From One Conservative to Another:
A Critique of Epistemic Conservatism

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Abstract: Epistemic conservatism maintains that some beliefs are immediately justified simply because they are believed. The intuitive implausibility of this claim sets the burden of proof against it. Some epistemic conservatives have sought to lessen this burden by limiting its scope, but I show that they cannot remove it entirely. The only hope for epistemic conservativism is to appeal to its theoretical fruit. However, such a defense is undercut by the introduction of phenomenal conservatism, which accomplishes the same work from a more intuitive starting point. Thus, if one opts for conservatism, better to choose the phenomenal kind.

Foundationalists agree that no belief can be justified unless some belief is immediately justified. Disagreement, however, surrounds the source of immediate justification. Epistemic conservatism says that immediate justification for our basic beliefs arises simply from the possession of those beliefs in and of themselves. The bare state of *having* a belief gives one some presumption in its favor. This is to be contrasted with other views, including other forms of conservatism, in which immediate justification arises from experience. For instance, phenomenal conservatism says (roughly) that basic beliefs are justified because they seem true (Huemer 2001, Ch. 5). Thus, it is an experiential state called a "seeming" or "appearance" that lends the belief some presumption in its favor.[1] In light of these other forms of conservatism, epistemic conservatism is perhaps better titled "doxastic conservatism," although I will continue to use the traditional moniker for continuity.

Epistemic conservatism, in one form or other, boasts a surprisingly impressive list of adherents, including (arguably) Thomas Reid, Roderick Chisholm, William Lycan, and Richard Swinburne. Though its popularity in the contemporary landscape has waned in light of well-known criticisms (e.g., Foley 1983; Christensen 1994), recent work shows epistemic conservatism to be more plausible and resilient than it is usually given credit for (McCain 2008, 2019, forthcoming; Poston 2012, 2014). In particular, epistemic conservatism promises to do serious theoretical work if admitted.

This paper offers a critique of epistemic conservatism. The objections are not directed at the conservatism, but at the claim that the conservative presumption derives simply from the possession of a belief in and of itself. Phenomenal conservatism, I will argue, proves to be the better form of conservatism. It provides all the theoretical benefits of epistemic conservatism while avoiding its drawbacks. Accordingly, epistemic conservatives should consider joining with their phenomenal cousins.

§1. Epistemic Conservatism

Before voicing our critique, it is first necessary that we understand precisely what we are critiquing. There are many different principles that march under the banner of epistemic conservatism, some of which do not concern immediate justification at all. These include forms of what Hamid Vahid calls "differential" and "perseverance conservatism" (Vahid 2004). For instance, Lawrence Sklar's differential conservatism maintains only that, when faced with an equally good alternative hypothesis, one is justified in continuing to believe a previously held hypothesis *if* that belief was initially formed "on the basis of whatever positive warrant may accrue to it from the evidence, a priori plausibility, and so forth" (Sklar 1975, p. 378). These forms of conservatism "are concerned with the justificatory status of a belief *after* its conception and acquiring positive epistemic value" (Vahid 2004, p. 113). Prominent proponents of differential and perseverance conservatism, respectively, include W.V.O. Quine (Quine and Ullian 1978) and Gilbert Harman (1986). Despite their pedigree, such principles do not bear on the immediate justification of basic beliefs, and so do not fall within our purview.

Conservative principles that do pertain to immediate justification are forms of what Vahid calls "generation conservatism" (Vahid 2004). Unrestricted versions extend the same initial presumption to all beliefs, whereas restricted versions grant it only to some. For instance, Chisholm endorses a fairly unrestricted form of epistemic conservatism: "Anything we find ourselves believing may be said to have some presumption in its favor—provided it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of other things we believe" (Chisholm 1980, pp. 551-552). Whereas Swinburne restricts his principle of credulity to basic beliefs: "every proposition that a subject believes or is inclined to believe has (in so far as it is basic) in his noetic structure a probability corresponding to the strength of the belief or semi-belief or inclination to believe" (Swinburne 2001, p. 141). Finally, Reid grants immediate justification to all and only natural

beliefs—i.e., those formed by the proper functioning of our natural constitutions (McAllister 2016). Formulations can also differ with respect to the exact status bestowed on beliefs, as these examples illustrate, as well as the conditions for its maintenance and defeat.

