8. A Very Powerful Appearance, A Very Powerful Argument

Appearances can seem (!) feeble things: "mere appearances," as we might say. We usually say something "seems" or "appears" to be so when we don't feel in a position to flat-out declare that it is so. And the most proverbial thing we know about appearances is that they can be deceptive. How solid, and how compelling, can our premise, and then our argument, be, then, if it is based on an appearance?

Some of the apparent (!) general shakiness of appearances is due to a misleading trick of language: As I suggested above, when appearances are strong and reliable, we're usually in a position to say something stronger than just that things appear to be the way we take them to be. For instance, we'll often then be in a position to say that things simply are that way—and sometimes even that we know them to be that way. And when we're in a position to say something stronger like that, we typically *will* say, and generally should say, that stronger thing, rather than making the needlessly weak "It appears/seems that…." claim. So, though appearances can be strong and reliable, our use of "appears"/"seems" talk is generally called for when shaky appearances are in play, and this can make us think of appearances as being generally shaky things, when in fact they run the gamut.[29] Some appearances certainly can be deceptive, as well as shaky. That's quite consistent with some others of them, as well as some of what's based upon them, being very solid.

Indeed, some of us, myself included, think that *all* we know about the world, including the things we know most solidly, are ultimately based on appearances. According to this "Phenomenal Conservatism," as it's known in philosophy, in developing our view of the world and our place in it, we all start with some appearances, play them off of each other, getting rid of some as deceptive, but, thankfully, find many of them to fit together well to form a good, coherent picture of what the world is like. Because much of the resulting picture fits together so well, and incorporates incoming experience so well, we end up knowing many things, some of them being things we know very solidly indeed, and being very justified in many of our beliefs—despite it all being ultimately based on appearances.[30]

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[29] I here adapt H.P. Grice's (philosophically) famous explanation, in "The Causal Theory of Perception," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 35 (1961), pp. 121-152, for why the likes of "It looks red to me" generates an "implication" (Grice later came to use the label "implicature" here) to the effect that there is some "doubt or controversy" about whether the object is red, though the sentence doesn't actually say that there is such doubt or controversy.

[30] Michael Huemer has been the most important champion of Phenomenal Conservatism, perhaps most influentially in his paper "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007): pp. 30-55, but also then in other work. I'm going beyond PC as Huemer tends to formulate it—though in ways I've always suspected that (and have now confirmed that, via p.c.) Huemer

Admittedly, the question of what we so "start with," and what our knowledge of the world is "ultimately based on," is an extremely tricky one, and this "Phenomenal Conservatism" provides only a controversial answer to it. Thankfully, though (since I don't think anything like 1s could be one of our ultimate "starting points," anyway), good arguments to substantial and interesting philosophical conclusions don't have to—and I think almost never do—reach so far back into the cognitive mists as to begin exclusively from where our knowledge of the world ultimately begins, but instead make use of appearances that emerge some distance down the cognitive road[31] (though the early steps down the cognitive road we took to get to the appearances we now appeal to can be notoriously hard to reliably reconstruct).

So, based on experience in philosophy, including a good deal of studying of its history (though my knowledge of its history is admittedly spotty), and not on any controversial grand claim about where all our justification for our beliefs ultimately comes from, I feel pretty comfortable saying: Where its conclusion is indeed substantial and interesting, any philosophical argument will have at least one premise—let's say its most controversial and shaky starting premise; we can call it the argument's "key premise"—that is itself interesting and substantial.[32] And potentially deniable.[33] And what can be said for such a premise? Well,

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would agree with. Huemer construes Phenomenal Conservatism as the position that (to take his gloss in the just-cited paper) "appearances of all kinds generate at least some justification for belief" (p. 30), which falls short of saying that appearances are where all our justification ultimately comes from (and indeed, falls short of even saying that appearances generate very much justification). But I think one could always find in Huemer's work pushes toward accepting a more thorough-going "Phenomenal Conservatism" than what he himself officially endorses.

[31] I should perhaps here cancel any suggestion that if we could dig down to where our knowledge of the world begins, we would then be starting from something unusually, much less unshakably, solid, because I for one suspect the appearances we begin with are mostly quite uncertain, shaky ones, that do give rise to all our knowledge, including some very certain knowledge, only after a lot of playing these appearances off each other, and so quite a ways down the cognitive road from its fabled beginnings.

