

Phil. 270/570, 2/28: Conservatism, Part 3: Phenomenal Conservatism

1. Huemer's 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. (p. 30.5)

Reason for the "at least some degree of" qualification: CPC, n. 1, p. 30

The real thing (more thorough-going PC): 3H, p. 25bot, incl., for the contrast with Huemer, fn. 30 on pp. 25-6. Appearances are where (all) of our epistemic justification for our beliefs comes from!

2. The nature of seemings/appearances

H: "I take statements of the form 'it seems to S that p' or 'it appears to S that p' to describe a kind of propositional attitude, different from belief, of which sensory experience, apparent memory, intuition, and apparent introspective awareness are species. This type of mental state may be termed an 'appearance'." (p. 30.7)

H: Appearances are not beliefs: CPC 30.9-31.2; nor dispositions or inclinations to form beliefs: CPC 31.3-31.8

3H, p. 27bot.-29top, including note 35: I take appearances to be inclinations to believe, responding here mainly to H's first argument.

But note the context-sensitivity of "appears" and "seems" claims (end of n. 35, at very bottom of 3H, p. 29), with "all-in" appearance claims (3H, p. 29top) being one important type. This can be used to respond to Huemer's second argument (CPC 31.5): One can appeal to an early-in-processing disposition to believe to non-trivially explain a later-in-processing disposition to believe

3. Note Huemer's playing the role of Reid to Bonjour's "semi-skeptic"!, hinting at Reid's charge of arbitrary partiality in the paragraph that straddles pp. 31-32 of CPC (where he opponents as those who favor appearances from certain sources, without yet explicitly complaining of this procedure), and really getting into it in a way that can be seen just by looking at the headings at the bottom of CPC, p. 32: "Discriminate" "Privileging."

4. Huemer's "Self-defeat" attack on non-PC-ers: introduced at CPC, p. 31.1, and then the main topic of the whole paper, moving forward. It's this argument that most clearly hints at Huemer holding to a more thorough-going PC than his official "Principle" advances

fighting it out with Descartes note (fn. 30, pp. 237-238 of KDR, *The Appearance of Ignorance*):

30 Here I take myself to be departing from the deeply anti-conservative attitude I find most emblematically expressed in the (disastrous in its implications) ninth paragraph of the Third Meditation, where Descartes distinguishes between “natural impulses” to belief and being able to intellectually “see” the truth of something by “the natural light.” Descartes is examining his long-standing belief in “things existing outside [him]” (Descartes 1996: 26) or “external objects” (Descartes 1971: 79), and has, in the previous paragraph, given this account of how this belief arose: “Nature has apparently taught me to think this” (1996: 26). Here is how Descartes draws the crucial distinction:

When I say “Nature taught me to think this,” all I mean is that a spontaneous impulse leads me to believe it, not that its truth has been revealed to me by some natural light. There is a big difference here. Whatever is revealed to me by the natural light—for example that from the fact that I am doubting it follows that I exist, and so on—cannot in any way be open to doubt. This is because there cannot be another faculty both as trustworthy as the natural light and also capable of showing me that such things are not true. But as for my natural impulses, I have often judged in the past that they were pushing me in the wrong direction when it was a question of choosing the good, and I do not see why I should place any greater confidence in them in other matters. (1996: 26–7)

His beliefs in external objects having fallen on the dark side of this crucial distinction, Descartes refuses to accept them, at least in his Meditations, unless and until they can be verified by things that are not just believed by “some blind impulse” (as he puts it in the twelfth paragraph), but that he can see to be true by the “natural light.” Much is going on here, and I won’t go into it all. But I should note that the “natural” belief that Descartes is speaking of here is not just that there are external (in some suitable sense) objects, but also that they in some seemingly murky and problematic way resemble his “ideas” of them: “But the chief question at this point concerns the ideas which I take to be derived from things existing outside me: what is my reason for thinking they resemble those things? Nature has apparently taught me to think this.”

Here, Descartes may well be saddling our “natural belief” with some extra baggage it doesn’t actually carry, though issues of interpretation are tricky—not to mention issues about the actual nature of our relevant thoughts! And (especially for those of us with a history of actual error in matters of math and logic) much needs to be hashed out about how Descartes manages to individuate “faculties” so that believing what one sees to be true by the “natural light” presumably ends up with a pristine track record, as compared with the apparently very sorry record of following mere natural impulses to belief. But at the end of the day, the conservative, like me, thinks that Descartes is just fooling himself here: There is no great difference of the type Descartes thinks he has found. Ultimately, we are just going by how things seem to us. When appearances are in conflict, we give some up in favor of others, often with the aid of explanations of how and when we are apt to go wrong, and if all goes well (as it often enough does) we may in that way come to learn that some types of natural impulses tend to misfire. And on the other side, some of these would-be beliefs we find ourselves impelled toward fit together well with another, and survive and are bolstered by our best attempts to tidy up our view of the world, perhaps to the extent that we might start to think of them as having some altogether different and higher status than something that could just result from our best attempt to best manage appearances. But that way by which we come to “see” things to be true is in reality to arrive at a view of the world that is built on a suitably refined way of following our natural impulses toward belief, not to reach outside of what is indicated by our natural impulses and instead rely on a totally different (and pristinely trustworthy) source, as it seems that Descartes’ “natural light” is supposed to be.