

## Epistemic Conservatism and Huemer's Phenomenal Conservatism

### Background: Some Epistemology of Perception

#### Epistemic Justification

- justification and knowledge (see first page of Gettier)
- epistemic justification
  - epistemic vs. pragmatic
  - epistemic as the kind of justification relevant to knowledge
- the case of (the usually more careful) Ann and (the usually less careful) Bob: who is more justified?
- pluralism about epistemic justification: what it is; how to proceed – see Srinivasan (“many concepts of epistemic justification”)

#### Epistemic Conservatism

- IUPG: see Wolterstorff (I)
- But it still seems a form of “conservatism” after one makes the Huemer/Tooley move of adding an “at least some degree of” qualifier
- EC going beyond Huemer's formulation, as an account of where our epistemic justification generally comes from – see my note on Descartes
- What's the, or an, alternative? EC vs. broad evidentialism
  - the propositionality of evidence
  - the place of evidence on a conservative view

### Huemer

#### 1. “Phenomenal Conservatism”: Huemer's and the Real Thing

- Huemer's: 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)
- A “more thorough-going” PC: appearances are where all our justification comes from: see 3H, bottom paragraph of p. 25, and see n. 31, on the bottoms of pp. 25-26 for remarks on Huemer's relation to this more exciting PC

#### 2. The Nature of Seemings/Apearances

- 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, *emph. added*)
  - another important appearance verb: *looks*.
- H: Appearances are not beliefs: CPC 30.9-31.2; nor dispositions or inclinations to form beliefs: CPC 31.3-31.8
- But see 3H, first paragraph of n. 36 (on p. 28) for a response to Huemer's argument
- And see 3H, p. 27 thru the top paragraph of p. 29 (including n. 36, and especially that note's last sentence) for a view on which appearance claims do report inclinations to belief

from Amia Srinivasan, “Does Feminist Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”, pp. 12-13:

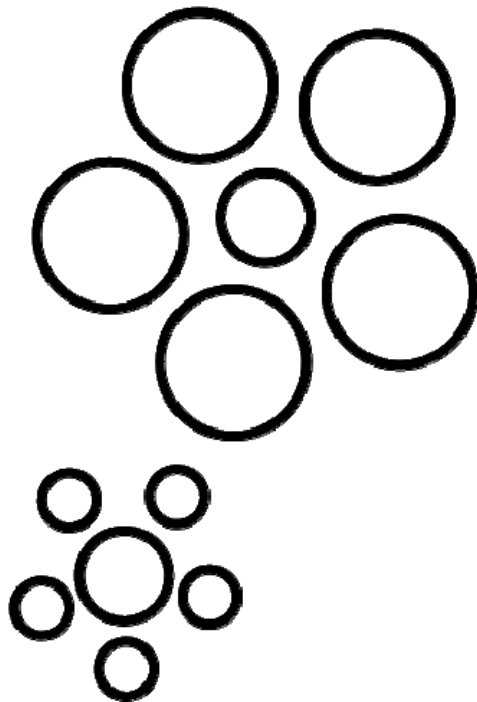
complete draft at: [http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Research\\_files/Does%20Feminist%20Philosophy\\_KCL%20talk.pdf](http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Research_files/Does%20Feminist%20Philosophy_KCL%20talk.pdf)

I want to suggest that at least in some cases it’s philosophically legitimate to argue for views that one does not oneself hold. And I want to suggest that this is something philosophers do very often.

For example, when I write and talk about epistemology, I often advocate for an externalist conception of epistemic justification. And in so doing, I offer reasons for believing that externalism is true, and reasons for believing that internalism is false. Indeed I *present* myself as believing that externalism is true, and that internalism is false. But in reality I’m not convinced that there is really a substantive debate here. For I think there are many concepts of epistemic justification, some externalist and some internalist, and so it doesn’t really make sense to talk about which is the ‘correct’ theory of epistemic justification. In some sense, I am inclined to think that internalists and externalists are having a merely verbal dispute, talking past each other. So I don’t really believe that externalism is true and that internalism is false, although I present myself as believing just that. So why do I do this?

