

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.³⁰ 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.³¹

³⁰ 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.

³¹ 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 road³² (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.³³ And potentially deniable.³⁴ And what can be said for such a premise? Well,

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.

³² 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.

³³ 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.

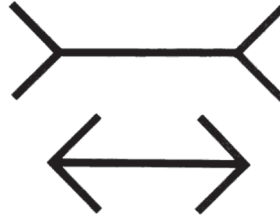
³⁴ “So much the worse for philosophical arguments!”—I can hear the response. And I do agree that philosophical arguments generally aren’t strong enough to produce anything close to knowledge of their conclusions. In fact, though I don’t think this could provide an exception-free definition, I think there 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.³⁵

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:

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.)

³⁵ 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.³⁶

³⁶ 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 a 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 their soul, but is reporting what they are inclined to believe at their final (so far) stage of inquiry on the issue, taking into account all the relevant considerations they have access to.

Well, our philosophical arguer is likely not just reporting their own all-in inclination to believe, but is in effect also appealing to their audience, “Hey, doesn’t it seem that way to you, too?” Our arguer has likely just raised various considerations which (they at least think) push toward the judgment that things are as they’re claiming they appear, and they are asking us to consider the matter with those considerations especially in mind, but they are 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 reasonably find it plausible—and perhaps even compelling.” 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

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.