

IDENTIFICATION AND APPEARANCE AS EPISTEMIC GROUNDWORK¹

Nicolas C. GONZALEZ

ABSTRACT: The idea that appearances provide justifications for beliefs—the principle of phenomenal conservatism—is self-evidently true. In the case of cognitive penetration, however, it seems that certain irrational etiologies of a belief may influence the epistemic quality of that belief. Susanna Siegel argues that these etiologies lead to ‘epistemic downgrade.’ Instead of providing us with a decisive objection, cognitive penetration calls for us to clarify our epistemic framework by understanding the formative parts of appearances. In doing so, the two different but inseparable ideas of sensation and intellection provide us with a basis of our appearances. These appearances, in turn, provide us with the objective evidence needed to test our judgements. Thus, the extra-sensory concepts of intellectual identification and the appearances they help form become an epistemic groundwork.

KEYWORDS: phenomenal conservatism, cognitive penetration, direct realism

Common sense justifications are found everywhere in our everyday lives, yet scientists and philosophers tend to be skeptical of them. We hold beliefs because there is some appearance that they are true—and this is generally thought to be justified. Still, this principle, known as phenomenal conservatism, is contentious among epistemologists because it seems almost too broad. Instead, to others, some justificatory criteria must be more constrained or precise in order to form a reliable epistemology. If something that is false appears to be true to us, for example, it may seem odd to say that we are justified in believing the false appearance. I disagree—and so do Huemer, Aristotle, and others.² Even in the face of these seemingly odd instances, it makes sense to talk about justification in terms of appearances. Nevertheless, some believe that certain dispositions or schematic frameworks can alter our perception and thus ‘downgrade’ our appearances. In this context, known as ‘cognitive penetration,’ there may be some issues posed to phenomenal conservatism that an epistemologist may need to answer. I hope to do so in what follows, allowing epistemologists to save appearances from the illusory threat of

¹ I should like to thank Ziren Yang for his time and effort in helping me with this research, as well as Luke Pennella, Miguel Chehadeh, and Hunter Sacrey for their insightful comments.

² Although Huemer is not a self-identifying Aristotelian, I find his views concurrent with those of Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, as I will argue.

schematic imposition in cognitive penetration by laying the proper epistemic groundwork.

The Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism

Phenomenal conservatism is rather commonsensical. When we form beliefs, we often do so because of something that makes that belief appear correct—phenomenal conservatism takes this as its starting point. The principle's basis is upon appearances; more specifically, that appearance is the foundation for justification. Michael Huemer, a leading epistemologist in favor of phenomenal conservatism, defines it as such: "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). A wide variety of appearances can be counted within this principle—not just intuitions or similar internal mental states. Experiences and perceptions can also be included in these appearances, so long as they are what *seem* to be the case. This does not mean that all justifications should be equally considered, however; by adding the phrase, "in the absence of defeaters," Huemer recognizes that some of these justifications can be fallible and defeasible. If it seems to someone that *p*, but then some stronger appearance (be it sensory or rational) negates this, the appearance that *p* is no longer justificatory. Additionally, not all appearances are equal, as some may be ill-formed through rash consideration (cf. Huemer 2007, 37). Still, these appearances provide some sort of justification for believing in what *seems* to be true.

There are a couple of reasons for accepting this principle. First, as I've said above, the principle is intuitive. To say that a belief is justified if it seems to be true would itself seem to be as if one was simply speaking commonsensically in plain English. I believe that I am sitting in this chair because it very strongly appears that I am; people believe that the sky is blue because it very strongly appears so. In both cases, we would commonly say that one has good reason to believe both things—it would be odd to deny this. Huemer would add, moreover, that denying this is not just odd—it is self-defeating. To him, denying the principle of phenomenal conservatism does not preclude any justification; but if we base our beliefs on the fact that they appear to be true and still reject the principle then we have no justified beliefs:

If, that is, appearances do not confer at least some defeasible justification on propositions that are their contents, then since our beliefs are generally based on what seems to us to be the case (the reason we believe what we do is that it appears true to us; our method of forming beliefs is to believe what seems true to us), our beliefs are generally unjustified. Therefore, if Phenomenal Conservatism is false, those who believe it to be false do so unjustifiedly (Huemer 2007, 41).

According to this argument, it is almost nonsensical to reject phenomenal conservatism. Still, people tender arguments for this rejection. Cognitive penetration is one of these; and while it can call for us to clarify our conception of belief and justification, it does not ultimately defeat the principle.