I engage in the debate, and present myself as believing in externalism, because I think there is a good question about which concept of justification is *best* to use—by which I mean, which concept of justification can be best put in service of radical politics. My own view is that externalist epistemology has enormous radical political potential, for reasons I won’t go into here. But suffice to say when I offer arguments for epistemic externalism, I am not making a claim about what justification really is, but instead am trying to persuade others to adopt a concept of justification that I think will advance justice. Of course, if enough people were to join me in doing this, and our efforts were successful, then our concept of justification really would be externalist, precisely because the content of our concepts is determined by how we use those concepts.

### The Ebbinghaus Illusion:





Says Reid: "when our faculties ripen, we find reason to check that propensity to yield to testimony and to authority, which was so necessary and so natural in the first period of life. We learn to reason about the regard due to them, and see it to be a childish weakness to lay more stress upon them than reason justifies." (*Essays on the Intellectual Powers*, VI,5)

Thus it is Reid's view that we are *prima facie* justified in accepting the deliverances of the credulity disposition until such time as we have adequate reason in specific cases to believe the deliverances false, or until such time as we have adequate reason to believe the deliverances unreliable for certain types of cases. Our situation is not that to be rationally justified in accepting the deliverances of the credulity disposition we need evidence in favor of its reliability. Rather, we are rationally justified in accepting its deliverances until such time as we have evidence of its unreliability for certain types of cases. The deliverances of our credulity disposition are **innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proved innocent.**

So, I suggest, it is **in general – with one important exception** to be mentioned shortly. A person is rationally justified in believing a certain proposition which he does believe unless he has adequate reason to cease from believing it. Our beliefs are rational unless we have reason for refraining; they are not nonrational unless we have reason *for* believing. They are innocent until proved guilty, not guilty until proved innocent. If a person does not have adequate reason to refrain from some belief of his, what could possibly oblige him to give it up? Conversely, if he surrenders some belief of his as soon as he has adequate reason to do so, what more can rightly be demanded of him? Is he not then using the capacities he has for governing his beliefs, with the goal of getting more amply in touch with reality, as well as can rightly be demanded of him?

The exception to which I alluded was this: Suppose that someone has **undertaken** to alter some native belief disposition, or to cultivate some new belief disposition, for **perverse** reasons, **or for reasons having nothing to do with getting in touch with reality.** The extent to which such undertakings, such resolutions, can be successful seems to me severely limited. But no doubt they sometimes have their effect. For example, it may well be that if some person undertakes to disbelieve everything another says, not because of his experience that what the other says is often false, but rather because of his hostility to that person, this will eventually result in his granting the speech of that person less credibility than otherwise he would – *and less than he ought.*

Above I affirmed the innocent-until-proved-guilty principle for beliefs. Here we are dealing with noninnocent belief *dispositions*. And it seems evident that the outcomes of a noninnocent disposition should not be accorded the honor of innocence until their guilt has been proved.

I suggest that, from the standpoint of rationality and its governing

goal of getting in touch with reality, the only acceptable reason for undertaking to revise one of one's belief dispositions is that one justifiably believes it to be unreliable. (It is to be remembered here that many of our belief dispositions *get* revised by conditioning; we do not *undertake* to revise them.) If one **undertakes** to revise it for some other reason, and succeeds, then the disposition, with respect to the points of revision, is no longer innocent with respect to rationality. It has been **culpably revised.** Now if a given belief is produced by a culpably revised disposition, and *solely* by such a disposition, then it is not a belief rationally held. Correspondingly, if a person's *not* believing something in a certain situation is due to the working, or the nonworking, of a culpably revised disposition, then his *not*-believing is not rational.

The innocent-until-proved-guilty principle which I have affirmed for beliefs must be understood as applying just to those not produced by culpably revised dispositions. A person may well find himself in the situation where he does not have adequate reason to surrender a belief produced by a culpably revised disposition. Nonetheless the belief is not held rationally, for the disposition producing it was not innocent on this matter.

What we have so far then is this:

- (I) A person *S* is rational in his eluctable **and innocently produced** belief *B<sub>p</sub>* if and only if *S* believes *p*, and it is not the case that *S* has adequate reason to cease from believing *p*.

