

# Can phenomenal conservatism secure external world foundationalism?

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External world foundationalism argues that some of our beliefs about the external world are justified immediately without the involvement of other beliefs. Phenomenal conservatism is an epistemological theory of justification which claims that what seems true explains this immediate justification. In this essay, I will motivate phenomenal conservatism and discuss whether seemings can supply foundationalism with a secure mechanism for explaining the immediate justification process. I will argue that the theory can secure external world foundationalism even if one questions the underlying assumption of most epistemological theories, Cartesian dualism.

External world foundationalism distinguishes between basic beliefs, which include information about the external world and are justified by an immediate process without other beliefs, and non-basic beliefs that are necessarily linked to other beliefs to gain justification (Berghofer 2018, p. 4). Here, both ways of justification might only be *prima facie*. In contrast, *ultima facie* justified beliefs can only be reached on the ground of *prima facie* justification if no defeater against the belief is present (Senor 1996, p. 554). A defeater is, thereby, a proposition believed by a subject to be true which yet indicates that another belief of the subject is either false or irresponsible to sustain (Lackey 1999, p. 474).

Phenomenal conservatism (PC) motivates itself as the most plausible internalist external world foundationalism (EWF). The foundationalism it defends is moderate: basic beliefs have a degree of justification which is sufficient for being *prima facie* justified but are directly refutable in the presence of defeaters. The latter constraint is required to avoid the commitment to infallible basic beliefs only, so beliefs without any potential defeaters, which would amount to Cartesian scepticism and an unreasonably small basis for inferring all other beliefs we hold (Berghofer 2018, p. 3). Further, PC answers the question of where to look for the states or processes that are valid candidates for justifying immediate beliefs by relying on mentalism. This internalist theory claims that the

reasons for justification are necessarily mental but one does not need to have direct access to the factual reasons for our justification. Mentalism can be motivated by looking at hallucinations, where I would argue that one is justified in believing that one perceives an object even though it is motivated by a misperception, so the wrong reason<sup>1</sup>.

The reliance on mentalism demands that anything outside our cognitive apparatus contributes to the justification process only if it is brought into consciousness first (Steup 2013, p. 136). PC offers a positive account of this demand by introducing intermediate mental states: so-called *seemings* carry a truth-bearing property as propositional attitude (Markie 2013, p. 248) and thus, provide justificatory support for the propositional content of our basic beliefs without the need for justifying themselves. As a consequence, “if it seems to [a subject] S that [a belief] p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p” (Huemer 2007, p. 30)<sup>2</sup>.

Similar to beliefs, seemings can be perceptual, memorial and intuitive. Though, they are not beliefs themselves because beliefs are already affirmed representations to us: we already made a justificatory decision about them, and they now provide us with their propositional content. In contrast, seemings are the cause for the affirmation, they are the normative source for what we should believe by presenting the world as being in a certain way. Also, seemings are not rationally committing compared to beliefs. Thus, inconsistent seemings are fully rational compared to inconsistent beliefs (Bergmann 2013, p. 160). This explains, for example, that we see a bent stick in a glass filled with water even though we do not believe that the stick is bent. The perceptual seeming persists, though we defeated it with rational reasoning which forms our belief that the stick is straight. Similarly, the Perkey experiment can be explained (Skene 2013, p. 552): a subject is asked to imagine a banana on a particular spot on a white wall. Unbeknown to the subject, an actual banana is then slowly projected at that spot. Here, most subjects report that they

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<sup>1</sup>A view rejecting mentalism is externalism which claims that at least some justification arises from external factors like reliability (Senor 1996, p. 562). I think that externalism is almost undefeatable because it asks mentalists to show that external states are never relevant. This seems impossible to me because externalists could always come up with a new definition of their theory in light of new defeaters (see for example Goldman (1979) for a struggling attempt to establish a formulation). For the sake of this essay, I derive from this that mentalism is valid as long as it is undefeated and one can show its positive explanatory power.

<sup>2</sup>Thus, seemings are a sufficient condition for *prima facie* justification, but not always necessary, because immediate justification could also occur without seemings. For example, Tucker (2013) introduces the idea that testimonial beliefs could be basic, whereas Lackey (1999) counters that testimonies require perception and thus, seemings, to become justified beliefs.

do not start believing that there is a banana on the wall after all. Seemings can account for this paradox because the subject might have a perceptual seeming of a banana but also a conflicting seeming from memory that the banana is just imagined. Participants who after all believe that the banana is only imagined might experience the latter memorial seeming as stronger in consciousness<sup>3</sup>.

