

# Against Phenomenal Conservatism

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**Abstract** Recently, Michael Huemer has defended the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism: If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p. This principle has potentially far-reaching implications. Huemer uses it to argue against skepticism and to defend a version of ethical intuitionism. I employ a reductio to show that PC is false. If PC is true, beliefs can yield justification for believing their contents in cases where, intuitively, they should not be able to do so. I argue that there are cases where a belief that p can behave like an appearance that p and thereby make it seem to one that p.

**Keywords** Epistemic justification · Internalism · Externalism · Phenomenal conservatism

## 1 Introduction

Recently, Michael Huemer (2001, 2007) has defended the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism.

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 that p. (Huemer 2007: 30; cf. Huemer 2001: 99)

Huemer proposes PC as an internalist principle of foundational justification. It has potentially far-reaching implications. Huemer uses it to argue against skepticism and to defend a version of ethical intuitionism (Huemer 2001, 2005). I employ a reductio to show that PC is false. If PC is true, beliefs can yield foundational justification for believing their contents in cases where, intuitively, they should not be able to do so. I argue that there are cases where a belief that p can behave like an appearance that p and thereby make it seem to one that p. This can happen in the absence of what can count as defeaters on Huemer's internalist view of justification. Throughout, I claim

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that beliefs can behave like appearances. By this I mean two things. (1) Beliefs can make certain claims seem true, and therefore can be appearances. (2) Beliefs can, in particular, behave like certain paradigmatic appearances, e.g., intuitions.

Huemer offers an argument that may preempt this possibility, however. I criticize his argument, defend the claim and show how it threatens PC. Obvious attempts to quickly defend PC from the threat fail.

## 2 Appearance and Belief

By way of determining whether beliefs can behave like appearances, it will help to begin by considering an argument Huemer gives for the claim that beliefs are not appearances. From the outset Huemer tries to distinguish appearances from beliefs. “This is important,” he says, “since otherwise PC would be granting foundational justification, automatically, to all beliefs, and this is not what we want” (Huemer 2001: 99). He compares beliefs to paradigmatic appearances like perceptions and intuitions.

I take statements of the form “it seems to S that p” or “it appears to S that p” to describe a kind of propositional attitude, different from belief, of which sensory experience, apparent memory, intuition, and apparent introspective awareness are species. This type of mental state may be termed an ‘appearance.’ (Huemer 2007: 30; cf. Huemer 2001: 99-100)

“We can see that appearances are different from beliefs,” he argues, “from the fact that it may appear to one that p while one does not believe that p” (Huemer 2007: 30-31; cf. Huemer 2006: 156, Huemer 2001: 99-100). One need not believe that a stick half submerged in water is bent, for example, even if it looks bent.

This argument fails. For all this argument shows, beliefs may be a type of appearance.<sup>1</sup> We can have one type of appearance without another, and we can have conflicting appearances of different types. That person may look like Anna, but sound like Kate. That house may look new, though memory tells me it is old. These examples highlight differences between different types of appearance. They may even show that particular mental states are not appearances of a certain type. But they do not show that particular mental states are not appearances at all. Visual appearances may conflict with or occur in the absence of auditory ones. Neither possibility shows that the latter are not appearances. More generally, perceptual appearances can conflict with or occur in the absence of mnemonic or intuitive appearances. This does not show that the latter are not appearances. Such cases do not rule out belief as a type of appearance either.

Huemer’s argument fails, but there is an obvious alternative. One might argue that beliefs are not appearances because one can believe that p without it seeming to one that p (cf. Bealer 2000: 3). This argument has two problems. First, in the absence of more information about appearances, the argument seems question begging. The

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tolhurst 1998: 293, note 1. Tolhurst uses the same premise as Huemer to conclude that seemings “constitute a distinct mental state type.” He leaves it open, however, whether some beliefs are seemings.

suspicion is that it is covertly making the same mistake Huemer made above: comparing beliefs to paradigmatic appearances, noting that beliefs are not these appearances (since one can have the beliefs in their absence) and concluding that beliefs are not appearances. Beliefs could simply be another type of appearance. Second, and more seriously, the argument is invalid. Even if one can believe that *p* in the absence of appearances that *p*, that does not show that beliefs are not appearances. What it shows is that beliefs need not be appearances. For all the argument shows, a belief could be an appearance at one time and fail to be an appearance at another time.