Cognitive Penetration

Cognitive penetration, as discussed by Susanna Siegel, is the phenomenon that certain dispositions or pre-existing schemas can alter the “phenomenal character of experience,” and thus lead to “epistemic downgrade” (Siegel 2013, 697-722). In her words, “An experience E is epistemically downgraded if it has a checkered past” (703). This ‘checkered past’ can include epistemically irrational or negative aspects that led to the formation of the belief. This ‘downgrade’, then, can be discussed regarding justification. Siegel discusses both doxastic and propositional justification—justification for holding a belief and the proposition that justifies that belief, respectively—but seems to place greater emphasis on the former. Perhaps, in her eyes, the lower standard of propositional justification causes the lack of doxastic justification, but the basis of the idea of epistemic downgrade is upon doxastic justification.

Nevertheless, what seems to be at play is some unjustified belief. If the etiology of the experience can somehow leave the subject epistemically worse off, there must be some sort of lack of justification upon which our belief would be based. The etiologies of our experiences can be judged as to whether they are rational or irrational (699). If our experiences, upon which we find justificatory foundation for our beliefs, arise from a kind of irrational etiology, the whole experience might be thought of as unjustified, or at least having a much lower justification. Expanding upon this, Siegel (704) formulates the Doxastic Downgrade Thesis as follows:

If S forms a first-order belief B with content P, on the basis of an experience E that is checkered with respect to its content P, B is thereby doxastically unjustified, assuming that S has no other basis on which she believes P.

Therefore, to Siegel, the etiology of experience matters because it can provide certain aspects that lead to a lack of justification. The pre-existing dispositions and schemas that provide origins for irrational considerations to enter into our beliefs also entail some epistemic downgrade. Siegel provides several examples that illustrate the issue whereby the etiology of these perceptions influences their content. Two of these examples, however, seem to be the paradigmatic examples of her point, and I will thus focus on these:

Anger: Before seeing Jack, Jill fears that Jack is angry at her. When she sees him, her fear causes her to have a visual experience in which he looks angry to her. ...

Pliers: When primed with pictures of Black men, White American subjects more often misclassify a tool (pliers) as a gun when asked to indicate by keystroke which one they have seen (they're told they will see either one or the other), compared with White American subjects who have been primed with pictures of White men (698).

Siegel anticipates that one might say that these examples are overplayed and only provide possible defeaters for justifications. Critics argue further that we may allow for these etiological considerations to concern us, but that lack of justification is not entailed by this supposed 'epistemic downgrade.' To this, Siegel replies that such a standpoint does not properly explain the intuition that the paradigmatic cases above are still somehow epistemically dubious. We already know of this checkered etiology, and seem to have some sort of insight into how such a checkered etiology impacts the belief of one thing over another:

If the kind of knowledge-defeat in question is somehow expanded to include these cases, then it cannot accommodate the comparative dimension to the original intuition. Intuitively, Jill's fear-penetrated anger-experience puts her in a worse epistemic position than she would be, if she had an unchecked anger-experience, all other things being equal (719).

Here, Siegel makes clear that it does not suffice to simply say that the checkered experiences would provide a defeater for the supposed initial justification. Her intuition holds that Jill would not be able to have such a distinguishing factor between the checkered and unchecked experiences, so it is not as though she could even discover this defeater—she is in an epistemically underprivileged position. By introducing irrational emotion into belief, our doxastic justification is therefore downgraded such that the appearance that P does not lend justification to the belief that P. The irrational pre-supposed beliefs that one might have can influence the phenomenal character of experience, thus causing the beliefs made upon the subsequent experience to be of downgraded epistemic value.

Siegel, as we see, then believes that a defeater-relation explanation is not distinct enough to be used in epistemological discussion of justification vis-à-vis checkered experiences. This reply seems ambiguous with respect to why introducing other things as defeaters might not be clear. In fact, I hold the view to which she is replying and will attempt to show why it is still correct. Nevertheless, my engagement of cognitive penetration will be according to how I have presented here; and I hope that any lack of clarity regarding the principle will be solved as I begin to discuss the phenomenon.

Ill-Founded Justifications are Justifications

With cognitive penetration, it is important that we begin from the ground up vis-à-vis these schematic frameworks. We can begin with a simple case: hallucinations. If there is a hallucination, this does not mean that we *ipso facto* lack justification. But this is not all that can be said of ‘downgraded’ phenomena. A hallucination entails that one aspect of sense perception is skewed, but we can still have defeaters as to why we would reject the original appearance. Siegel grants that hallucinations can provide justification; nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these ideas are still important in delineating justification.

We must first recognize that perceptual appearances are inseparably comprised of sensation and an act of intellection.³ Regarding the hallucination above, it is often that the sensation is skewed—but many are willing to grant that these appearances are still justified. What seems to be disputed in the example of cognitive penetration is whether the act of intellection can be irrational.