[32] I'm here assuming that arguments' premises imply their conclusions. If an argument is not like that, and its controversial aspects instead concern whether the conclusion really follows from the premises, rather than whether the premises are true, it can be converted to the needed form by adding conditional bridge premises ("If [premise[s]], then [conclusion]"), which will then bear the weight of the controversy. Otherwise, one can construe both the premises and the inferences as "steps" in an argument, and then say that where its conclusion is substantial and interesting, any philosophical argument will have at least one "key step" that is itself interesting and substantial and deniable, where an inference is "denied" where one claims that its conclusion doesn't follow from its premises.

[33] "So much the worse for philosophical arguments!"—I can hear the response. And I do agree that philosophical arguments generally aren't strong enough to produce anything close to knowledge of their conclusions. In fact, though I don't think this could provide an exception-free definition, I think there is something right about a characterization of philosophers as specialists in addressing some of the questions we find important, but which nobody has yet figured out a knowledge-producing way to get answers to, generating answers to such questions, and good (even if not knowledge-producing) support

one can offer a proper argument for it, but then it becomes a conclusion (or a sub-conclusion: a claim that one provides an argument for, but that then one uses to argue for further conclusions), with premises supposedly leading to it, and not an initial premise of one's argument, and what I'm claiming here is that at least one of those *initial* premises of any argument for a substantial conclusion will itself be substantial and deniable. And, short of offering a proper argument for that premise, which we can now suppose our arguer is not in any position to do effectively, what can our arguer do in defense of their shakiest *initial* premise, other than to present it in its best light, perhaps asking their audience to evaluate it in light of certain considerations, and appeal to their audience, to us, in light of the considerations adduced: Doesn't that *seem* right? Doesn't it *appear* to be true? When the pusher of our Simple argument makes their case for their premise, but then ends with a "mere" appeal to appearances or their key premise seeming true, they are doing what all arguers must at least in effect do when they reach their initial premise(s)—well, insofar as they seek to support those premises at all.[34]

Since such seemings or appearances are so important to our argument, and indeed to any substantial philosophical argument, it's worth pausing to remark on how the appearances that underwrite good arguments compare with some other appearances. Sometimes we say that something "seems" or "appears" to be the case, even though we are not at all tempted to believe that things really are as they appear to be. For instance, even after being effectively informed (perhaps before even encountering it) that it really is an illusion, and that the two horizontal lines included here in it really are the same length, many will report that the horizontal line on top here "appears to be longer" (or "seems to be longer") than the other, lower one in this display of the Müller-Lyer illusion:

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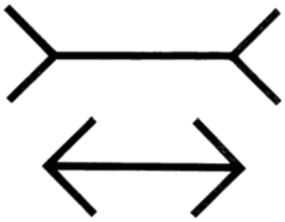
for those answers—sometimes in the form of "proper arguments" for these conclusions, and sometimes by means of other "cases" for them. None of this is to put philosophy down. Philosophy is wonderful–and in large part precisely because it deals with those important but hard questions. (And I think there's something to the idea that once we get to the point that philosophy is producing actual knowledge about a topic, then the area of philosophy that deals with the area is likely to break off and no longer be thought of as philosophy.) Philosophy is sometimes attacked as a waste of time for dealing with such questions, but quite inconveniently for them, those making such an attack appear to be engaging in philosophy in the very making of the attack—and often not very well! (I suppose it's no great surprise that those who don't value an activity can tend ~~not~~ to be so good at it.)

[34] Some back-up on this from a prominent philosopher: After an evaluation of an argument of his own (in fact, one that will be important to us later), Peter van Inwagen writes: "And this, *mutatis mutandis*, is all that can be asked of any philosophical argument. At any rate, no more can be said for any known philosophical argument than this: it is valid and its premises seem to be true" (van Inwagen, "Free Will Remains a Mystery," *Philosophical Perspectives* 14 (2000): 1-19; p. 10).



