesn't stop appearances from being sources of non-inferential justification. Thus, this fact doesn't undermine the role of (PC) as a key principle of foundationalism. Indeed, (PC) has been claimed to be *the only* principle of foundationalism, as capable of unifying *all* kinds of non-inferential justification — e.g. perceptual, introspective, rational, mnemonic, and so on (see for instance Huemer 2001). But this claim has been called in question (cf. Smithies 2019). I found no systematic investigation in the literature about which forms of non-inferential justification can

² An interesting attempt is in Miller (2016).

actually be unified under (PC). Admittedly, my research has mainly focused on *perceptual* justification. Future work on phenomenal conservatism should carry out this systematic investigation.

References

- Greco, John. 2007. External world scepticism. *Philosophy Compass* 2: 625-649.
- Huemer, Michael. 2001. *Skepticism and the veil of perception*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Klein, Peter. 2019. Skepticism. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta.
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/skepticism/>.
- Miller, Brian. 2016. How to Be a Bayesian Dogmatist. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94: 766-780.
- Pritchard, Duncan. 2019. Contemporary skepticism. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<https://www.iep.utm.edu/skepcont/>. Accessed 10 November 2019.
- Smithies, Declan 2019. On the global ambitions of phenomenal conservatism. *Analytic Philosophy* 60: 206-244.