

# PHILOSOPHY 5340 – EPISTEMOLOGY

Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*

## Chapter V. A Version of Foundationalism

### 1. A Principle of Foundational Justification

1. Mike's view is that there is a single principle of foundational justification that can account for **all** foundational – that is, non-inferentially justified – beliefs:

#### The Rule of Phenomenal Conservatism

"(PC) If it seems to *S* as if *P*, then *S* thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that *P*." (99)

2. How is the sentence "It seems to *S* as if *P*" to be interpreted here? Mike does not offer any analysis. Instead, he says that one is to interpret "It seems to *S* as if *P*" in such a way that it is logically compatible with *S*'s **not believing** that *P*. He also refers to different types of cases where something seems to *S* as if *P*:

(1) **Perceptual seemings**: Here your perceptual experience involves its seeming to you that the external world is a certain way. But you may think that you are hallucinating, and so not believe that things are as they seem to be.

(2) **Memory-related seemings**: Here it seems to you that certain things happened, but you may distrust your memory, and so you may not believe that such things really happened.

(3) **Intellectual seemings (or "intuitions")**: Here, when you simply contemplate a proposition, it seems to you that it is true. But again, you may not believe that the proposition is true, for you may have good, or even decisive reasons for thinking that it is false.

#### Comments: 1. What Is it to Seem to *S* as if *P*?

(1) Given the centrality of this notion for the foundational rule of Phenomenal Conservatism that Mike is advancing, I think that he should have discussed possible analyses that might be offered.

(2) In the case of perceptual seeming, where it seems to someone as if they are seeing a pink rat, but the person does not form that belief because he thinks that pink rats do not exist, and therefore thinks that he must be hallucinating, it seems to be true that if he did not think that there were no pink rats, he **would** believe that he was now seeing a pink rat. One type of analysis that this suggests is the following **counterfactual analysis**:

"It seems to *S* as if *P*" =<sub>def.</sub>

"*S* has some belief *Q* such that if *S* did not believe that *Q*, then *S* would believe that *P*."

On this analysis, seemings are **blocked inclinations to believe**.

(3) The problem with this analysis, however, is that Mike wants to interpret

(a) "It seems to *S* as if *P*"

in such a way that it is compatible with

(b) "S believes that P".

But (a) and (b) are not compatible on the above, counterfactual analysis.

(4) So what is to be done? One idea is to shift to a **dispositional analysis**, along the following lines:

"It seems to S as if P" =<sub>def.</sub>

"S is disposed to believe that P"

(5) However it might be objected that dispositional statements aren't clear unless the conditions under which the dispositions are manifested are specified. But this could be done by unpacking the dispositional analysis in terms of the following **conditional analysis**:

"It seems to S as if P" =<sub>def.</sub>

"If S has no belief Q such that Q causes S not to believe that P, then S believes that P."

### **Comments: 2. A Consequence of the Absence of an Analysis: A World Full of Diverse Seemings, and Noninferentially Justified Beliefs**

(1) The types of seemings that Mike lists – perceptual, memory-related, and intellectual – are related to fundamental areas of epistemology. But this immediately raises a question about other areas. It seems to most people, for example, that there are other human minds. According to the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, then, such people have a noninferentially justified belief that there are other human minds. Similarly, it seems to most people that the regularities that have obtained up until now will obtain in the future. So, given the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, one has a noninferentially justified belief that inductive inference is sound.

(2) But it also seems to many people as if there is a force of gravity, and as if there are electrons, and so on for a variety of **theoretical** beliefs. According to the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, then, one can have a noninferentially justified belief that there is a force of gravity, and that there are electrons.

(3) Notice that it does not block this objection to point out that some beliefs – such as the belief that there are cars outside – are inferentially justified, since a belief can be both inferentially justified and noninferentially justified. (Compare Mike's remark on page 102: "Foundational beliefs are defined to be beliefs that do not depend upon other beliefs for their justification; they are not defined as beliefs that are not supported by other beliefs.") Accordingly, since it does seem to me as if there are cars outside, it is the case, if the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, that I have a noninferentially justified belief that there are cars outside, regardless of whether that belief is also inferentially justified or not.

