

ALTERNATIVE SELF-DEFEAT ARGUMENTS: A REPLY TO MIZRAHI

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ABSTRACT: I address Moti Mizrahi's objections to my use of the Self-Defeat Argument for Phenomenal Conservatism (PC). Mizrahi contends that other epistemological theories can be supported by parallel self-defeat arguments. I argue that the self-defeat arguments for other theories either (a) are compatible with PC and thus present no problem, or (b) have a false premise, unlike the self-defeat argument for PC.

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

According to Phenomenal Conservatism (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.

I have previously defended PC using the "Self-Defeat Argument," which includes roughly the following reasoning:

1. All our beliefs (that are reasonable candidates for being justified) 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. So, if appearances are not a source of (propositional) justification, then all our beliefs are (doxastically) unjustified (including the belief that appearances are not a source of justification).¹

In an interesting recent paper, Moti Mizrahi has objected to my use of the Self-Defeat Argument for Phenomenal Conservatism.² Mizrahi maintains that if my argument works, then analogous self-defeat arguments may be deployed on behalf of other epistemological theories, including, in particular, evidentialism. As Mizrahi would have it, the evidentialist could argue:

¹ For a full statement and defense of the argument, see my "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): 30-55; and "Phenomenal Conservatism and Self-Defeat: A Reply to DePoe," *Philosophical Studies* 156 (2011): 1-13. For brevity, I shall hereafter omit the parenthetical phrases from the argument.

² Moti Mizrahi, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Justification, and Self-Defeat," *Logos & Episteme* 5 (2014): 103-110.

- 1*. All our beliefs are based upon evidence.
2. A belief is justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of justification.
- 3*. So, if evidence is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified.

So far, so good. But now I do not see where the problem for my view is supposed to arise. Why should I be troubled if this evidentialist-friendly argument succeeds?

Here is one possible reason. The success of that argument would trouble me if I rejected its conclusion, and especially if the conclusion were incompatible with, or at least in tension with, PC. But in fact I accept (3*), and I see no tension between (3*) and PC. Surely evidence is a source of justification! I would merely go on to note that our evidence consists of appearances. (In fact, depending on what “evidence” means, PC might just be a form of evidentialism.)

Here is a second thought. As Mizrahi observes, the success of the above evidentialist argument shows that PC is not *unique* or *special* in being supportable by a self-defeat argument. But I see no reason why this should be problematic. One who endorses a conclusion based upon a certain argument need not deny that any other conclusions can be supported by the same style of argument. Of course, one should, at least *prima facie*, be troubled if the same style of argument supports *contrary* conclusions, or supports *implausible* conclusions. But evidentialism is not contrary to PC, nor is it implausible.

But did I not claim, in my original presentation of the Self-Defeat Argument, that PC *was* unique in being supportable by this type of argument? Not exactly. What I claimed was that the Self-Defeat Argument tells against any *opposing* theory, that is, any theory that is actually incompatible with PC. I have no objection *per se* to theories that are *compatible* with PC, and I do not deny that some theories *that are compatible with PC* might be supported by a plausible self-defeat argument.

Perhaps evidentialism was simply a poor choice of example, because it happens to be compatible with PC. Mizrahi appears to hold that a (approximately equally persuasive?) self-defeat argument could be given for *any* theory of basic propositional justification (or at least for many such theories?). Certainly it should trouble me if an equally plausible self-defeat argument could be constructed for some competing theories of basic propositional justification (that is, theories incompatible with PC). But I deny that this is the case. The conclusion of the relevant self-defeat argument would be of the form “If X is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified” (with the further suggestion of

course being that we should accept X as a source of justification). PC holds, in essence, that appearances are a source of justification (check the formulation of PC above). But no proposition of the form “If X is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified,” nor of the form “X is a source of justification,” can be incompatible with the claim “Appearances are a source of justification.” (“a is F” is not incompatible with “b is F.”) To have a theory that is incompatible with PC, one must not merely hold that X *is* a source of justification (for some X), but actually hold that *appearances* are *not* a source of justification.

Perhaps the problem is not that self-defeat arguments can be used to support conclusions incompatible with PC, but merely that they could be used to support *implausible* conclusions, or conclusions that I would reject. For example, suppose someone held the view that tea leaf readings are a basic source of propositional justification. A self-defeat argument might be constructed for this view. It would go as follows:

- 1'. All our beliefs are based upon tea leaf readings.
2. A belief is justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of justification.
- 3'. So, if tea leaf readings are not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified.