Though they are fully convinced that the top line is not longer, I think that when they say "Wow, the top line seems to be longer!", such a person is still reporting some push toward believing that the top line is longer that they can feel within their soul. This push or inclination to believe may never have had any chance of resulting in a belief that the top line is longer, given their unwavering trust that the lines are in fact the same length, but the push is still there, and can still be felt, and is I think what we are reporting with the relevant "seems" or "appears" claims.[35]

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[35] I believe that "seems" and "appears" claims generally report some push toward believing the proposition that one is saying "seems" or "appears" to be true. Here, I go against Huemer, who in his main work, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism" (see note 30*), argues as follows:

> Nor should appearances be identified with dispositions or inclinations to form beliefs. One reason is that one might be so convinced that an appearance was illusory that one was not even inclined to believe its content. One could even be convinced in advance that one was going to experience an illusory appearance, so that there would be no time at which one had the relevant inclination to believe. (p. 31)

But as I pointed out in the main text (and I had Huemer's argument in mind when I did so), there can be push toward (and the same point would hold for an inclination toward) belief that is preemptively and thoroughly checked by some other force.

In later work ("Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles," in Chris Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, Oxford University Press, 2013); pp. 328-50), Huemer argues as follows:

> A natural approach to analyzing seeming is to appeal to dispositions to believe. One might hold that its seeming to one that P is simply a matter of one's being in a state such that one would believe that P, were there no other factors interfering with one's forming such a belief.
>
> It is worth briefly reminding ourselves of one of the main reasons for rejecting that approach. This is the fact that one can be disposed to believe P for different sorts of reasons, other than its seeming to one that P. If I am disposed to believe in the afterlife because I *want* there to be an afterlife, this is quite different from my being disposed to believe in the afterlife because that seems true. The lesson is that appearances are only one sort of ground for the disposition to believe. (p. 329)

But I think that to someone inclined to believe something because they want it to be so, the thing does seem to them to be the case. Of course, there are different levels of inclinations to believe things, and not everything that can be called a "disposition" to belief in someone forces us to say that the thing "seems" or "appears" to them to be so. My desire for there to be an afterlife may not yet have generated any felt push in me toward believing that there is an afterlife, though it may have made me particularly open to the thought, should it be urged by those around me, and in that way, may have in

By contrast, the seemings that we hope underwrite the premises of our philosophical arguments are those reported by what I call "all-in" appearance or seeming claims. Here, the claimant is not just reporting a push toward belief at some initial stage of cognitive processing that may have been checked by some other processing occurring elsewhere in ~~her~~ soul, but is reporting what ~~she is~~ inclined to believe at ~~her~~ final (so far) stage of inquiry on the issue, taking into account all the relevant considerations ~~she has~~ access to.

Well, our philosophical arguer is likely not just reporting her own all-in inclination to believe, but is in effect also appealing to her audience, "Hey, doesn't it seem that way to you, too?" Our arguer has likely just raised various considerations which (she at least thinks) push toward the judgment that things are as she's claiming they appear, and she is asking us to consider the matter with those considerations especially in mind, but she is inviting us, appealing to us, to agree, all-in, that, yes, it sure seems as if that's the case.

And often, of course, to many of us, the arguer's key premise does *not* seem true: When we bring all the relevant considerations to bear, including those the arguer has just stressed, we are not all-in inclined to think that the key premise is right. Indeed, I suppose this is the usual case. But even when unconvinced, we can often recognize the power of the argument: "Well, that key premise still doesn't seem to me to be true, but I can certainly see how someone else might find it plausible." At that point, you might be able to explain a bit why things seem otherwise to you, and the conversation may advance. Or maybe you can't. These things go in different ways.

It's rare, but the appearances behind the key premises of some substantial philosophical arguments can be (or can be made to be) extremely strong: Sometimes it *really* seems that something is the case. Insofar as philosophical arguments for substantial conclusions go, where the shakiest of the starting premises are ones whose credentials are that they give a very strong appearance of being true, so far from being a feeble argument based on "mere appearances," *that's the good case*! That's what the *best* of our arguments are like. Would that more of them

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some sense, I suppose, "disposed" me toward belief. But this is not a case, to use Huemer's words (in the above quotation), of "one's being in a state such that one would believe that P, were there no other factors interfering with one's forming such a belief," and the fact that some ways of being "disposed" toward belief don't generate what we would call "appearances" of truth doesn't show that "appears" and "seems" claims don't generally report pushes or dispositions toward belief.