On this final point, some versions of generation conservatism, such as Chisholm's, claim only that belief grants the agent some "presumption in its favor" (see also Lycan 1988). Chisholm explicitly defines this to mean, "Accepting h is more reasonable for S than accepting not-h" (Chisholm 1977, p. 8). As McCain points out, presumption thus defined does not imply that the belief is justified, even in the absence of defeaters (McCain 2019, pp. 203-204). Indeed, these weak versions of epistemic conservatism are often favored by coherentists who deny immediate justification altogether. Instead, the presumption in favor of our beliefs is leveraged into justification only by being incorporated into a coherent and mutually supporting framework of such beliefs. These weaker versions of epistemic conservatism can bypass some of the objections faced by their stronger brethren (McCain 2019), but they do so at the cost of theoretical potential. Most of the theoretical benefits claimed by epistemic conservatism require that it explain immediate justification. In any case, the general criticism I offer will apply to these weaker principles as well (although I will continue to use the language of justification). The point is that whatever work can be done by epistemic conservatism can be done by phenomenal conservatism with less cost.

Among the stronger versions of epistemic conservatism, the most plausible formulation comes from Kevin McCain (2008, p. 186):

> **EC**   If S believes that p and p is not incoherent, then S is justified in retaining the belief that p and S remains justified in believing that p so long as p is not defeated for S.

Notice that EC does not say that beliefs are reasons for themselves (c.f. Adler 1996). McCain clarifies that, on EC, believing p bolsters one's justification for p, but not by providing a reason for p (McCain 2008, p. 187). The idea behind EC, and epistemic conservatism more generally, is that our beliefs can sometimes be justified *without any reason for believing them at all*.

Because of this claim, it is generally conceded that epistemic conservatism is not especially intuitive. Indeed, I think it is fair to say that it is positively *counter*intuitive by most

lights. The main complaint (expressed as a question) is: Why should the mere fact that I believe something *even if I have no adequate reason for doing so* justify me in continuing to believing it? As Sklar puts it, "surely not only is believing p not sufficient grounds for believing p…; in general, believing p is *no grounds at all* for believing p" (Sklar 1971, p. 377). This is made especially salient by considering that, "A person may happen to hold a belief because of whim, prejudice, emotional manipulation, specious arguments, self-interested rationalization, subliminal advertising, drugs, or post-hypnotic suggestion" (Goldstick 1971, p. 187). I will unpack these intuitions in a moment, but first it is worth asking why anyone would endorse such a principle.

2. Theoretical Motivations for Epistemic Conservatism

Usually, people tolerate EC and principles like it because it is theoretically fruitful. Some of the uses ascribed to it are suspect (Vahid 2004, pp. 99-101), but others appear genuine. Among these, the most significant advantages claimed for epistemic conservatism are that it helps us make sense of (i) common sense philosophical methodologies, (ii) the justification of belief in the external world despite underdetermination by the evidence, (iii) the justification of memory beliefs, and (iv) cases of forgotten evidence. Another, oft-cited advantage of epistemic conservatism is that it helps account for our conservatism in belief-revision, but this seems more a matter of differential or perseverance conservatism rather than generational.

The introduction of phenomenal conservatism severely undercuts these motivations. The seminal formulation of phenomenal conservatism comes from Huemer (2007, p. 30):

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*.

On phenomenal conservatism, immediate justification arises not from the beliefs themselves but from the apparently revelatory experiences on which they are based. Most of the things epistemic conservatism promises to explain can be accommodated as well or better by its phenomenal cognate. As Vahid says, "With such a view in place, there would be no need to appeal to doxastic conservatism" (Vahid, n.d.). Add to this that phenomenal conservatism is significantly more intuitive. Thus, if there is need to posit one of these two principles to secure the

aforementioned advantages, then phenomenal conservatism seems the better choice. As a result, the motivation for epistemic conservatism is lacking from the get-go. To shore up my critique, let us quickly run through some of the areas where epistemic conservatism is supposed to help and see how phenomenal conservatism handles them. Remember, given the greater intrinsic plausibility of phenomenal conservatism, I only need to show that it explains things *as well as* epistemic conservatism (not better than it).

2.1 Common Sense Methodology

A common sense philosophical methodology is sometimes summarized: *Start with the obvious, and never give up the more obvious for the less.* This approach has two components to it. First, "The metaphilosophy of common sense," Stephen Boulter writes, "insists that common sense beliefs are to be treated as default positions. … one has *shifted the burden of proof* onto the shoulders of those who would reject common sense beliefs" (Boulter 2007, p. 24). Second, this presumption is taken to be quite formidable, generally warranting the rejection of philosophical theories or arguments when they come into conflict with common sense beliefs. This is sometimes true even if their exact error remains unknown. Reid writes:

> Zeno endeavoured to demonstrate the impossibility of motion; Hobbes, that there was no difference between right and wrong; and [Hume], that no credit is to be given to our senses, to memory, or even to demonstration. Such philosophy is justly ridiculous, even to those who cannot detect the fallacy of it. It can have no other tendency, than to shew the acuteness of the sophist, at the expence of disgracing reason and human nature, and making mankind Yahoos. (Reid [1764] 1997, p. 21)

The rejection of philosophical theories in this way has been called "the GE Moore Shift" (Rowe 1979) because of its use by GE Moore (e.g. Moore 1959, p. 41), although Reid almost certainly served as Moore's inspiration. While it is controversial how much weight is to be given our common sense beliefs, the fact that they are given some presumption—that they serve as our starting points in philosophical theorizing—is ubiquitous.

