PHENOMENAL CONSERVATISM AND SELF-DEFEAT ARGUMENTS: A REPLY TO HUEMER

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I respond to Michael Huemer's reply to my objection against Phenomenal Conservatism (PC). I have argued that Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC does not favor PC over competing theories of basic propositional justification, since analogous self-defeat arguments can be constructed for competing theories. Huemer responds that such analogous self-defeat arguments are unsound. In this paper, I argue that Huemer's reply does not save his Self-defeat Argument for PC from my original objection.

KEYWORDS: appearances, dogmatism, justification, phenomenal conservatism, seemings, self-defeat argument

Michael Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for Phenomenal Conservatism (PC), the view according to which "[i]f 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,"[1] goes like this:

(1) All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon appearances.

(2) A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.

(3) Therefore, if appearances are not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that appearances are not a source of justification.[2]

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[1] Michael Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30-55. See also Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Michael Huemer, "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43 (2006): 147-158.

[2] Michael Huemer, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Self-Defeat: A Reply to DePoe," *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 1-13. See also Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 98-115.

This Self-defeat Argument for PC, Huemer argues, shows that "any theory [of basic propositional justification] that rejects PC is self-defeating, in the sense that if such a theory is true, it is (doxastically) unjustified."[3]

Against Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC, I have argued that analogous self-defeat arguments can be made in support of competing theories of basic propositional justification.[4] This shows that considerations of self-defeat alone do not favor PC over its competitors. As an example, I have constructed the following self-defeat argument for evidentialism, "the view that the epistemic justification of a belief is determined by the quality of the believer's evidence for the belief:"[5]

(1*) All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon *evidence*.

(2) A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.

(3*) Therefore, if *evidence* is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that *evidence* is not a source of justification.

In response to this self-defeat argument for evidentialism, Huemer claims that he need not be concerned, since evidentialism is not incompatible with PC. He should only be troubled by self-defeat arguments for "competing theories of basic propositional justification (that is, theories incompatible with PC)."[6] Huemer sums up his reply as follows:

> It does not matter if it is possible to construct an implausible and unsound version of the self-defeat argument in defense of other theories of justification. That casts no doubt on my use of the self-defeat argument for PC. What sets PC apart from its rivals (i.e., theories that are incompatible with PC) is that the Self-Defeat Argument for PC has a first premise that is plausible and true, whereas the self-defeat arguments for rival theories have first premises that are implausible and false.[7]

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[3] Huemer, "A Reply to DePoe," 1.

[4] Moti Mizrahi, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Justification, and Self-Defeat," *Logos & Episteme* 5 (2014): 103-110.

[5] Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48 (1985): 15-34. More explicitly: "*S*'s belief that *p* at time *t* is justified (well-founded) iff (i) believing *p* is justified for *S* at *t*; (ii) *S* believes *p* on the basis of evidence that supports *p*" (Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 46).

[6] Michael Huemer, "Alternative Self-Defeat Arguments: A Reply to Mizrahi," *Logos & Episteme* 5 (2014): 223-229.

[7] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 229.

As I understand it, Huemer's reply to my original objection consists of the following moves:

(M1)   Some theories of basic propositional justification, such as evidentialism, are compatible with PC, and thus self-defeat arguments for such theories need not trouble the phenomenal conservative.

(M2)   Self-defeat arguments for theories that are incompatible with PC have implausible first premises.

I think there are problems with both (M1) and (M2).

As far as (M1) is concerned, although evidentialism can be made compatible with PC, it can also be made incompatible with PC. PC is an internalist theory of justification insofar as it counts certain mental states (i.e., seemings) as justifiers. On the other hand, although it is often construed as an internalist theory, evidentialism can also be construed as an externalist theory of justification.[8] "Externalist evidentialism,"[9] according to which mental states are not justifiers,[10] would be incompatible with PC but the analogous self-defeat argument for evidentialism can be made to support externalist evidentialism as well. That is:

(1`)   All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon *ext-evidence*.

(2)   A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.

(3`)   Therefore, if *ext-evidence* is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that *ext-evidence* is not a source of justification.

This, then, is an argument for a theory of basic propositional justification, namely, externalist evidentialism, which is incompatible with PC.

As an additional example of a theory that is incompatible with PC, consider the following self-defeat argument for a simple version of process reliabilism, an externalist theory according to which, if S's belief that p results from a reliable belief-forming process, then S is justified in believing that p:[11]

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[8] Kevin McCain, *Evidentialism and Epistemic Justification* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 120.

[9] Earl Conee, "First Things First," in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, eds. Earl Conee and Richard Feldman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35.