To show that beliefs are not appearances, one would have to identify necessary conditions for appearance-hood and show that beliefs cannot satisfy some of them. However, if we can identify some such conditions and if beliefs can satisfy them, that may lend support to the claim that beliefs can behave like appearances. So let us inquire into the nature of appearances.

Huemer offers a helpful discussion. Consider some of the appearances he discusses. Take perceptual experience. According to Huemer, perceptual experiences have two essential characteristics: representational content and forcefulness (Huemer 2001: 66).<sup>2</sup>

According to Huemer, perceptual experiences have representational content because they represent the world in a certain way (ibid. 71). This content is arguably propositional. It has truth-value, and it bears logical relations to other propositions (ibid. 74). In this respect, perceptual experiences are like beliefs. Beliefs also have representational propositional content. In fact, Huemer claims that beliefs and perceptual experiences can have the same content (ibid. 52-3).

Huemer also claims that perceptual experiences represent their content in a special way. They are forceful or assertive. A forceful or assertive appearance “represents [its] contents as actualized” (ibid. 77; cf. 53). Intuitions, memories and many other possible and actual states do this too – including beliefs (cf. ibid. 54). Huemer distinguishes these states from states like desires and imaginings, which represent the world as we want it to be or as it could be, rather than as it is.

On Huemer’s view, then, beliefs and appearances are similar in one crucial respect: they both have forceful, assertive propositional content. According to Huemer, one gets justification for believing things by having appearances with appropriate content. “PC holds that it is by virtue of having an appearance with a given content that one has justification for believing that content” (Huemer 2007: 30). Moreover, he doubts there are relevant differences between appearances that would render some incapable of conferring justification.

I argue that no epistemically relevant distinction can be drawn among appearances that would enable some of them but not others to confer epistemic

<sup>2</sup> Huemer notes that perceptual experiences also typically have a third feature: qualia. But he thinks there are perceptions lacking qualia. His example is proprioception, a faculty that makes us aware of the position of our bodies (Huemer 2001: 67). Huemer claims that the lack of qualitative content is the reason why one can be aware of the position of one’s body without being aware of the fact that one is getting this information via proprioception (I myself do not think the absence of qualia is necessary for this difference in awareness, only that it facilitates it). The example in my reductio involves beliefs behaving similarly, i.e., making certain things seem true without it being apparent that this is happening via belief.

justification. [...] I take it that the critic who believes that only some appearances should be accepted as sources of justification incurs a burden of identifying an epistemically relevant difference between those appearances that do and those appearances that do not confer justification on their contents. (Huemer 2007: 32)

Huemer is on to something. Appearances come in many forms and could come in many more. Innumerable many types of appearances are logically possible (consider all the logically possible types of perceptual experience). If they are all to be capable of conferring justification, it will likely be because of quite general features about them, features like those Huemer discusses.

This leads to problems. Beliefs share the central justification-conferring features of paradigmatic appearances: they have forceful, assertive propositional content. Huemer's initial argument that beliefs are not appearances, then, can get no traction from the fact that appearances have this content, since beliefs do too. Of course, there may be other necessary conditions for appearance-hood that beliefs cannot satisfy. But I think the fact that beliefs have this content lends some support to the claim that they can behave like appearances. If we can make a plausible case for this claim, we can create a problem for PC. If a belief that *p* can make it seem to one that *p*, then, according to PC, it will be able to confer justification for believing that *p* – at least if defeaters are absent.