This act of intellection does not require that there be some inference between the perception and the belief, however; even with this act, the intellection does not remove the immediacy and foundational character of the justification. All that this act is doing is intellectually identifying what appears to be. Huemer (2007, 52, 53) clarifies the direct character of perceptual belief:

One does not, on this view, *infer* the proposition in question *from the premise* that one has a certain sort of intuition; rather, by having an intuition, one is (seemingly) immediately aware of some particular necessary truth, and in virtue of that, one is non-inferentially justified in believing the relevant proposition. ... All of this applies equally well to the case of perceptual experience and belief. ... The direct realist view is *not* that we first notice that we have a perceptual experience with a certain character, and then infer that the external world is a certain way.

Instead, as Huemer would have it, our justified beliefs are founded within the very appearances of the world. This intellectual act is not an inference, but simply an identification. In other words, as Celestine Bittle (1936, 143) claims, “The senses do not merely ‘represent,’ they actually ‘present’ reality, at least in some form; man, therefore, does *not infer* the existence of objects... but *perceives them directly through intuition.*” As such, this identification is a judgement in the order of the second act of the intellect and is open to falsity in a way that simple apprehension is

³ Only after writing this section did I discover Thomist philosopher Celestine Bittle’s discussion of consciousness, which “merely ‘registers’ [objects] existence” and “the *intellect* which classifies them by interpreting the data revealed by consciousness.” I believe our views are complementary ways of describing the same phenomenon. See Bittle (1936, 91).

not.⁴ The simple apprehension that is the first act of the intellect remains unaffected, even if the judgement of identification which is its second act may be false. The non-inferential character of such judgements in identifications, therefore, may be false, but still do not open our judgements to some lack of justification arising from some skewed appearance. The falsity of judgement based upon a direct intuition does not entail, as will be explored, does not mean that there is no good reason to make such a judgement. Thus, any appearance derived from a misidentification is not unjustified, but rather ill-justified and defeasible.

We can apply this to cognitive penetration. Emotional influence on the phenomenal character of experience is the only thing here in which we have a plausible source of investigation for irrational factors influencing the formation of beliefs. Here, the emotion may influence us to direct our intellectual act toward some separate identification of the experience. This does not, however, entail a lack of justification—doxastic or propositional—for having a belief, as there was still a perception that was still identified by the intellectual act, albeit with irrational direction, to form an appearance. An analysis like the misidentification discussed above applies here as well. Jill does not infer that Jack is mad from the premise that he seems mad or because she fears that he is mad but is justified in believing it simply because he appears to be mad. It is not relevant if the appearance of Jack's anger was influenced by her fear. Jill's fear might have been irrational, but her fear was not the belief from which she inferred that Jack was mad—her act of intellection was simply directed toward identifying him as angry. The basis of her belief was not the fear but the appearance—and this appearance foundationally justifies the belief. It might be objected that the cause *is* the ultimate basis because the fear led to the appearance. Even if the fear leads to the appearance, though, the belief is not inferred due to the fear; instead, the sensation is simply misapprehended, meaning that, although it appeared to Jill that Jack was mad, she misidentified him as being so. It is not as though we must come up with a reason for *why* she misidentified this, however, as the experience is foundationally justified. The justification is non-inferential—and thus, the irrationality of these emotions has no bearing on the immediate justification—because of the direct awareness of the appearance. This process is similar to a recklessly formed justification that is ill-founded because it is easily defeated. Even though someone is reckless in considering an appearance, there is still a justification for believing so because the appearance seems to be true, even if

⁴ The first act of the intellect only grasps essences, while the second act makes judgements about them. See ST I, Q. 85, A. 6; and Jenkins (1991) for a discussion of this and similar passages. This observation was occasioned by a lecture I heard at the Dominican House of Studies by Fr. James Brent, O.P.

it can be defeated.⁵ Fear, like recklessness, can be an irrational disposition to misidentify. The disposition to identify and understand these appearances does not need to be rational for a justification if the appearance itself is foundational. If it *seems* to be true, that is a good reason for believing it, and all that is needed to show that it is ill-founded is a defeater.