One important way that I agree with Huemer about the meaning of appearance claims is that, like him, I reject the multiple senses of "appears" and "seems" that were posited by Roderick Chisholm (whose approach was adopted by Wykstra; see note 40*), and instead hold that there is just a single sense: see sect. 1.3, "One Sense of 'Appear'," pp. 323-332 of "Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles." However, this single sense, on which, on my view, one reports some push toward belief, displays a lot of context-sensitivity, as one can report these pushes (or lacks thereof) at various stages of cognitive processing.

had such claims as their shakiest initial premises! And those pushing our problem of horrendous evils often think their case is that powerful. Rowe, for example, starts the last of the passages indented above by asserting that his premise's answer to the question it's directed at "must" be right, then softens a bit by saying "it seems quite unlikely" that it's wrong, but soon gathers enough conviction to declare that its denial is "an extraordinarily absurd idea, quite beyond our belief." Such an aggressive declaration rhetorically clears the way for the meek ("good cop") claim that follows, that his premise is "*reasonable* to believe," hopefully (from the arguer's perspective) making it seem a wildly generous understatement.

Such a defense can also (and I think even better) be applied to the premise of our "Simple" argument and its key (and only) premise. To appreciate the power our problem has for many, and perhaps to also begin to feel its power in your own thinking, you may find it helpful to imagine encountering in person a Rowe (or an Unger, or an Ivan), moved by the horrors of our world to declare the likes of that "there is just no way" that a wholly good God would have allowed all that. It may even help to imagine them getting more verbally aggressive, and stating forcefully how absurd it strikes them that there might be a God actually allowing *that*, and *that*, and all *that*. Perhaps even *ridiculing* the very idea that there is a wholly good God who has actually decided to let *that* – I mean look at it, if you dare: *that*! — happen.[36] We

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[36] In a passage whose importance Michael Bergmann's work brought to my attention (see Bergmann's "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 69 (2004): 709–27; p. 723), though I must have read right over it myself before reading Bergmann, the Eighteenth Century Scottish common sense philosopher Thomas Reid had this to say about the role of absurdity and ridicule in thinking about "first principles":

> We may observe, that opinions which contradict first principles are distinguished from other errors by this; that they are not only false, but absurd: And, to discountenance absurdity, Nature hath given us a particular emotion, to wit, that of ridicule, which seems intended for this very purpose of putting out of countenance what is absurd, either in opinion or practice.
>
> This weapon, when properly applied, cuts with as keen an edge as argument. Nature has furnished us with the first to expose absurdity; as with the last to refute error. Both are well fitted for their several offices, and are equally friendly to truth when properly used. (Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, D. R. Brookes (ed.), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002; Essay VI, Chapter IV, p. 462)

I am very sympathetic to the importance of recognizing absurdity, in cases where argument fails us, and even in such cases where what's seen as absurd is only contingently false (and Reid does see this as operative in cases of contingent falsehood): How the suggestion that we are brains vats strikes us as absurd and ridiculous plays a key role in my account (in Chapter 7 of *The Appearance of Ignorance* (Oxford UP, 2017), see esp. pp. 227-28) of how we come to know (at least by ordinary standards for knowledge) that we are not brains in vats (which belief I think is immediately justified). Of course, these tools can be misapplied; and ridicule—especially when publicly ridiculing the claims of another person—should be used with caution.

But I think I am inclined to apply Reid's insight to a broader scope of judgments than Reid himself did—though it isn't always easy to map Reid's epistemological terminology on to my own. Reid is speaking of "first principles," but what are those? Bergmann says that for Reid, first principles are

The Simple Argument from Horrendous Evils
1s. If there were a God, we should not find the evils we find in the world, especially including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them
So, C. There is no God.

may often respond to such verbal bullying very defensively (to the point of even resorting to the likes of *Wizard of Oz* jokes to deflect the pressure), but sometimes I think it does help to appreciate the power of a claim to see how someone else can find it, not just plausible, but overwhelmingly powerful—and then perhaps ask how horrible things would have to get before *you* would find the case powerful, too. (Or is there really no conceivable limit for you?) And having imagined such a convicted display, one can then evaluate how reasonable our skeptics might seem in then stepping back into "good cop" mode, and simply saying that, well, it sure seems to them that if there were a God, we should not find the evils that we find in the world, especially including the truly horrendous evils we find, and in such vast amounts as we find them.