That this result would be absurd seems obvious. A belief that behaves like an appearance in the absence of defeaters will, according to PC, secure justification for itself. I will consider possible ways of dealing with this result later, after I have offered such a case. Huemer would likely agree that this is a problem. He considers a similar objection to another view (Huemer 2001: 111-12). Richard Foley (1983) offers the following argument against Epistemic Conservatism [EC]. EC holds that if *S* believes that *p*, that very fact gives *S* at least some degree of justification for believing that *p*.<sup>3</sup> Foley employs the following *reductio* against EC. Suppose *S* is just short of enough evidence for justifiably believing that *p* and irrationally decides to believe it anyhow. If EC is true, *S* will thereby secure some justification for believing that *p*. Given that *S* was just short of enough justification before, *S* will now be justified in believing that *p*, in part because *S* believes it. This is absurd, so EC is false.

Huemer thinks this objection undermines EC but not PC. He thinks this for two reasons: (1) he holds that beliefs are not appearances, and (2) PC holds that appearances are what confer justification. As we have seen, his quick argument for the first claim fails. Moreover, there are important similarities between beliefs and paradigmatic appearances and, as I hope to show, there do seem to be cases where beliefs behave like appearances. A similar absurd result may threaten PC, then.

<sup>3</sup> I have modified the statement of EC to mirror Huemer's most recent articulation of PC.

In the next section, I will argue that there are such cases. Such cases, however, are different from the one Foley offers against EC. Beliefs may not always behave like appearances, so they may not always confer justification according to PC. I will also consider some attempts to defend PC from my objection.

### 3 Generating the Problem

By way of arguing that beliefs can behave like appearances, it will help to consider an argument for the claim that they cannot. To show that beliefs cannot behave like appearances, one must identify relevant differences between them. Perhaps such differences are obvious enough.

Consider one alleged difference. One might claim that when I believe something, I exercise my agency in ways I do not when, say, I perceive something (cf. Frankish 2007; Hieronymi 2006; Huemer 2001: 97-8). Both beliefs and perceptions represent propositions as true. But, one might argue, there is an important difference. When I believe a proposition, *I* represent it as true. In perception, however, it is not me but my sensory faculties that represent propositions as true. Believing and perceiving are different activities. The things I do and can do in each case are importantly different. The same differences hold between beliefs and appearances more generally. Hence, one might argue, beliefs cannot behave like appearances.

Counterexamples to some of the key claims here are obvious. Consider the claim that in believing something I exercise my agency. This needn't be the case. A belief that *p* can be induced and maintained in *S* without *S* exercising her agency. This could be achieved by brainwashing or with fantastic technology. More typically, many beliefs are arguably induced in us as young children. Moreover, many beliefs are dispositional, i.e., not currently before our minds. In becoming occurrent, they can arguably come at one like paradigmatic appearances typically do. No doubt we can and often do exercise our agency in various ways with respect to our beliefs. But it does not seem like we have to do this much of the time, if at all.<sup>4</sup> So this difference does not show that beliefs cannot behave like appearances.

But why think they can? Here is an example that arguably shows they can, one involving a dispositional belief becoming occurrent. Suppose I believe a certain politician is corrupt and incompetent. I am not conscious of the belief, however. Then I see her on television and the belief's contents just come unexpectedly to mind. There are obvious similarities between what is going on here and what goes on when I have an appearance: some content is being represented to me as true. Moreover, whatever differences there might be

<sup>4</sup> And even if we did, that would not show that beliefs are not appearances. There might simply be appearances that require exercising agency. Such exercises of agency might not count against something's being an appearance. Exercises of agency might just count as justificatory defeaters, but that will depend on precisely how agency is involved. I cannot discuss doxastic voluntarism here, but see Alston 1988.

between beliefs and paradigmatic appearances, these differences need not be apparent to me. There seems to be nothing incoherent in saying that in a case like this I can be conscious of my belief's contents while being unaware of the fact that I believe the contents. No doubt I can and typically do become aware of the latter, but I need not become aware of it right away, if at all. I may mistake the appearance for a sort of gut feeling, for example. The case seems psychologically possible. All my argument really needs, though, is that the case be logically possible. And it certainly seems to be.