The fear can still be used as a possible defeater, however, because the absence of the fear can change the identification of the anger, and thus the appearance.⁶ Jill has good reason to believe that Jack is mad—it appears that he is. Although the reason why it appears comes from an irrational fear, it does not entail that the belief is automatically unjustified until one recognizes that things would *seem different* if there was not that fear. In this, there is a new appearance that provides a good reason for rejecting the original appearance. Thus, it is not the emotion that acts as a defeater, but the fact that such an emotion could skew the appearance that does so. Fear is not the only irrational disposition that Siegel lists. Wishful thinking or irrational hope can act in the same way (Siegel 2013, 701); yet it is still subject to all that has been said. Just as one who literally wears rose-colored glasses is justified in thinking that things are rose until he notices the glasses on his face, so too is one who metaphorically does so until he notices his irrational hope skewing the appearances. Therefore, any emotion can be used as a defeater if it influenced the perception, but it does not *eo ipso* mean that a belief is unjustified if its past is ‘checkered’. This allows us to continue working within a framework of foundational *defeasible* justification.

Return to the example above of racism and pliers. It becomes clearer that if this racism caused the irrational direction of intellectual identification, there is more to consider; but these considerations ultimately bring us back to holding that etiology is largely irrelevant. A belief that one is holding a gun is still justified if it appears that he is. Like fear, racism is an irrational disposition to misidentify, but it does not provide us with direct awareness of these perceptual beliefs. Dispositions may be irrational, but beliefs are not justified by dispositions. Instead, *appearances* justify them.

Phenomenal conservatism still holds true. This supposed ‘downgrade’ only means that there are ill-formed justifications, not that there is a lack of justification in these appearances. Evidenced by what I have said about Siegel’s examples, justification does not *eo ipso* track truth; justification only provides us with reasons for believing that a true thing is true. While it is certainly helpful and relevant to justification that it reliably does so, it is certainly possible that we are justified in

⁵ That is to say that the possibility of defeasibility is not itself a defeater. See Huemer (2007, 37).

⁶ Claims from Siegel notwithstanding.

believing false things, so long as there is no defeater for the justification. Ill-formed justifications are still justifications, and any appearance can certainly be used as evidence for belief even when false. In these cases, the underlying veracity of some belief does not change the fact that there are not good reasons for holding it. Simply put, falsity does not entail a lack of justification, and justification does not entail truth. What we are concerned with here is not immediately perceiving the ultimate truth of things—if anyone could do this, Socrates would pale in comparison. Instead, we are concerned with the process of doing so, the first step of which is finding some evidentiary grounds for belief. These grounds, then, are the justification of our beliefs; and these justifications can either hold up to scrutiny or be defeated, thus falling from their status as a proper justification. This does not mean that we should jump at the first justification to believe something; Christopher Shields (2013, 23) discusses Aristotle's view of phenomenal conservatism, saying, "A good reason for believing that something is so is not, however, also already a decisive reason for forming the judgment that it is, in fact, so." Nevertheless, we would still be justified in holding these beliefs due to these good reasons—at least until we found appearances to the contrary. Cognitive penetration, if it is true, may be a reason for us to suspend our judgements before concluding a belief, but it does not preclude justification on the basis of what appears to be true. I hold, and I believe both Huemer⁷ and Aristotle⁸ would as well, that in doing science or philosophy we should be careful to search for possible defeaters to these appearances, comparing appearances and beliefs of different sources; but that a failure to do so does not strip a belief of its justification.

In addition to this, cognitive penetration does not answer the self-defeating rejection argument. If, as Huemer holds, rejection of phenomenal conservatism entails that there are no justified beliefs, then its rejection is merely absurd. I do not see any unique way that cognitive penetration escapes this. Cognitive penetration may provide new reasons for defeating certain appearances, but it does not give us reason to reject the fact that appearances provide justification. Thus, any epistemology that considers cognitive penetration to be a rejection of phenomenal conservatism must offer new reasons why this itself is not a belief based on the appearance that some other principle is true.

⁷ Huemer responds to Seigel in a similar way that I have. While I have developed my response independently from Huemer's—i.e. in a more Aristotelian spirit—I believe the two views can be taken together as two sides of the same coin. See Huemer (2013).

⁸ See Shields (2013, 20-23) for Aristotle's use of the principle; note, however, that metaphysics is prior to epistemology in Aristotelian thinking.

The Epistemic Importance of Justification

If justification does not directly track truth, then we are left wondering why it is epistemically significant. Why should we care about something that does not lead us on a straight road to truth? After all, we can have good reasons for believing something that is ultimately false, as we have shown. Justification becomes either a triviality or a new road to falsehood. If this is the case, our foregoing analysis has either been useless at best or dangerous at worst. Even within the Aristotelian tradition, appearances are held to not be the truth. St. Thomas Aquinas, in commenting upon Aristotle, rejects that what appears is not necessarily true, even if the sense or intellective faculties are not deceived regarding their proper objects, as we may judge things farther away to be smaller or of a different color (*Metaphys.* IV, 14, sec. 695). We may have appearances of contradictory positions, but it would be “foolish to say that all judgements are equally true” (sec. 702). He goes so far as to claim that to such a belief collapses one into a sort of idealism, which he proceeds to rule out as impossible (sec. 705-707). As St. Thomas racks up arguments against the position equating truth and appearance, we come to question just how appearances might figure in our epistemic framework if they were to not be something thrown to the wind.