Rationality in one's beliefs does not await one's believing them on the basis of adequate reasons. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of having reasons does play a central and indispensable role in rationality – a rationality-*removing* role.

But formula **(I) is only a first approximation.** A number of revisions are necessary before we have a satisfactory criterion. First, though, an explanation is necessary of what I have in mind by "adequate reason." Perhaps it can rightly be said of a person who has the belief that he feels dizzy that he has a *reason* for that belief – namely, *his feeling dizzy*. In that case his reason would be a particular event. Perhaps, too, it can rightly be said of a person who believes that he is seeing a red car, in an ordinary case of perception, that he has a *reason* for this belief – namely, *its seeming to him that he is seeing a red car* (that is, his having a red-car-seeing experience). In this case, too, his reason would be a particular event. In short, sometimes the reason for a belief of ours may be the event which caused the belief (the event which triggered the operative disposition).

But when here I speak of "reason," that is not what I have in mind. I do not mean the disposition-triggering event. What I mean by "reason" is to be explained by reference to the workings of Reid's reasoning disposi-

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(though without taking facts about beliefs as brute) and might provide a way out for the skeptical epistemologist. This appearance would be misleading. A version of the direct pragmatic picture that focused on linguistic behavior would still lead to the result that skepticism is impossible—the skeptical belief state wouldn't rationalize any linguistic acts for the same reasons that it wouldn't rationalize acts more generally. The sorts of background beliefs necessary to rationalize linguistic actions—beliefs about the meanings of words, the interests and knowledge of one's audience, and so forth—are just as off-limits to the skeptic as empirical beliefs more generally. A version of the indirect pragmatic picture that focused on linguistic behavior—for example, a version according to which a system's counting as a *belief* system depends on the way it guides specifically linguistic behavior—would still be a view on which a creature's having beliefs will be an extrinsic fact about that creature, and so such views will still lead to the impossibility of open-eyed skepticism. The earlier sections of this essay would have played out much the same had I focused on views that stress the centrality of the relation between belief and language-use specifically, rather than belief and action more generally.

Ultimately, while the three-way distinction I have employed doesn't exhaust logical space, it does seem to me to exhaust the space of views that have been taken seriously in the literature, and also to exhaust the space of views that deserve to be taken seriously.

In the next section I will defend a version of the claim that ought implies can in epistemology. Together with my arguments from this section, it will imply that it is not the case that we ought to be skeptics (if the direct pragmatic picture is true), or at least that it is not the case that we ought to be open-eyed skeptics (if the indirect pragmatic picture is true). But since the position that we ought to be skeptics even though we cannot be open-eyed skeptics is unattractive, I take it that even if the indirect pragmatic picture is true and the direct one is false, my arguments in the next section will motivate rejecting the claim that we ought to be skeptics.

## 2. Ought Implies Can

David Hume (2000) famously argued that because our beliefs are formed by custom or habit, **skepticism is in some sense not a possible doxastic state for us**. Because of the nature of human psychology, we are unable to refrain from forming certain beliefs about the unobserved on the basis of the observed. **An antiskeptical impression by Hume's observation might try to appeal to an epistemological ought implies can principle to leverage**

*Impossibility of Skepticism*

Hume's point about habit into an antiskeptical argument. Such a strategy strikes me as unpromising; skeptical epistemologists could reasonably respond to such a strategy by granting that our beliefs are determined by habit, but insisting that this is an epistemic *defect*. They might hold that the beliefs of a *rational* agent would *not* be determined by habit and that such an agent would instead be a skeptic. That is, the relevant ought implies can principle that we'd need to generate antiskeptical conclusions from Hume's observation is implausible—it rules out the possibility of contingent psychological defects in humans that make it impossible for us to be fully rational, but such defects seem possible (and probably actual) (see Kahneman, Tversky, and Slovic 1982).

In this section, however, I will argue that the ought implies can principle necessary to generate antiskeptical conclusions, when combined with the claims of section 1, is considerably weaker and more plausible than the one we'd need to generate antiskeptical conclusions from Hume's claims about habit.