Going back to ancient times, Aristotle recommends that we begin with the *endoxa*—often translated as "reputable," "received," or "credible" beliefs or opinions—and seek to preserve as many of them as possible. He writes:

> As in our other discussions, we must first set out the way things appear to people, and then, having gone through the puzzles, proceed to prove the received opinions about these ways of being affected—at best, all of them, or, failing that, most, and the most authoritative. For if the problems are resolved, and received opinions remain, we shall have offered sufficient proof. (Aristotle 2004, 1145b2–7)

This same mentality pervades contemporary philosophy as well. Boulter attributes it to philosophers such as Ryle, Austin, Grice, and Searle (Boulter 2007, pp. 24-25). It arguably underlies Rawls's method of reaching reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971). David Lewis directs us to, "Collect all the platitudes you can think of" and use these as our starting point (Lewis 1972, p. 256). James Pryor recommends, "[W]e start with what it seems intuitively natural to say about perception, and we retain that natural view until we find objections that require us to abandon it" (Pryor 2000, p. 538).

Epistemic conservatism accounts for such methodologies by granting presumption to one's beliefs simply because they exist; but clearly, this is not our only option. The reason common sense beliefs are so common is because they seem true—often so strongly that we would consider them *evident* or *obvious*. Either that or they are the natural conclusions of things that are obvious. Notice that for Aristotle, the *endoxa* are reputable attempts to account for the *phainomena*, or appearances, which are experiences similar to seemings.[2] Thus, we can account for the presumption given to such beliefs by appealing to a principle like phenomenal conservatism on which seemings constitute reasons to believe their content. Indeed, phenomenal conservatism does a better job than epistemic conservatism in fitting with these methodologies. For it is not *all* beliefs that are used as starting points but only the ones that seem obvious ("the platitudes"), or the ones that are "intuitively natural to say," or the ones credibly formed in response to the appearances.

2.2 Response to Skepticism

Another way in which epistemic conservatism is supposed to help is by furnishing a response to skepticism, specifically skepticism stemming from underdetermination by the evidence. This form of skepticism is most prominently connected to Descartes but goes back at least as far as the epistemological debates between the Stoics and the Academic Skeptics. The worry is that all of one's evidence for, say, the existence of some tree is logically compatible with the falsity of that hypothesis. For instance, one's experience of the tree might be produced by an Evil Deceiver. But if that evidence does not eliminate all of the alternatives, then, it is argued, one cannot justifiably believe in the tree on that basis. Epistemic conservatism provides a way out by granting belief in the tree immediate justification, despite uneliminated skeptical possibilities, simply because this belief is held. Phenomenal conservatism does the same by granting immediate justification to what *seems* to be the case (Huemer 2001, Ch. 8). It is apparent to us that there is tree (which is why we believe it in the first place), and so we are immediately justified in believing in that tree on the basis of that experience. The crucial point is that phenomenal conservatism's response to skepticism is just as good or better than that of epistemic conservatism.

Luca Morretti has recently argued that the phenomenal conservative response to skepticism isn't all it's made out to be (Moretti 2018, 2020; McCain and Moretti forthcoming). The problem of reflective awareness, as Moretti calls it, is that "seeming-based justification is *elusive*, in the sense that S's becoming reflectively aware of her seeming that *P* and wondering about its possible causes results in either just destroying S's seeming-based justification for believing *P* or replacing this non-inferential justification with inferential justification" (Moretti 2018, p. 267). For example, if I reflect on my perceptual seeming of a tree and inquire as to its origins, there will be multiple explanations available—some on which the content of my seeming is true (veridical explanations) and others on which it is false (deceptive explanations). If I cannot independently verify that some veridical explanation is correct, then I thereby acquire a defeater for the initial justification provided by my tree-seeming. On the other hand, if I can independently verify the veridical explanation, then I have inferential justification for the tree's existence which supplants any immediate justification provided by the tree-seeming.