(4) The result seems to be that **Direct Realism conquers all in epistemology**. Consider any disputed question, and simply ask whether it seems to you as if something is the case. Does it seem to you as if there are external, mind-independent objects? Does it seem to you as if the past exists? Does it seem to you as if there are other human minds? Does it seem to you as if there is

mind/body interaction? Does it seem to you as if you have contra-causal freedom? Does it seem to you as if past regularities will obtain in the future? Does it seem to you as if there are objective values? Does it seem to you as if there are other possible worlds - perhaps concrete ones, in the David Lewis style? Then, if the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, and if it seems to you as if these things are so, then all is well: you are *prima facie* justified in believing that such things are so, and, in the absence of defeaters for the beliefs in question, you are also noninferentially justified in believing that these things are so. So David Lewis, for example, was *prima facie* justified in believing that there were concrete possible worlds, and, in the absence of defeaters, he was also noninferentially justified in believing in the existence of concrete possible worlds. If challenged by a skeptic to **justify** that belief, Lewis need merely have appealed to the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism.

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## 2. Alternatives to Phenomenal Conservatism?

1. Mike Huemer asks what alternative there is to the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, and suggests, in effect, that there is none that is remotely plausible.

### Comments

(1) An alternative foundational principle that many philosophers accept, and that is not considered by Mike, is this:

#### The Principle of Direct Acquaintance:

(DC) *P* is noninferentially justified in believing that a contingent state of affairs *S* exists if *P* is **directly acquainted** with *S*.

(2) A principle that is also very plausible, but which specifies circumstances in which beliefs are **not** noninferentially justified, rather than circumstances in which they are, is the **negative analogue** of the Principle of Direct Acquaintance:

#### The Negative Principle of Direct Acquaintance:

(NDC) *P* is **not** noninferentially justified in believing that a contingent state of affairs *S* exists if *P* is **not directly acquainted** with *S*.

(3) This second principle is incompatible with the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism.

(4) If both (DC) and (NDC) are correct, they can be combined to give the following principle:

#### The General Principle of Direct Acquaintance:

(GDC) *P* is noninferentially justified in believing that a contingent state of affairs *S* exists **if and only if** *P* is **directly acquainted** with *S*.

(5) As I have formulated the Principle of Direct Acquaintance, it covers only beliefs concerning **contingent** states of affairs. So one needs to consider whether it can be extended to beliefs involving propositions that are necessarily true, or

whether some other foundational principle is needed in the case of beliefs of the latter sort.

(6) My own view is that one can be directly acquainted with such things as concepts and propositions, and with relations between concepts. So I would say that what makes one noninferentially justified in believing, for example, that the proposition that  $p$  and  $q$  entails the proposition that  $p$ , is that one is directly acquainted with the concepts of **conjunction** and **entailment**.

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2. Mike also contends, "any attempt to deny the principle of phenomenal conservatism will be self-defeating, for all thought and reasoning presupposes the principle in a certain sense." (105)

### Comment

There is nothing self-defeating about accepting a principle of Direct Acquaintance.

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3. One argument, among others, that Mike advances in support of the principle of Phenomenal conservatism is this: ". . . it is impossible coherently to argue against phenomenal conservatism." (107)

### Comments

(1) The following is a perfectly coherent argument against the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism:

1. It seems as if there are other minds.
2. If the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, then one has a noninferentially justified belief that there are other minds, in the absence of defeaters.
3. There are no defeaters for the belief that there are other minds.
4. Therefore, if the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, then one has a noninferentially justified belief that there are other minds.
5. One cannot have a noninferentially justified belief that there are other minds.
6. Therefore the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is false.

(2) Another way in which one can coherently argue against the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is by advancing a restricted form of that principle, namely

### **The Restricted Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism**

(RPC) If it seems to  $S$  as if  $P$ , **and if  $P$  is, if true, necessarily true**, then  $S$  thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that  $P$ .

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### 3. Michael Huemer's Discussion of an Objection to the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism

**Objection: Phenomenal Conservatism is overly liberal in classifying beliefs as prima facie justified.**

1. Mike's answer to this objection appears to be that there can be cases where it seems to *S* as if *P*, and thus where *S*'s belief that *P* is prima facie justified, **but where that prima facie justification is undercut** by other features that render *S*'s belief unjustified.