Given this, it looks like a dispositional belief's contents can come before my mind in ways that are, from my perspective, indistinguishable from the ways it can come before my mind via paradigmatic appearances like intuitions and introspective appearances. When I intuit or introspect, it seems I can be conscious of the relevant content without being conscious of the fact that I am intuiting or introspecting it.<sup>5</sup> It seems like the same thing can happen when dispositional beliefs become occurrent.

If I am right about the way things appear in the above case, there need be no defeaters, in the sense intended in PC, that prevent the belief involved from conferring justification for believing its contents. This is because, on Huemer's internalist view of justification, only appearances count as defeaters (Huemer 2001: 100, 111). There simply are no defeating appearances in this case. As far as PC is concerned, then, nothing speaks against the ability of the belief to confer justification for believing its contents – quite the contrary.

This seems obviously absurd. But the absurdity can be illustrated with a case like Foley's. Suppose S is just short of having enough evidence for justifiably believing that p. Despite this, S believes p, but the belief is currently dispositional. Then, for whatever reason, the belief becomes occurrent, without S becoming aware of the fact that she believes its content. It will then seem to S that p in the absence of defeaters. According to PC, this will confer some justification upon S for believing that p and S will then be justified in believing that p. This is absurd. So PC is false.

Granting the coherence of the case, there are two ways PC's advocates might try to cope with this problem. They could insert an exception clause in PC, explicitly barring beliefs from conferring justification for believing their contents in this way. Or they could bite the bullet and grant that the beliefs in these cases do confer justification for believing their contents. Neither strategy works. The first is ad hoc and undermines PC's internalist credentials. The second undermines PC's foundationalist credentials.

Consider the exception clause strategy. First, the strategy is ad hoc. Avoiding the problem I have raised is not a good enough reason to insert such a clause. As

<sup>5</sup> Recall the discussion of proprioception in an earlier footnote. Perhaps the same things can be said about perception and memory, though I think this is more obviously (and more typically) true of intuition, introspection and proprioception.

Huemer notes, those who think appearances can confer justification need a principled reason for ruling out particular appearances. But if there were good internalist reasons for doing this, there would be no need for such a clause. PC would already be sensitive to those reasons: either a belief could not behave like an appearance or there would always be defeaters. Second, inserting such a clause would undermine PC's internalist credentials. Externalist considerations are arguably influencing our intuitions here. Intuitively, beliefs should not be able to confer justification for believing their contents even in cases like the one above, and for reasons that need not be apparent to S. This is arguably because the process described in the case is an unreliable one. It is not the sort of process that can confer justification. To admit there is a problem and to try to correct it in this way without giving any internalist account of why it is a problem seems to concede something to the externalist.<sup>6,7</sup>

So consider the other strategy: biting the bullet. This move would preserve PC's internalist credentials. But biting the bullet is problematic. Huemer proposes PC as a principle of foundational justification. It identifies a class of beliefs that are foundational, i.e., that "do not depend on any other beliefs for their justification" (Huemer 2001: 98). Biting the bullet does not just commit one to the view that beliefs can confer justification for believing their contents in certain cases. It also commits one to the view that any belief can secure foundational justification for itself simply by behaving like the belief in my case. This is absurd. Moreover, it contradicts the spirit of foundationalism, if not the strict letter of Huemer's statement of it. The belief in my case is not having justification conferred on it by *other* beliefs, but it is having justification conferred on it by a belief, namely itself. That

<sup>6</sup> I am construing internalism as Huemer does, i.e., as the thesis that "all of the conditions that confer justification supervene on how things seem to the subject" (Huemer 2006: 148). I am construing externalism as the denial of this thesis. I agree with Huemer that this is the best way of characterizing the internalism/externalism distinction. Even if this is not the case, however, the second problem above still arises. Inserting an exception clause will tacitly concede something to those who hold that justification does not supervene only on how things seem.