I have several worries with this reasoning, but I will confine myself here to just one. The argument assumes that the presumption granted to seemings is nullified simply by raising the

uneliminated possibility that the seeming is deceptive. (Uneliminated, that is, by some independent source of justification. They might be eliminated by one's justification for the tree-belief itself in the style of G.E. Moore, who used "Here is one hand, and here is another" to rule out skeptical alternatives to an external world (Moore 1939).) But a presumption is no presumption at all which can be overturned simply by raising the possibility of error. A prosecuting attorney, for instance, cannot overcome the presumption of innocence simply by raising the possibility that the defendant is guilty. The whole point of presumed innocence is that, if the evidence is compatible with both the defendant's innocence and guilt, then the verdict must be "not-guilty." The presumption in favor of seemings works in a similar way. Absent evidence for the seeming's deceptiveness or unreliability, one should respond to them as veridical, in which case one's immediate justification stands undefeated. As Huemer said in his original defense of phenomenal conservatism, "You would not let the mere possibility that P is *true* suffice for you to *accept* it, so why let the mere possibility that P is false suffice for you not to accept it?" (Huemer 2001, p. 105).

That being said, as a general rule, the more we come to know about the world, the more the absence of evidence for reliability indicates the absence of reliability. Thus, Moretti is correct that a more comprehensive worldview verifying the reliability of one's initial seemings will need to be built up if justification is going to be sustained long-term. It is also the case that such verification will inevitably be, in a procedural sense, circular, with the reliability of seemings being verified on the basis of other seemings. But such circularity is benign (not to mention unavoidable (Alston 1991, Ch. 3-4)) because the initial justification of one's beliefs does not depend on the support provided by one's larger belief system but is granted immediately on the basis of their apparent truth. Thus, Moretti is correct that the phenomenal conservative response to skepticism is not as simple as it is sometimes made out to be, but this does not render it altogether ineffective.

Perhaps the problem Moretti raises is more serious than I acknowledge. No matter. If phenomenal conservatism fails to provide a compelling response to skepticism for these reasons, then so does epistemic conservatism. The problem of reflective awareness applies equally to both. That is, if one reflects on the origins of one's beliefs, one will recognize veridical and deceptive explanations. Either one *cannot* independently verify the veridical explanation, in which case one's immediate justification is defeated, or one *can* verify it, in which case one's

immediate justification is replaced. Thus, even if the full force of the problem of reflective awareness is granted, it provides no point of separation between the two forms of conservatism.

2.3 Memorial Beliefs and Forgotten Evidence

The justification of memorial beliefs and cases of forgotten evidence are other areas where epistemic conservatism is supposed to help (McCain 2008, p. 188). On epistemic conservatism, one's belief that, say, one did or did not eat breakfast this morning is justified not on the basis of any evidence for that claim, but simply because one holds that belief (and it remains undefeated). Furthermore, in cases where we no longer remember the original justification for our beliefs, those beliefs remain justified simply by virtue of the fact that one continues to hold them (so long as they remain undefeated).

Now, I am not convinced that this approach is the best way of handling such cases. It is not clear to me why, in both cases, one's beliefs cannot continue to be justified on the basis of the original evidence one had for forming those beliefs, despite the fact that those evidential states no longer exist or have been forgotten. After all, their causal effects linger in the form of one's current beliefs, and that may be sufficient to say that those beliefs are still based on, and thus justified by, that original evidence. Assessing this further would take us too far afield. All we need to see for our purposes is that *if* this approach is correct, phenomenal conservatism can account for it just as well as epistemic conservatism can.

One's memorial beliefs can be justified on the basis of memorial seemings: for instance, it seems to you that you did or did not eat breakfast this morning. McCain denies that memorial beliefs are "justified by any kind of sense perception or distinctive memory experience" (McCain 2008, p. 118), but one can easily deny McCain's denial. It is true that many memories (semantic memories, in particular) aren't based on any state with sensory phenomenology, but that is compatible with those memories being based on experiential states in which the remembered content is presented as accurately representing what occurred in the past. Such memorial seemings, like rational intuitions, needn't have any sensory phenomenology. And such experiences do in fact seem to serve as the bases for many or most of our memorial beliefs. Likewise, a belief can remained justified even when one has forgotten one's original evidence for it so long as that belief seems true, even if it only seems true because of the evidence one

previously had for it. In short, phenomenal conservatism can account for such cases in a way that mirrors epistemic conservatism.

None of this should be particularly surprising. Both principles are forms of conservatism, and so share similar approaches and, in turn, advantages. I obviously haven't surveyed every advantage claimed for epistemic conservatism, but it is fair to expect that most of them will be accommodated just as well by phenomenal conservatism. Even if a few are not, the net effect is still to greatly dilute the overall motivations for epistemic conservatism. To make matters worse (or better, depending on which camp you're in), phenomenal conservatism also avoids the most serious problem facing epistemic conservatism. We will dissect this problem in the next section and see how phenomenal conservatism does better.