Some philosophers try to provide a more explicit definition of seemings in terms of their usage in our language, but I agree with Huemer (2013, pp. 329-30) that this is an invalid attempt: seemings are a concept above ordinary language use and partly below the level of consciousness if one is unfocused. Huemer (2007, p. 41) avoids further specification of seemings by taking them as necessary. This self-defeating argument is highly debated due to its circularity for which reason I avoid using it here<sup>4</sup>. Instead, I argue for understanding seemings with Husserl's method of phenomenology which requires us to actively introspect ourselves and reflect on the observed inner experiences as rational epistemic agents (Moran 2000, p. 131). This allows intuition to play a decisive role which is in accordance with PC. Similar to the ideas of Husserl (1970, p. 61), seemings can be understood as what "gives" itself to consciousness with all the requirements necessary for justification. Husserl also emphasises that perceptions, despite their immanent givenness, are not infallible due to a potentially wrong identification or lack of attention (Moran 2000, pp. 130-1). This again confirms my account of seemings from above.

I now want to investigate to which degree PC needs to be committed to moderate EWF in face of alternative theories. In particular, non-foundationalists argue that basic beliefs do not exist, but all beliefs are non-immediately justified through other beliefs of the subject (Audi 2013, p. 186). Coherentists defend this idea by stating that the justification of any belief is solely related to its coherence with the belief system of the subject. Could seemings be involved in this process? I refuse this possibility because the belief system coherentists have in mind has already justification included in form of its constituting beliefs. Thus, any potential new belief within this system can arise without the necessity of an additional normative mental state which a seeming amounts to<sup>5</sup>. I further refuse coherentism compared to EWF and seemings because it would amount to an isolated belief system which lacks sufficient connection to reality. In particular, it

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<sup>3</sup>In contrast, alternatives like direct acquaintance theories fail to explain this experiment because it would require all participants to believe in seeing the banana after the projection.

<sup>4</sup>See for example Markie (2013, p. 251) for a rebuttal.

<sup>5</sup>With this I argue that seemings are only involved in basic belief formation but not in non-basic belief formation.

seems impossible to me to develop a belief system without input from sensory experiences in the first place, and it would imply that we lack any concept in our mind including language to explicate our beliefs. Thus, it seems that some basic beliefs are required to establish a belief system in the first place.

Some argue that this is too fast of a conclusion: it seems still possible to accept the idea of basic beliefs to some degree but deny the moderate EWF claim that they have sufficient justification for being even *prima facie* justified. Instead, basic beliefs might only participate in justifying non-basic beliefs in the context of other beliefs held by the subject. Lycan (2012, p. 7) defends this holistic view by allowing basic beliefs to have “basic reasons” but no justification-bearing capacity. This of course is incompatible with seemings which are nothing else than the carriers of this capacity. But, I do not think that Lycan’s theory can present itself as a viable alternative to moderate EWF. In particular, it remains unclear to me how the belief system shall incorporate these basic reasons if not normatively as foundationalists claim. By denying this normativity, it would amount to taking perceptual input as descriptive and requiring some agent that performs its evaluation, like our conscious mind. However, following an argument of efficiency in our evolved mind, it seems more likely to me that some normativity, like in seemings, is already attached to perception than that consciousness evaluates the perceptual input by making it necessarily coherent to the belief system. Thus, I conclude that not only is PC required to rely on moderate EWF but it thereby also makes EWF immune against critiques from coherentism<sup>6</sup>.

The necessary symbiosis of PC and EWF creates however two well-known objections. The first one claims that PC makes the acquisition of inferred justification for non-basic beliefs too easy. Following the example by Cohen (2005, p. 418), suppose a subject looks at a table that seems red to her. According to PC, she rationally justifies the belief that the table is red upon this seeming in the absence of defeaters. She can then also infer that the table is not white illuminated in red light, which ultimately leads to the new justified belief that the table is not white illuminated in red light. Is this correctly predicted? I think it is fruitful to include the context of the scenario in the discussion. First, this scenario could be linked to a mother who wants to reassure her son who worries that the table might actually be white. Defending PC, I would argue that the mother is then not

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<sup>6</sup>This means however not that beliefs are never formed by a holistic process. Quite the contrary, as I argued above, non-immediate beliefs are formed by other beliefs and this might be done in a coherent manner. This fits at least well with my intuition that our overall belief system tends towards inner coherence.