<sup>7</sup> An anonymous referee suggests that advocates of PC could offer the following principled reason for saying that beliefs cannot confer justification for believing their contents: that no belief can confer justification upon itself, perhaps because this would involve "vicious circularity." I worry an advocate of PC who offered such a response would be missing the point of some of my remarks above. But no matter. There is an independent problem with the principle: there seem to be cases where one's beliefs can confer justification upon one for believing their contents. Notice that I have not argued that beliefs can never do this, only that the belief in my case cannot. Consider some other cases. Take someone who repeatedly finds herself believing things that have no apparent connection to her experiences or concerns. Out of curiosity, she investigates matters every time this happens and discovers that the beliefs are always true. It seems that the beliefs provide her with some justification (via induction) for believing their contents. Or consider some aliens who cannot see or hear and for whom belief functions as a kind of perception. Instead of seeing or hearing things, for example, they just find themselves believing that there are things nearby with certain properties when there are such things nearby with those properties (they may not be able to perceive things like color in this way, but that does not matter to my point). They do have other sensory faculties more like ours, though, e.g., a sense of touch, and these other faculties can typically be used to confirm the beliefs (and usually do when so used). It seems their beliefs can confer justification upon them for believing the contents of their beliefs.

undermines its allegedly foundational character.<sup>8</sup> I conclude that PC's advocates cannot bite this particular bullet.<sup>9</sup>

## 4 Conclusion

I have argued that PC is false because it has absurd consequences. It follows from PC that beliefs can confer foundational justification for believing their contents in cases where they should not be able to do so. This is because PC holds that appearances can confer justification for believing their contents, because beliefs share crucial similarities with paradigmatic appearances and because differences between beliefs and paradigmatic appearances need not be apparent to believers. Given this, the prospects for saving PC are poor. A plausible defense seems to require denying the coherence of my case. This would require a detailed inquiry into the nature of beliefs and appearances.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> It can hardly be suggested that Huemer's use of the word *other* (which is typical in formulations of foundationalism) is meant to accommodate this possibility or can plausibly do so. More likely, it reflects the assumption that beliefs that do depend on beliefs for their justification always depend on other beliefs. Note also that I am not denying the common claim that some beliefs have "self-warrant" (Alston 1971: 235) or that belief in some propositions is justified "by their [the propositions'] own nature" (Chisholm 1977: 63, 86). This claim holds that some beliefs are justified because of some special fact about the proposition believed, e.g., that one has privileged access to its content (say because the proposition is that one seems to be seeing text right now).

<sup>9</sup> The implausibility of biting the bullet serves in part to distinguish my criticism from others, notably Peter Markie's (2005: 356–358). Markie complains that PC grants defeasible justification even when appearances have problematic origins, e.g., wishful thinking and cognitive malfunction. He claims that the difference in epistemic status between these appearances and appearances that have impeccable pedigree is not just a difference in their defeasibility. Even if the former are open to defeat, the latter, he observes, are also open to defeat. The problem with PC, he claims, is that it awards defeasible justification to all appearances in the first place. He thinks that appearances like those he discusses should not be granted such status. Obviously, I agree that PC is too generous in doling out justification. But the absurdity of granting defeasible justification to the appearances Markie discusses is not obvious to me. Markie's cases and my own both pump externalist intuitions. But it seems that Huemer can plausibly insist that the sorts of appearances Markie discusses do confer defeasible justification, that they are typically defeated, and that, in cases where they are not defeated by countervailing appearances, they confer some justification. Such insistence about my case, however, seems far less plausible for the reasons outlined above. My objection, then, shows that there are grounds for rejecting PC even if one is willing to be much more generous in doling out justification than Markie is.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Andre Gallois, Clayton Littlejohn, Matt Skene and an anonymous referee for this journal.



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