But this argument is just utterly implausible, mainly because the first premise is obviously false. This is a counter-example to the claim that any theory of justification can be supported by an *equally plausible* self-defeat argument (e.g., one whose first premise is as plausible as my premise (1)).

What does Mizrahi say by way of explaining why other theories of basic propositional justification could be supported by self-defeat arguments? He writes:

I submit that any basic source of propositional justification [...] can be plugged into the following argument scheme instead of X:

- All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon X.
- A belief is (doxastically) justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of (propositional) justification.
- ∴ If X is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified [...].

This is so because any theory of basic propositional justification that identifies X as a basic source of justification would have to appeal to X in order to justify itself *on pain of self-defeat*. Since the ‘in the relevant cases’ is supposed to rule out beliefs that are clearly not justified, the remaining beliefs must be justified in virtue of being based upon X.³

³ Mizrahi, “Phenomenal Conservatism,” 108–9.

I am not sure exactly how to read this passage. It appears that Mizrahi is considering only *complete* theories of basic propositional justification, that is, theories that purport to identify the *sole* ultimate source of propositional justification, rather than theories that merely purport to identify *a* source of propositional justification. (Aside: PC, as formulated at the outset, is not complete in this sense; it only purports to identify *a* source of justification. Nevertheless, I would in fact be strongly inclined to accept appearances as the sole ultimate source of justification.) As Mizrahi notes, if one holds that X is the only ultimate source of justification, then one is committed to holding that X is the ultimate source of justification for the claim that X is the only ultimate source of justification. My best guess is that this is somehow supposed to show that one who holds that X is the sole ultimate source of justification is then entitled to assert that all our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon X. But I cannot see how this is the case. Suppose someone holds that tea leaf readings are the only ultimate source of justification (call this the Tea Leaf Theory). Their merely holding this bizarre view would not in the least render plausible their assertion that all our beliefs in relevant cases are based upon tea leaf readings.

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 $2+1=3$. This is not to say that we must start with complete agreement on which beliefs are justified, or even any *definite* agreement on whether any particular belief is justified; it is only to suggest that there are certain initially reasonable candidates for justified beliefs (like the belief about the squirrel), and other beliefs that are not even initially reasonable candidates (like the belief, based on pure wishful thinking, that I am the world's greatest basketball player). It just is obviously false that all the reasonable candidate beliefs are based upon tea leaf readings. It doesn't matter if someone holds that tea leaf readings are the only source of justification – that won't somehow make it plausible to hold that my belief about the squirrel, your belief that $2+1=3$, and so on, are all based upon tea leaf readings. We know that they are not.

Here is another thought. Suppose S holds that X is the only ultimate source of propositional justification. Assume also that S accepts the basing requirement for doxastic justification (premise 2 in the self-defeat argument). S would then be committed to the view that, if there are any justified beliefs, they are all based upon source X. S would therefore be committed to accepting both premises in the following argument:

- 1". If there are any doxastically justified beliefs, they are based upon X.

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

3". Therefore, if X is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified.

Since the argument is obviously valid, S must hold that the argument is in fact *sound*. We can thus conclude: any complete theory of basic propositional justification can be supported by a self-defeat argument *that the theory's proponents are committed to viewing as sound*.

Perhaps this is in the neighborhood of what Mizrahi was getting at in the passage I quoted above. However, I still see no problem for my view. Suppose the proponent of theory T is committed to the view that there is a sound self-defeat argument for T. That of course does not imply that *I* am committed to the view that there is a sound self-defeat argument for T. Nor does it imply that it is even the slightest bit *plausible* to think that there is a sound self-defeat argument for T. Thus, for example, proponents of the Tea Leaf Theory of justification would be committed to holding that there is a sound self-defeat argument for the Tea Leaf Theory. But this does not trouble me at all, since *I* remain free to hold that the self-defeat argument for the Tea Leaf Theory is ridiculous.

Might opponents of PC react similarly to my argument? Well, not reasonably. 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 $2+1=3$), in a way that you will *not at all* find it plausible that the belief is based upon a tea leaf reading that told you that $2+1=3$. That is why the self-defeat argument for PC is reasonable, whereas the self-defeat argument for Tea Leaf Theory is unreasonable. Of course, if, when you reflect, you *don't* find it plausible that you believe that $2+1=3$ because it seems to you that $2+1=3$, then my argument won't work on you.