§3. Epistemic Conservatism's Fatal Flaw

Let us return to the intuitive complaint above. Many have generated counterexamples attempting to capture this complaint. Richard Feldman makes the following contribution:

> Detective Jones has definitively narrowed down the suspects in a crime to two individuals, Lefty and Righty. There are good reasons to think that Lefty did it, but there are equally good reasons to think that Righty did it. There is conclusive reason to think that no one other than Lefty or Righty did it. (Feldman 2002, p. 144)

If Jones randomly believes Lefty did it, then it seems that principles like EC would grant justification to Jones's belief, simply because that is the belief that he holds. But clearly Jones's belief would not be justified in such circumstances; rather, he should withhold assent.

The most plausible versions of epistemic conservatism try to escape such examples by narrowing their scope. In the case of EC, this is accomplished by McCain's explication of the conditions of defeat. On McCain's view, defeat can occur in either of two cases (McCain 2008, p. 186):

DC1   If S has better reasons for believing that ~p than S's reasons for believing that p, then S is no longer justified in believing that p.

DC2   If S has reasons for believing that ~p which are as good as S's reasons for believing that p and the belief that ~p coheres equally well or better than the belief that p does with S's other beliefs, then S is no longer justified in believing that p.

In the Lefty-Righty case, Jones's reasons for believing that Lefty committed the crime are equal to his reasons for believing that not-Lefty (or Righty) did. Moreover, the belief that Righty is guilty presumably fits just as well with Jones's background beliefs as his belief in Lefty's guilt does. Thus, DC2 obtains and the justification for Jones's belief is defeated, reconciling our intuition with EC.

McCain avoids the counterintuitive implications by constricting the circumstances to which EC applies; however, the problem cannot be avoided forever. Eventually, one must bite the bullet—accepting that belief in p can be justified even when the balance of reasons doesn't support it—or else restrict the scope of one's principle so aggressively that it doesn't apply to anything.

To prove this, I will first show that EC does not escape all counterintuitive implications. Consider a scenario designed to avoid triggering either of McCain's conditions of defeat. In this scenario, S's reasons for p and ~p are of equal strength, but belief that p coheres better with S's other beliefs than belief that ~p. For instance, envision a situation in which S has strong experiential reasons for ~p but S's background beliefs cohere better with p, balancing S's reasons for p and ~p against one another. To put a face on it, imagine one intuits that murdering a drifter and harvesting his organs is always wrong (~p); however, one's background beliefs cohere slightly better with consequentialism and the conclusion that, in some cases, murdering the drifter is morally permissible (p). Here EC maintains that, if S happens to believe that murdering the drifter is sometimes permissible, that belief is justified in accordance with EC. However, the intuition of Feldman and others seems to apply in this case just as strongly as in the Lefty-Righty case. If the reasons really are equally strong on both sides, then the only justifiable stance is to withhold assent.

To add to the problem, imagine a second person S* phenomenally indistinguishable from S except that, following his or her intuition, S* believes that murdering the drifter is always wrong. Here DC2 *would* obtain—the belief that the drifter's murder is sometimes permissible

coheres better with S's other beliefs than does belief that his murder is always wrong—and so S*'s immediate justification for believing that this is always wrong would be defeated. But why the asymmetry? In both cases, S and S* believe something when there are equal reasons on both sides. In the one case, these reasons come from one's background beliefs and, in the other, they come immediately from experience, but why should that make any difference?

As a last resort, one could argue that the proposed scenario is impossible—that S's reasons for p will always be superior to the reasons for ~p when p coheres better with S's background beliefs. If this is true, it is presumably because coherence with background beliefs is one's exclusive source of reasons. Thus, this strategy requires doing away with experiential evidence altogether (a daunting prospect) and adopting a coherentist approach to non-inferential justification.[3] Regardless, it would have the effect of eliminating the problematic cases. If S's reasons for p and ~p are equal, this is because both p and ~p cohere equally well with S's background evidence, in which case DC2 obtains and S's justification for p is defeated.

As before, this avoids the counterintuitive implications only by narrowing the conditions in which EC provides immediate justification. Indeed, it narrows them so much that they become almost non-existent. Consider four possible scenarios in which S believes p, which are together exhaustive:

(i)   S believes p and S's reasons for p are *better than* S's reasons for ~p.
(ii)   S believes p and S's reasons for p are *equal to* S's reasons for ~p.
(iii) S believes p and S's reasons for p are *worse than* S's reasons for ~p.
(iv)   S believes p and S has *no reasons* for p or ~p at all.