#### Comments

Let us consider some possible cases, to see if this response is satisfactory.

(1) Suppose that it seems to Alvin as if God exists. According to the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, Alvin is prima facie justified in believing that God exists. Is there any defeater for this belief? Here there may very well be, since one can argue – with considerable plausibility, I think – that the argument from evil is a defeater.

(2) Perhaps one now feels secure against claims by the Alvin's of this world. But consider, now, Anthony, a sometime atheist who has recently become a deist. The Anthony that I have in mind has changed his view not because of reflections on the complexity of living things, but because he has come to have experiences of Od ("Od" = "God" without the goodness.) The question is now, "What are the defeaters for the belief that there is an omnipotent and omniscient, **but not necessarily good**, deity?" I suggest that none will be found.

But can one argue that, even if there are no defeaters, Anthony may be guilty of some epistemological misbehavior that undercuts his prima facie justification for believing in the existence of Od?

If one were an indirect realist, one would say that Anthony needs **evidence** if he is to be justified in believing that Od exists, and that since he has none, his belief is irrational. But given the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, Anthony's belief is noninferentially justified, in the absence of defeaters, so a defender of that principle cannot complain that Anthony has no evidence supporting his belief that Od exists.

Moreover, given the way that "Od" was defined, no investigation that Anthony might undertake could generate any evidence against the existence of Od. So Anthony is surely not guilty of epistemological negligence.

What about Anthony's belief-forming mechanism? That mechanism, we may assume, was simply that of accepting any proposition when it seems to him as if it is true, and he has no contrary evidence. Those of us who reject the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism may object that this is an unreliable method, but the advocate of the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism can hardly raise this objection.

(3) One can, moreover, make things more troubling. Anthony's Od is a harmless bloke, as is belief in his existence. But imagine a different deity – **Jod**, understood as a deity who, like Od, has never in the past intervened in the affairs of earth

other than by granting some people direct experiences of him, but who is going to intervene on December 31, 2007, at which point he will transport to a realm of eternal happiness all who have died while attempting to kill infidels – where infidels are people who do not worship Jod. If it seems to someone - call him Jim - as if Jod exists, then, given the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, the following things will be true:

- (a) Jim is prima facie justified in believing in the existence of Jod.
- (b) Neither Jim nor anyone else will have, before December 31, 2007, defeaters for the belief that Jod exists.
- (c) Accordingly, Jim is noninferentially justified in believing in the existence of Jod.
- (d) It is therefore strongly in Jim's self-interest to attempt to kill infidels.

(4) Consider a different sort of case, involving the belief that there are other human minds. Here the objection is that it seems to many people as if there are other minds, and that the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism then generates the conclusion that the belief that there are other minds has prima facie justification, and thus that that belief is **noninferentially** justified, in the absence of defeaters. There are, however, no defeaters, and so, if the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, the belief that there are other minds is noninferentially justified.

Are there factors that undercut the prima facie justification? Again, if one accepts the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, it is hard to see that there are. The believer in other minds need not, for example, be engaging in any self-deception. Is there some investigation that the person should have carried out, before coming to believe that there are other minds? One might make this claim if one rejected the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism, arguing that a belief in other minds, if justified, would have to be **inferentially** justified. But the advocate of the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism cannot advance this claim.

(5) A final sort of case involves a belief that there are now cars outside. Of course, one probably formed that belief because one thought that one had good evidence for the proposition that there are now cars outside. Nevertheless, if it now seems to one as if there are cars outside, then the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism entails that that belief is prima facie justified, and so **noninferentially** justified, unless there are defeaters for it. But there are no defeaters, so, if the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism is true, that belief, in addition to possibly being inferentially justified, is also noninferentially justified.

Given that we are, in this case, dealing with an uncontroversial belief that may be eminently justified, on the basis of evidence, it is hard to see how the defender of the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism can convict the believer of any epistemological misbehavior. So the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism appears to lead to the conclusion that **quite ordinary** beliefs that are inferentially justified are also noninferentially justified.