It can also help to get comparative (and a bit personal) and imagine them asking you for what philosophical arguments for substantial and interesting conclusions you *do* like, and then critically comparing your key premise (the shakiest of the starting premises of your darling) with 1s in terms of which gives the stronger and more secure appearance of being true. Though I don't know what your favorite argument is, and so can only be so confident of this, I have to guess that I would have a lot of sympathy for the claim of our Rowe-ish character were they to say, "Wow, I find 1s a whole lot more powerful than *that*!" Or a bit more snarkily: "Wow, after all your complaints about 1s, *that's* what you *do* find powerful? Really?!" This guess of course is based on my judgment that 1s is extremely intuitively powerful for the shakiest premise of a philosophical argument to a substantial and interesting conclusion. And since it is our Simple

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believed "noninferentially" (Bergmann, p. 722), and indeed, in the passage Bergmann cites for this, Reid says that in the case of first principles, "There is no searching for evidence, no weighing of arguments; the proposition is not deduced or inferred from another. . ." (Reid, p. 452) And Bergmann seems to speak of what is believed and known noninferentially as being known "directly" (Bergmann, p. 722, n. 28), and, very much in keeping with this characterization, Reid's description of first principles that I've just quoted immediately continues with these words: ". . .it has the light of truth in itself, and has no occasion to borrow it from another." (And it is not for nothing that Reid is often referred to as a "direct realist.")

But, as I conveyed in note 27*, I think many of our beliefs are *based on* others of our beliefs, and so, in Reid's terminology, "borrow their light of truth" from other beliefs, though we have performed no conscious inference from the basis to the based, and have not and cannot formulate any arguments. When one or more belief does evidentially support another, and we are sensitive in our holding the supported belief to the support it gets from those other beliefs—in that we would not have held the supported belief, or would not have held it so strongly, were it not for the support it receives from those others of our beliefs—then I think the supported belief is not held "directly," but on the basis of the beliefs from which it receives support, even though no conscious inference has been performed, and no argument has been formulated, and is perhaps beyond the ability of the believer to formulate. And I think the role Reid assigns to absurdity and ridicule should be applied to such "indirectly" held beliefs: Where a judgment is very strongly supported by others of our beliefs, but in a way we can sense but cannot articulate, our sense of absurdity often kicks in to be a guide to truth, where argument fails us.

argument's only premise, and since that argument's conclusion really does follow from it, that would make our Simple argument a powerful philosophical argument.

One of the most powerful I know.[37]

Phil. 270: end here

9. Wykstra's Challenge: CORNEA and Suspect Appearances

I will soon (starting in section xx) be urging that the way to get relief from this powerful argument against theism is/would be via the avenue I reported provided me with some relief: by providing credible accounts of why God might allow the horrific suffering of our world—to engage in "theodicy," in a prominent use of that term. And the rest of this book will then largely be an attempt to obtain such relief.

But is theodicy needed here? We are for now wrestling with swipes at the power of our argument that don't depend on the swiper producing any theodicy—bafflement at what the argument could possibly be having been the first such complaint.

But we now move on to consider a couple of other important attacks on such arguments as our Simple argument from horrific evils that are in the philosophical literature and that also seek to cut these arguments off before the need for theodicy ever arises—attempts to show that there is no good argument against theistic belief here worth worrying about, even in the absence of any account of what God's reasons might be for allowing horrific suffering. These attacks, by Stephen Wykstra and by Alvin Plantinga, are not only influential in some philosophical circles, but answering them may help address related intuitive worries about our argument that might naturally arise for many readers, or that they might encounter in discussion of these issues.

Stephen J. Wykstra's wonderful essay, "The Humean Obstacle to Evidential Arguments from Suffering: On Avoiding the Evils of 'Appearance'" (note 17*), sparked the movement in philosophical theology known as "skeptical theism" (that we will discuss more generally a bit in section 12), and also, taking Rowe's argument as its example target, posed an important challenge to evidentialist arguments from evil that we must answer. Wykstra has followed that paper up with more recent work, but I find the most valuable lessons to be in Wykstra's original.

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