If (iii) obtains, then so does DC1 and S's immediate justification for p is defeated. If (ii) obtains, then so does DC2 and S's immediate justification for p is defeated. If (i) obtains, then S retains justification for believing p; but S's belief is also *mediately* justified by the stronger reasons for p present in S's larger belief system. This inferential justification essentially replaces the immediate justification granted by EC, rendering it irrelevant. Thus, the only scenario in which the immediate justification from EC shows itself is the extreme one in which S has no reasons for or against p *at all*, including no framework of background beliefs that bears on the issue. This is called being in a state of "empty symmetrical evidence" (Poston 2014, p. 21), and it seems

clear that no human ever actually finds herself in it (Coren 2021). It is fair to say that this would be a much more limited role for epistemic conservatism than its proponents originally envisioned.

Yet the most plausible form of epistemic conservatism, defended by Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 2), limits itself to beliefs of exactly this sort. Poston's version of epistemic conservatism is restricted to "mere beliefs," which are defined as those accepted in a state empty symmetrical evidence. It states:

EC*   If S merely believes p, then S has some justification for maintaining her belief that p.

Poston describes EC* as a principle of last resort, since it is only relevant in those situations in which reasons tell us nothing. This does not, however, make it inconsequential. Poston follows Wittgenstein (1969) in arguing that hinge propositions are accepted in the state of empty symmetrical evidence (Poston 2014, Ch. 2). Hinge propositions are fundamental assumptions "upon which the door of inquiry turns," and so must already be in place before the provision of considerations for or against any them can even begin to occur. They include things like the reliability of our cognitive faculties, the uniformity of nature, and the stability of meaning over time. The presumption in favor of such beliefs provides just enough leverage to get inquiry off the ground, at which point Poston favors an explanatory coherentist account of justification.

Though extremely restrictive, Poston's EC* is plausible. It escapes counterexamples of the sort given above, and it is less counterintuitive to grant presumption to such bedrock assumptions if only because they are believed. Indeed, Poston asks us what alternative we really have? (Poston 2014, pp. 39-41) If we find ourselves in the state of mere belief, we cannot wait for various arguments to weigh in since the proffering of considerations for or against such assumptions will itself presuppose them. Whatever path we take—believing, disbelieving, or withholding assent—will be selected in the dark. Since we already find ourselves believing, it makes the most sense just to continue in that direction.

There is another option here. It may be true that hinge propositions cannot be supported by derivative reasons (such as those provided by deductive, inductive, or explanatory inferences) without relying on those very propositions, but what about non-derivative reasons? It is possible

that the justification of hinge propositions comes not from the fact that they are believed but from the fact that they are utterly evident—the sort of things that seem so obviously true that it is ridiculous to deny them. In which case those seemings might themselves constitute reasons for believing—non-derivative reasons not depending on any arguments or framework of background beliefs. We thus return to my central theme: anything epistemic conservatism can do, phenomenal conservatism can do just as well (and from a more plausible starting point).

What's more, reflecting on the evident character of hinge propositions should lead us to reconsider the plausibility of EC*. It turns out that EC* must grant justification to hinge propositions even if they do not seem the least bit true. Why? Because if one concedes that believing in hinge propositions is justified only when they appear true, then one must also concede that those seemings are acting as non-derivative reasons, in which case one is not in the state of empty symmetrical evidence. Thus, to properly evaluate EC*, we must try to envision a situation in which those hinge propositions are not evident—a difficult prospect, as such propositions are so naturally apparent to us that it is hard to imagine feeling indifferent towards them. Nevertheless, we shall try.

Imagine an epistemological Adam of sorts—an adult human brought into the world fully-formed. Our Adam has the conceptual framework necessary to form thoughts, but has no indication whatsoever as to how the world works. He hears a sound. The question comes to mind whether there must be some cause of this sound. Again, our Adam has no background beliefs that bear on this claim. Moreover, the proposition does not in any way strike him as being true. Or even plausible. As far as its apparent truth is concerned, he feels completely *indifferent* towards it. It feels no different than if he were considering any random proposition—say, that in 2073 the Royals will win the World Series. The one difference is that he finds himself assenting to the former claim. He, for no reason at all, believes that the sound has a cause. Is Adam's belief justified? I submit that it is not.[4]