justified in reassuring her son from the single seeming of her perception because the son introduces a sceptical context which should make the mother more sceptical as well. As a rational agent, she should directly investigate the location for eventual lights, maybe even touch the table to see whether she thereby creates shadows. Ultimately, the son could forward more and more sceptical concerns, like the table being actually a mock-up. Each time the son raises the standard of the inquiry, the mother needs to adapt accordingly to stay epistemically rational (compare Cohen (2005, p. 423)). In a second scenario, the subject might be alone and does not know anything about table colours from before. Following the chain of belief formation, PC needs to admit that both, the belief that the table is red and the belief that the table is not white but redly illuminated, are somehow justified by the initial perceptual seeming of a red table. But according to Hasan (2017, p. 109), it seems dubious to have the latter justification. I think that Hasan is wrong in supposing this because he oversimplifies the situation. PC only claims that *prima facie* justification is based on seemings, which does not entail that a single seeming is sufficient for fully justifying the belief. Quite the contrary, epistemic agency means that one is constantly critically engaging with new input. I think that the subject has a small amount of justification to trust the initial seeming and make inferences from this. But once she gains access to the inferred belief that the table is not illuminated, she should find it directly reasonable to start looking for further evidence, similar to the previous scenario with the son.

Similarly, a second objection against PC can be defended. Markie (2005, p. 357) provides the example where a cognitive malfunction causes a subject to have the seeming that a particular tree was planted at a particular date in ancient history. According to PC, the subject has, thus, justification for believing that the tree was planted on that particular date, which seems counter-intuitive. I reject this objection because it seems highly unlikely that one has this single seeming without either other seemings supporting this similar crazy content or seemings from intuition or memory which present defeaters for this belief, for example, that it is not rational to guess the date of a tree without investigating the tree in more detail. The first possibility points toward the classical sceptical example where an evil demon operates the mind of a subject. In this case, it seems rational to me to call these beliefs justified although these beliefs are not factually true, as long as the subject's belief system is consistent and rationally informed.

So far then, it seems that PC secures EWF and can avoid the mentioned objections. I find it however instructive to notice that all theories discussed here bind themselves to Cartesian dualism. They departed from Descartes' idea, that the only justified beliefs we

have are some basic intuitions about our existence, without questioning its assumption of splitting mind and body. Therefore, the gap EWF and PC somehow close arose in the first place from the opposition of an inner world and the independent external world: since we are not in the external world, the only things we can know something about are mental representations mirroring more or less successful the external world. PC claims then that seemings accompany these representations for us to grasp their valid connection to perception, memory or intuition. It is an interesting insight from cognitive science that the idea of Descartes, including mental representations, is under strong debate, and Varela et al. (2016) convincingly challenge the representational model by proposing *enactivism* as a viable alternative<sup>7</sup>. Here, the mind is defined as a closed, dynamic system fully present in the world. Cognition becomes a continuous co-evolution of the mind and environment where perceptions are perturbations of the system that are compensated by internal processes. These processes, then, construct meaning for ourselves, dependent on the very organisation of the system (Thompson 2007, pp. 43, 53). As a result, the world around us is not mirrored in us from perceptual input but actively enacted by us inseparable from the structure of our brain and our sense organs. The world we perceive is nothing else than a world which bears the biological and cultural stamp of our brain. Thus, the gap Descartes opened is non-existing (Thompson 2007, p. 59)<sup>8</sup>. It is important to stress that two humans of the same community still see the world in an indistinguishable manner as the world is only informed by us but not fully constructed by our mind as idealism claims.

For the discussion of this essay, this implies the important qualification that the idea of mental representations might be mistaken. To the best of my knowledge, the consequences of enactivism for theories of justification have not been discussed yet, but to propose a starting point: foundationalism informed with seemings, and thus PC, is not refuted in the new picture of mind-body unity. The immediacy of perceptions and vividness of the truth of its content is still a valid experience and serves as the foundation for our belief systems. However, seemings are no longer providing mental representations from perception with normativity but reflect the normative certainty of the enacting process.

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<sup>7</sup>This is motivated through colour perception where it became obvious that the colour we perceive is not simply dependent on the wavelength of the reflected light of an object. Instead, the perception depends on all of our sense organs, linguistic capacities and even culture (Varela et al. 2016, pp. 159-171).

<sup>8</sup>This idea of the mind is very much in line with what perspective realism claims about science (compare my essay 2). This parallel could be a possible explanation for why science feels somehow natural for many of us.

In conclusion, I argued that phenomenal conservatism secures the moderate version of external world foundationalism as presented in this essay. In particular, the introduction of seemings makes the existence of basic beliefs very likely which refutes the idea of coherentism. Seemings are also able to explain misperceptions or wrong judgments while resisting the objections of too easy knowledge and cognitive malfunction. Finally, I emphasised the Cartesian assumption underlying the discussed theories and proposed an alternative basis in line with cognitive sciences. Here, seemings and basic beliefs can still play a valid role, which strengthens the position of phenomenal conservatism epistemically.

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