[10] "Externalism on this dimension, then, would be the view that something other than mental states operate as justifiers" (George Pappas, "Internalist vs. Externalist Conceptions of Epistemic Justification," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Fall 2013 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/justep-intext).

[11] Alvin Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?" in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. George S. Pappas (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Co, 1979), 1-24. See also Alvin Goldman, "Immediate

(1``) All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon *reliable belief-forming processes*.

(2) A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.

(3``) Therefore, if *reliable belief forming processes* are not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that *reliable belief-forming processes* are not a source of justification.

As in the case of the analogous self-defeat arguments for evidentialism and externalist evidentialism, premise (1``) is a simple variation on premise (1) of Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC; instead of 'appearances' in (1), we now have 'reliable belief-forming processes' as the basic source of propositional justification. Premise (2) remains unchanged. Consequently, from premises (1``) and (2), conclusion (3``) is supposed to follow, just as conclusion (3) is supposed to follow from premises (1) and (2) in Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC.

Even if Huemer is right about PC and evidentialism being compatible, the fact that analogous self-defeat arguments can be made in support of competing theories of basic propositional justification would still undermine Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC. To see why, note that two theories may be competing but not incompatible theories. For example, suppose that my car does no start one morning. There are at least two potential explanations for that: (a) the car does not start because the battery is dead; (b) the car does not start because it is out of gas. These two explanations are competing explanations for the same fact, namely, that my car does not start, insofar as each explanation, if true, would explain why the car does not start. But (a) and (b) are not incompatible, since both (a) and (b) could be true. Now, in trying to figure out which explanation is more plausible, or which we should prefer, we could appeal to several theoretical desiderata, such as simplicity. But if (a) and (b) are equally simple explanations of the fact that my car does not start, then simplicity is not a consideration that would warrant choosing (a) over (b) as the most likely explanation (and vice versa). In other words, if both (a) and (b) are simple explanations of the fact that my car does not start, then simplicity alone does not favor (a) over (b) or (b) over (a).

Now, suppose that Huemer is right about PC and evidentialism being compatible. Even if they are compatible, in the sense that both could be true, they are competing theories of basic propositional justification insofar as each theory, if true, would "*account for* the justification of certain sorts of beliefs that we

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Justification and Process Reliabilism," in *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 63-82.

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antecedently take to be justified" (original emphasis).[12] Huemer argues that, as far as theories of basic propositional justification are concerned, PC has a feature that "sets it apart from its rivals,"[13] namely, PC is such that rejecting it is self-defeating. However, if the aforementioned considerations are correct, then proponents of rival theories of justification can say the same thing about their theories. That is, evidentialism, externalist evidentialism, and process reliabilism have the same feature that PC has, namely, rejecting each of these theories is self-defeating, as the analogous self-defeat arguments show. If so, then considerations of self-defeat alone do not favor PC over its rivals, even if those rival theories are compatible with PC, just as considerations of simplicity alone do no favor (a) over (b) or (b) over (a).

Accordingly, if two competing theories (whether they are compatible or not), T_1 and T_2, have the same theoretical desideratum, D, then D does not warrant preferring T_1 over T_2 or T_2 over T_1. Since PC and evidentialism (or externalist evidentialism) have the same theoretical desideratum, namely, rejecting them is self-defeating, self-defeat considerations do not favor PC over evidentialism (or externalist evidentialism) and vice versa. So, if a self-defeat argument supports PC, a self-defeat argument supports evidentialism (or externalist evidentialism) as well. In that case, however, self-defeat arguments do not favor one of these theories over the other.

Although he might accept (1*), since he says that "evidence is a source of justification," and that "depending on what 'evidence' means, PC might just be a form of evidentialism,"[14] Huemer would presumably respond to the self-defeat arguments for externalist evidentialism and process reliabilism by claiming that (1`) and (1``) are implausible or false. This is his second move, (M2). But I don't see why Huemer is entitled to assert (1) in his Self-defeat Argument for PC but the evidentialist and the reliabilist are not entitled to assert (1`) and (1``) in their analogous self-defeat arguments for externalist evidentialism and process reliabilism. Recall that the "in relevant cases" clause in the first premise of a self-defeat argument is meant to rule out beliefs that are "based upon self-deception, faith, or the like."[15] The relevant cases, then, are "beliefs that we antecedently take to be justified."[16] In fact, in his reply, Huemer restates this clause as follows:

[12] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.
[13] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 229.
[14] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 224.
[15] Huemer, "A Reply to DePoe," 1.
[16] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.