If the proposition is not believed because of its apparent truth, then why is it affirmed? The answer seems to be that the belief is, from the agent's perspective, brutely caused, having no basis whatsoever.[5] From the subject's perspective, how could belief in such conditions be anything other than completely arbitrary? One way of gauging justification is asking whether it makes sense for someone solely concerned with securing true beliefs and avoiding false ones to risk assent. Well, if there are no reasons counting in favor of a belief, and it doesn't even seem

true in the slightest, then that belief doesn't appear a risk worth taking. Perhaps if the pursuit of truth were all that mattered then belief might be wagered, but the goal of avoiding falsehood prohibits reckless doxastic ventures, which is precisely what belief in these conditions would be. In such an instance, Locke seems more or less right in saying,

> He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, no pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Errour. (Locke [1689] 1975, pp. 687-688)

This objection is at the core of the intuitive complaint with which we began. There has to be *some* indication a proposition is true before it can be affirmed in a way that isn't reckless with respect to the avoidance of falsehood. There has to be some on balance reason for belief. And epistemic conservatism says that belief can be justified even if there is no reason at all. This is the unavoidable problem plaguing all forms of epistemic conservatism and, in my judgment, a decisive one.

Granted, the epistemic conservative might have an out if there was no alternative; but there is. Phenomenal conservatism provides a decidedly more plausible option. For on this view, the claim is that Adam is justified in believing that the sound has a cause *because that proposition seems obviously true to him*. Belief seems a sensible response to such obviousness for those concerned with finding the truth and avoiding falsehood. That's a wager worth making. At the very least, this is a much more plausible starting point than on epistemic conservatism. Thus, phenomenal conservatism not only serves the same purposes as epistemic conservatism, it does so from a more intuitive foundation.

§4. Reid's Defense

In my judgment, the strongest defense that can be offered for epistemic conservatism comes from early modern philosopher Thomas Reid. These arguments are largely neglected in contemporary debates surrounding epistemic conservatism, to their loss. Alas, these too are undermined by the introduction of phenomenal conservatism. That is, they work just as well or

better as arguments for phenomenal conservatism than for epistemic conservatism, as we shall see.[6]

Reid's first argument appeals to the *irresistibility* of certain beliefs (belief in hinge propositions being prime candidates). These are beliefs that cannot be changed by any human effort, either direct or indirect. Regarding such, Reid writes "An invincible Error of the Understanding, of Memory, of Judgment or of Reasoning is not imputable for this very Reason that it is invincible" (Reid 2002, p. 66). The idea is that we cannot be at fault for something we do not control (ought implies can), and so if we do not have power to resist forming a belief, that belief is *ipso facto* permissible for us (McAllister 2016). Reid's reasoning makes sense if our notion of epistemic responsibility required *voluntary* control over our beliefs, for it is true that we have no control over many of our beliefs in this sense. But contemporary accounts of epistemic responsibility do not require voluntary control, doxastic voluntarism being largely maligned. Moreover, we do retain a more moderate form of control over the relevant beliefs in that they result from cognitive dispositions that are our own, and it is possible for us to be otherwise disposed.[7] In this sense we *can* resist even "irresistible" beliefs, and we should. If the irresistible belief is not occasioned by some reason to believe in its truth, then our previous complaint returns: in the complete absence of reasons, believing isn't justified.

Reid's second argument appeals to the *naturalness* of certain beliefs (again, belief in hinge propositions being prime candidates). Natural beliefs are those formed in accordance with innate principles of our constitutions. The fact that there is nothing we did to bring about these beliefs is thought to shield us from any responsibility pertaining to them (McAllister 2016). Reid offers the plea, "This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine" (Reid [1764] 1997, p. 169). But the fact that a belief results from our natural constitution is no guarantee that it's justified, even initially, for we might be naturally constituted in a deficient way. Cognitive scientists regularly expose how natural it is for us to engage in motivated reasoning and all other sorts of problematic cognition.

My critique here treats naturalness as a descriptive concept—natural beliefs being something like those that all humans will form in the statistically normal course of human development, barring some developmental obstacle. It is obvious that belief in hinge propositions is natural in this sense, but that counts little in its favor. What if Reid is using naturalness as a

normative concept—natural beliefs being those that result from a properly-constituted human intellect? That counts a lot in their favor, but there is no non-question begging reason to think that brute belief in hinge propositions is natural in this sense. To the contrary, I have made the case that if the belief is formed without any indication of its truth, then that belief is not one that the properly-constituted human intellect would form.