Luckily for phenomenal conservatism, I do not believe that justification according to phenomenal conservatism is useless or false. Justification, even if it is not equivalent to or the cause of truth, provides us with basic building blocks with which we can begin scientific or philosophical discussion. If we had an unjustified belief, there would be no basis whatsoever on which we could hold this belief. Even if this unjustified belief is ultimately true, what certainty does it give us to accept it? We do not yet know that it is true because we have no certainty to do so. Scientific and philosophical research cannot be done on the basis of no evidence, so there seems to be some need for good reasons, i.e. justifications, to enter into our dialectical processes. The strength of evidence may differ even in the absence of defeaters, but this is due to the strength of the appearance or appearances because of the appearance's justification-lending nature. Appearances are not truth, but they are objective evidence—that is to say, they are manifestations of objective reality to our intellects.⁹

What significance does this have for us? Bittle (1936, ch. 16) holds that the motive of our epistemic certainty is objective evidence, thereby qualifying as the criterion of truth. Just as the objective reasons for which we assent to a belief are our motive of certainty, so too are these reasons the ground of truth value in our

⁹ See Bittle (1936, 295) on the direct realism of this approach.

judgements (294). These reasons, Bittle argues, consist in the world as it presents itself to us. Of course, appearances are not truth, but if we are to reach truth, we must encounter appearances which provide us the reasons for holding some belief. There are times where we may be deceived or may judge improperly, but this is not essential to our act of judgement. Recalling our discussion of the first and second acts of the intellect, our second act consisting in judgements are fallible, but not essentially so, as to say so would be to prohibit us from any truth—a self-defeating position. Appearances must be regulated by self-evident principles, but they nevertheless provide us with the world as it is sensible and at first perceived.¹⁰

Reality is self-evident, just as being is the first principle, giving our epistemology a metaphysical grounding. Justifications and good reasons for holding a belief arise from our appearances, which in turn are the objective evidence that the world presents to us. If appearances are therefore this objective evidence, then appearances, in the absence of defeaters, are the motive of certainty in our epistemic project and provide us our criterion by which we test the truth of our own judgements.

Conclusion

Any epistemological framework that is to hold water must be in accordance with the principle of phenomenal conservatism. Those who put cognitive penetration forward as a reason to reject the principle either fail to circumvent their own self-refutation or misunderstand the foundational justification given by appearances. Siegel provides us with interesting ways to consider the etiologies of our perceptions, thus giving us new considerations when discussing defeasibility, but it appears that she does not give us good reason to abandon the principle altogether.

Throughout our answer, we have relied upon the notion that appearances rely upon sensation and intellection. We have seen via the principle of phenomenal conservatism that appearances lend justifications; however, our intellectual identification of our sensations forms the conceptual (or propositional, as Siegel would say) content of our beliefs. Though these justifications do not directly correlate to truth, they provide us with evidence by which we judge our knowledge. Appearances can deceive, but they can also show us how the world really is. It is through these extra-sensational aspects of experience—intellectual identification and appearances—that we are provided with our basic framework. We therefore can

¹⁰ Perhaps it would be better to say that appearances are themselves principles; and that the first principles of metaphysics are shown through them. See Gilson (1986, 182-183) and Shields (2013, 22).

see that any epistemology must have its structure laid upon the groundwork of these concepts.

References

- Aquinas, Thomas. 1995. *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Translated by John P. Rowan. Notre Dame: Dumb Ox Books. Cited as *Metaphys.*
- . *Summa Theologica*. 1981. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Notre Dame: Christian Classics. Cited as ST.
- Bittle, Celestine N. 1936. *Reality and the Mind: Epistemology*. New York: Bruce Publishing Company.
- Gilson, Étienne. 1986. *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Huemer, Michael. 2007. "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74: 30-55.
- . 2013. "Epistemological asymmetries between belief and experience." *Philosophical Studies* 162: 741-748.
- Jenkins, John. 1991. "Aquinas on the Veracity of the Intellect." *The Journal of Philosophy* 88: 623-632.
- Shields, Christopher. 2013. "The Phenomenological Method in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*." In *Aristotle on Method and Metaphysics*, edited by Edward Feser, 7-27. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Siegel, Susanna. 2013. "The epistemic impact of the etiology of experience." *Philosophical Studies* 162: 697-722.