beliefs "that are reasonable candidates for being justified."[17] As I understand it, this clause is meant to rule out unjustified beliefs, and so the first premise of a self-defeat argument is about beliefs that we take to be *justified* (otherwise, the Self-defeat Argument for PC would be invalid). As Huemer writes:

> One of the tasks for epistemological theory is to *account for* the justification of certain sorts of beliefs that we antecedently take to be justified – e.g., my perceptual belief that there is a squirrel in the tree outside, my belief that I feel hungry, your belief that 2+1=3 (original emphasis).[18]

The question, then, is what makes justified beliefs justified or what "*account*[s] *for* the justification of [justified] beliefs" (original emphasis).[19] For phenomenal conservatives, justified beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon appearances. For externalist evidentialists, justified beliefs are justified in virtue of being based upon ext-evidence. For process reliabilists, justified beliefs are justified in virtue of resulting from reliable belief-forming processes. Since each of these *accounts for* the justification of beliefs that we take to be justified, if the phenomenal conservative is entitled to premise (1) in Huemer's Self-defeat argument for PC, then the evidentialist is entitled to premise (1`) in the analogous self-defeat argument for externalist evidentialism, and the reliabilist is entitled to premise (1``) in the analogous self-defeat argument for process reliabilism.

Unsurprisingly, Huemer appeals to seemings in order to justify premise (1) of his Self-defeat Argument for PC when he says the following:

> Consider some reasonable candidate for a justified belief, say your belief that 2+1=3. If you reflect on this belief, I think you are just going to find it plausible that it is based upon the appearance that 2+1=3 (its seeming to you that 2+1=3).[20]

This is unsurprising because, if PC is true, then the premises of the Self-defeat Argument for PC, just like any other candidate for a justified belief, would have to be justified ultimately on the basis of seemings. But the same can be said of PC's rivals. For example, if externalist evidentialism is true, then (1`), just like any other candidate for a justified belief, would be justified ultimately in virtue of being based on ext-evidence. Similarly, if process reliabilism is true, then (1``), just like any other candidate for a justified belief, would be justified ultimately in virtue of resulting from some reliable belief-forming process.

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[17] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 223.
[18] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.
[19] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.
[20] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 227.

In that respect, it is important to note that the claim that PC is not a "complete theory of basic propositional justification," does not render (1) more plausible than either (1`) or (1``). If anything, it renders (1) false. According to Huemer, "*complete* theories of basic propositional justification [...] purport to identify the *sole* ultimate source of propositional justification," whereas PC "merely purport[s] to identify *a* source of propositional justification" (original emphasis).[21] Saying that appearances are merely *a* source of justification suggests that there are other sources of justification.[22] But if we have justified beliefs that are based on other sources of justification, then we have justified beliefs that are not based on appearances. In other words, it is not the case that *all* our justified beliefs are based upon appearances. If so, then (1) is false.

Finally, in an attempt to save his Self-defeat Argument for PC from my objection, Huemer might argue that (1`) and (1``) are less plausible than (1) because of skeptical possibilities, such as brain-in-vat scenarios. For example, according to (1`) all our justified beliefs are based on ext-evidence. But Huemer might say that this is false because, if we are brains in vats, then we have beliefs but no ext-evidence. The problem with this move, however, is that we might have beliefs in skeptical scenarios, but it is far from clear that we have *justified* beliefs. The first premise of a self-defeat argument is a premise about (what we take to be) *justified* beliefs. Arguably, these are not the sort of beliefs subjects form under radical skeptical circumstances. If so, then Huemer's own construal of (1) as being about "beliefs that we antecedently take to be justified,"[23] blocks this move.

To sum up, self-defeat arguments can be constructed for competing theories of basic propositional justification that are either compatible or incompatible with PC. For this reason, (M1) fails as an attempt to save Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC from my original objection. Moreover, competing theories of basic propositional justification account for (what we take to be) justified beliefs just as well as PC does, and so (1`) and (1``) are no less plausible than (1).[24] For this reason, (M2) fails as an attempt to save Huemer's Self-defeat Argument for PC

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[21] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.

[22] In fact, as mentioned above, Huemer says that "evidence is a source of justification" (224), although he probably construes evidence along internalist rather than externalist lines.

[23] Huemer, "A Reply to Mizrahi," 226.

[24] Indeed, one might argue that (1) is even less plausible than (1`) and (1``) insofar as it posits the existence of queer entities, namely, seemings, for which there is rather questionable evidence. See Ryan T. Byerly, "It Seems Like There Aren't Any Seemings," *Philosophia* 40 (2012): 771-782.

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from my original objection. If this is correct, then the original objection still stands: considerations of self-defeat alone do not favor PC over its competitors.[25]