Despite these deficiencies, there remains something extraordinarily insightful about Reid's defenses. Consider the possibility of cognitive dispositions so fundamental to the human intellect that, if removed, one would cease to operate as an intellectual agent at all. Let us call these "constitutive principles of rationality."[8] The beliefs formed in accordance with such constitutive principles would be irresistible in the most formidable sense. They could be avoided only by divesting oneself of one's intellectual agency altogether. The fact that one cannot resist beliefs in this sense *does* seem to shield us from criticism on their basis. Moreover, such beliefs are guaranteed to be natural in the normative sense. We know that the dispositions producing them are parts of the properly-constituted human intellect because they are parts of *any* functioning human intellect. If a belief resulted from this kind of principle, it would surely be justified.

This is, I think, the strongest case that could be made for EC*. If the very process of having and giving reasons requires belief in hinge propositions, then the disposition to believe them is a constitutive principle of rationality and we cannot be faulted for believing them. Furthermore, there is a plausible case to be made that belief in hinge propositions is in fact required in order to make inferences or engage in other forms of discursive reasoning. This does not, however, make it a constitutive principle of rationality to believe in hinge propositions *without any indication of their truth*. *That* is not required for rational activity. For it may be that such hinge propositions can be justifiably believed on the basis of seemings, as already discussed.

Indeed, if we are looking for constitutive principles of rationality, the following seems to be our most plausible candidate: not that beliefs must be given presumption whenever we hold them, but that beliefs must be given presumption *whenever they seem true*. Starting from this more plausible point, the case might still be made that trusting in how things seem is constitutive of rational activity in that no rational activity would be possible without it. For what else could constitute reasons for believing hinge propositions but seemings? How could we even get started

in reasoning, much less make any progress, if we did not place a basic trust in how things seemed to us? A full defense of phenomenal conservatism as a constitutive principle of rationality must await another forum.[9] The point at hand is that phenomenal conservatism once again undercuts motivation for its doxastic counterpart.

§5. Conclusion

The long and the short of it is this: epistemic conservatism starts from an implausible claim—that certain basic beliefs are justified simply because they are believed. This places the burden of proof against it. Some epistemic conservatives have sought to avoid this burden by limiting its scope, but I have argued that they cannot escape it entirely. When it comes down to it, epistemic conservatism posits basic beliefs justified without any good reasons for accepting them, and that's a significant cost to the position. Epistemic conservatives have proposed that we pay this cost in exchange for the theoretical fruit yielded by their position. However, such a defense is undercut by the introduction of phenomenal conservatism, which accomplishes much the same work from a much more plausible starting point. Thus, if one opts for conservatism, better to choose the phenomenal kind.[10]

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[1] Some have suggested that seemings just are beliefs, in which case phenomenal conservatism simply collapses back into epistemic conservatism. This is perhaps why proponents of phenomenal conservatism almost exclusively endorse the view that seemings are experiences rather than beliefs or inclinations to believe. For a survey of such debates and a defense of the experiential view, see McAllister 2018.

[2] See Shields 2013 on Aristotle's conservatism.

[3] For this reason, McCain himself presumably would not opt for this solution, as he allows for experiential evidence (McCain and Moretti forthcoming).

[4] Coren 2021 argues that it is practically impossible to evaluate such bare beliefs since we do not ever encounter them in our actual circumstances. While I am sympathetic to the concern, this reasoning does not, in my judgment, establish that evaluating bare beliefs is impossible; only that it is exceedingly difficult. If we are careful, we might still elicit lessons from imagining a subject in these extreme theoretical conditions.

[5] It's not clear that this is possible. How could a belief be sustained if it neither seemed true nor had any other conscious psychological motivation? Even McCain says, "I am dubious about whether we do in fact form beliefs for which we have no reasons (even bad ones)" (McCain 2008, p. 198, ft. 33).

[6] Reid's relationship to phenomenal conservatism, or dogmatism, is somewhat complicated. Boesplflug 2019b is correct that Reid was not a phenomenal conservative, nevertheless phenomenal conservatives often claim him as their forefather. This is because Reid's epistemology contains several core insights that some believe are most plausibly captured in phenomenal conservatism. What are these core insights? Reid's common sense philosophical methodology is certainly one, as Boespflug 2019a argues. Perhaps the most important, however, is Reid's apprehension that the fundamental orientation of rationality is one of credulity rather

than suspicion—that all rational inquiry proceeds on trust, or faith, in one's rational faculties and what they purportedly reveal to be true. I discuss this in McAllister 2019 and at greater length in McAllister n.d.

[7] See Boyle 2009 on exercising intrinsic control over our beliefs rather than agential control.

[8] Rysiew 2002 interprets Reid as claiming that the principles of common sense are constitutive principles of rationality.

[9] I articulate such a defense in McAllister n.d.

[10] I'd like to thank an anonymous reviewer for his or her exceedingly thorough and helpful comments.