

Mizrahi's argument against Phenomenal Conservatism

Mizrahi (2013, "Against Phenomenal Conservatism", *The Reasoner*, 7(10), pp. 117-118) argues that Phenomenal Conservatism (see Huemer 2007, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74, pp. 30–55) is an untrustworthy method of fixing belief (MFB). I respond that Mizrahi's argument is unsound because one premise is rationally unacceptable, and that if this premise is refined and made more acceptable, the argument proves invalid.

Phenomenal Conservatism says that *seemings* are special mental states – i.e. propositional attitudes, different from beliefs, capable of supplying justification for their contents. Accordingly:

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

(PC) holds that it is *by virtue of* (or *on the grounds of*) *S*'s having a seeming with content *p* that *S* has some degree of defeasible justification for believing *p* (cf. Huemer 2007, p. 30).

This is Mizrahi's argument:

1. (PC) [Assumption for reductio]
2. It seems to S_1 that *p* and it seems to S_2 that not-*p*, independently of each other. [Premise]
3. Therefore, in the absence of defeaters, S_1 has some degree of justification for believing *p* and S_2 has some degree of justification for believing not-*p*. [From (1) & (2)]
4. If an MFB provides some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs, it's untrustworthy. [Premise]
5. Appealing to seemings provides some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs. [From (3)]
6. Therefore, appealing to seemings is an untrustworthy MFB. [From (4) & (5)]

As Mizrahi indicates, (2) appears true for some *p*. For instance, to Jackson (1982, "Epiphenomenal Qualia", *Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, pp. 127–136) it *seems* that Mary learns something new, whereas to Dennett (1991, *Consciousness Explained*, Boston: Little Brown) it *seems* that she doesn't. To Hauser (2002, "Nixin' Goes to China", in Preston and Bishop (eds.), *Views Into the Chinese Room*, NY: OUP) it *seems* that the person in the Chinese room understands Chinese, whereas to Searle (1999, "The Chinese Room", in Wilson and Keil (eds.), *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences*, MIT Press) it *seems* that that person doesn't. I find Mizrahi's examples *prima facie* plausible, so I won't question (2).

Mizrahi reports an objection to (4) by an anonymous reviewer, which he leaves unaddressed but appears to regard as serious. I don't think Mizrahi's argument is flawed because of it. The objection runs as follows: you know that an urn *U* contains a red, a blue and a yellow ball. Alice extracts one ball from *U* but you cannot see its colour. She truthfully tells you that (*e*) the ball isn't yellow. This gives you some justification to believe that (*r*) it is red and some justification to believe that (*b*) it is blue. The alleged difficulty for (4) is that although *r* and *b* are incompatible, your MFB isn't untrustworthy. I see no real challenge for (4) because *r* and *b* are *incompatible* but not just one the *logical negation* of the other. (It is customarily accepted, for instance in science, that the same evidence can support *incompatible* hypotheses.) Furthermore, in this example it is false that *e* gives you some justification for *both r* and not-*r* (or *both b* and not-*b*). Suppose *U* contains the three coloured balls only. It is intuitive that before you learn *e*, your degree of confidence in not-*r* should be 2/3, but after you learn *e* your confidence in not-*r* should *drop* to 1/2. So *e* cannot give you justification for not-*r*. This conclusion holds in general even if *U* contains *additional* balls. Since *e* boosts your confidence in *r*, it follows from the probability calculus that *e* must *lessen* your confidence in not-*r*.

Mizrahi's argument against (PC) presupposes that the same MFB can be used by different subjects (or the same subject at different times). But there is a problem with the way he implements this idea. In particular, if (4) were true, we should conclude that *any* MFB utilizable by different subjects is untrustworthy. For, trivially, different subjects may have different evidential grounds that support contradictory propositions via the same MFB. Take for instance testimony. Let p be the proposition that my pet flies. I tell S_1 that my pet is a bird and I tell S_2 that my pet is a penguin. S_1 will have some justification for believing p and S_2 some justification for believing not- p . So if (4) is true, testimony is untrustworthy. Consider now perception. Suppose S_1 only sees that my pet has a beak, whereas S_2 clearly sees that my pet is a penguin. S_1 has some justification for believing p and S_2 has some justification for believing not- p . If (4) is true, perception is untrustworthy. These examples easily multiply.

We cannot accept (4) because this would commit us to a very implausible conclusion. An obvious refinement of (4), which settles this difficulty, is the following:

- 4*. If an MFB provides some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs *on the grounds of the same evidence*, it's untrustworthy.

Mizrahi might intend (4) as equivalent to (4*). For instance, to defend (4) Mizrahi envisages a situation in which he uses a Litmus test as a MFB about the pH of a given solution. The test is repeated again and again. Mizrahi sensibly concludes that if his blue Litmus paper sometimes turned red (thereby indicating an acidic solution) and sometimes stayed blue (thereby indicating a basic solution), he wouldn't put much trust in his MFB. In this thought experiment, Mizrahi's MFB can be described as processing at different times *the same evidence*, constituted by the same solution and the same background information necessary to interpret the test's observational outcomes.

Suppose we replace (4) with (4*). The resulting variant of Mizrahi's argument against (PC) would go through only if (5) could be interpreted accordingly, i.e. as stating that appealing to seemings provides some degree of justification for contradictory beliefs *on the basis of the same evidence*. This interpretation is very questionable. Take again the case in which it seems to Jackson that (p) Mary learns something new, whereas it seems to Dennett that she doesn't. The phenomenal conservative would claim that the *evidential grounds* of Jackson's belief that p and the *evidential grounds* of Dennett's belief that not- p are to be identified with Jackson's and Dennett's respective seemings. The phenomenal conservative would thus insist that Jackson and Dennett have (defeasible) justification for contradictory beliefs because they have *different* evidence constituted by their conflicting mental states coinciding with incompatible seemings. This example generalizes: appealing to seemings can provide some justification for contradictory beliefs only on the basis of *different* evidential grounds – i.e. different seemings. In conclusion, if we replace (4) with (4*), (6) doesn't follow from (4*) & (5); the resulting argument is invalid. I don't exclude that Mizrahi is onto something and that (PC) could turn out to be untrustworthy. However, to believe so we would need a neat argument that Mizrahi has not delivered.

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