"Okay," you might say, "big deal. So the self-defeat argument can't be used to support the Tea Leaf Theory. But what about theories opposing PC that epistemologists have actually advanced? For example, could a self-defeat argument be used to support the Acquaintance Theory of justification?" The Acquaintance Theory holds that one has non-inferential justification for believing that P if and only if one is acquainted with the fact that P.⁴ Imagine the Acquaintance Theorist arguing, by analogy to my own argument:

⁴ For defense of the acquaintance theory, see Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). The characterization in the text is somewhat simplified; for a more complex acquaintance theory, see Richard Fumerton, *Metaphysical and*

- 1#. All our beliefs are based upon acquaintance.
2. A belief is justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of justification.
- 3#. So, if acquaintance is not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified.

Is this argument as plausible as the analogous Self-Defeat argument for PC?

I think not. Premise (1#) is simply false. For example, if one has a perfectly realistic hallucination of a squirrel, with no reasons for doubting the experience's veridicality, and one believes on the basis of this experience that a squirrel is present, one thereby has a justified belief (certainly, at least, a belief that is a reasonable candidate for being justified). But this belief, at least on its face, is not based upon acquaintance. Similarly, if a philosopher believes the Comprehension Axiom of naive set theory (prior to the discovery of Russell's Paradox or any other objections to the Axiom) on the basis of the philosopher's intuition that the Comprehension Axiom is true, the philosopher has a justified belief which is not based on acquaintance.

Acquaintance theorists might dispute my claims here. Obviously, my belief that a squirrel is present is not directly based upon acquaintance with a squirrel. But it might be *indirectly* based upon acquaintance with, say, a *sensory experience* of a squirrel. According to the usual view, one's acquaintance with the sensory experience directly justifies one's belief that one has that very experience. The belief that one has a sensory experience of a squirrel, combined with the belief that sensory experiences are reliable indicators of facts in the external world, then inferentially justifies the belief that a squirrel is present.⁵ Similarly, the philosopher's belief in the Comprehension Axiom might be indirectly based upon acquaintance with an *intuition*, which, when combined with the belief that intuitions are reliable indicators of facts about abstract objects, gives one justification for believing the Comprehension Axiom.⁶

My first line of reply to this sort of view, as I have suggested elsewhere, would be to question that one can really justify the needed major premises (i.e., that sensory experiences and intuitions are reliable), if one does not start out by accepting appearances at least *prima facie*.⁷ My second line of reply would be that

Epistemological Problems of Perception (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 73-9.

⁵ See Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, Ch. 2.

⁶ For a similar approach to justifying introspective beliefs, see Ali Hasan, "Phenomenal Conservatism, Classical Foundationalism, and Internalist Justification," *Philosophical Studies* 162 (2013): 130-32.

⁷ See my *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001) and

the inferential justification that acquaintance theorists would rely upon simply is not the actual psychological basis for our perceptual or intuitive beliefs – even if the acquaintance theorist is able to construct convincing arguments for the reliability of sense perception and intuition, few if any people can seriously be claimed to be relying on such arguments when we form perceptual or intuitive beliefs. I therefore think that the acquaintance theorist will not be able to plausibly maintain that our actual beliefs (that are reasonable candidates for being justified) are based upon the reasoning that supposedly provides propositional justification for them. Given (i) the psychological facts about how we actually form beliefs, (ii) the acquaintance theorist's account of what provides propositional justification for beliefs about the external world and about abstract objects, and (iii) the basing requirement for doxastic justification, the acquaintance theorist will have to say that almost all of our beliefs are doxastically unjustified. This is a highly implausible result.

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. Obviously, more needs to be said in defense of that claim. But I have said more – in my earlier defense of the Self-Defeat Argument, I have argued that the plausible candidates for justified beliefs are in fact based upon its seeming to one that P, rather than, for example, on one's being acquainted with the fact that P, on P's being delivered by a reliable belief-forming method, etc.⁸ The Self-Defeat Argument thus supports the epistemic import of appearances, rather than of one of these other possible sources.

Ethical Intuitionism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 107–22.

⁸ Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," 39–48.