A number of writers have discussed the principle that ought implies can specifically in the context of epistemology—some endorsing it, some attacking it. Fred Dretske (2000, 598) endorses a strong epistemological ought implies can principle and uses it to argue that we have a right to hold perceptual beliefs because we are psychologically incapable of failing to form them. William Lycan (1985, 146) suggests that ought implies can is less plausible in epistemology than in ethics and expresses doubt that beliefs can be warranted in virtue of our being psychologically incapable of abandoning them. My strategy in this section will be to distinguish the principle I am defending from other, stronger principles, and to show how some *prima facie* problems for those stronger principles do not arise for the one I need for my antiskeptical argument. I will then go on to argue that the principle I need is independently plausible.

One motivation for an epistemological ought implies can principle—a motivation I will ultimately reject—involves the thought that people can be obligated to be in some doxastic state only if they can be blamed for failing to be in it, and they can be blamed for failing to be in it only if there is something they can do to get into it. The fate of an ought implies can principle motivated by this thought will be closely tied to the fate of doxastic voluntarism—the doctrine that people can exert voluntary control over their beliefs. But if *S*'s being obligated to believe that *P* implies that *S* is able to believe that *P*, and *S*'s being able to believe that *P* requires *S*'s being able to exert voluntary control to come to believe that

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*P*, then problems loom. Doxastic voluntarism is far from obvious,<sup>40</sup> and even if some beliefs are subject to voluntary control,<sup>41</sup> it is hard to deny that some aren't. Nevertheless, those that aren't may still be irrational, unjustified, or such that we ought not to hold them. For example, a hopeless paranoid schizophrenic may be unable to give up the belief that he is the target of a Martian conspiracy. That he is psychologically incapable of giving up this belief does not mean that he's not irrational for holding it; in the relevant sense of "ought," it is still the case that he ought to give it up. Being unable to appreciate the force of the evidence that Martians neither exist nor have infiltrated Earthly governments does not change the force of that evidence. By the same token, a skeptical epistemologist might hold that our beliefs are determined by habit (as Hume said) and so we are unable to be skeptics, but that this makes us in relevant respects like the hopeless paranoid schizophrenic.

Examples like this might lead us to conclude that there is no interesting version of an ought implies can principle in epistemology. Alternatively, we might look for ways of weakening the principle to avoid the result that our schizophrenic has a clean bill of epistemic health. By substituting in more or less demanding senses of "can," we get stronger or weaker versions of the principle that ought implies can in epistemology. For instance, while we might understand "can" such that subjects can be in or fail to be in some doxastic state only if they can bring it about that they are or are not in that state by exercising voluntary control, we needn't. We might instead understand "can" such that subjects can be in a doxastic state just in case it is metaphysically possible for subjects to be in that state, regardless of whether they are able to do anything to get themselves into that state. Armed with this understanding of "can," the principle that ought implies can is immune to counterexamples like the one involving the schizophrenic. While the schizophrenic is unable to get himself into the state of not believing in Martian conspiracies, such a state is one that it is metaphysically possible for one to be in. I am in it, and I suspect you are too. So our modified principle is consistent with the claim that the schizophrenic ought not to believe in Martian conspiracies.

40. Alston (1988) argues that we shouldn't conceive of epistemology in deontological terms, roughly because he thinks that ought implies can in the sense described above, but beliefs aren't subject to the sort of voluntary control that would support obligation claims.

41. For instance, if Velleman (1989) is right about the nature of intentions, then intentions are a type of belief that is subject to voluntary control.

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Is there any motivation for an ought implies can principle once we reject the blame-based motivation that leads to a principle requiring voluntary control over one's beliefs? I think there still is. It might be useful for us to evaluate beliefs with a set of epistemic criteria according to which certain belief states would be ideal, even though people are sometimes (or perhaps always) psychologically incapable of achieving these ideals, perhaps because of phobias, mental illnesses, or just computational limitations. This is why the strong principle fails. But it seems that even a (psychologically) unattainable ideal must represent a metaphysical possibility for it to provide a useful yardstick against which to compare the doxastic states of actual believers.

My inability to run faster than a cheetah (or really very fast at all) reflects a respect in which I fall short of the ideal when it comes to speed. There is some temptation to say that the ideal in speed would require instantaneous travel—and so is probably unattainable in any universe with our physical laws. However, there is no temptation to say that the ideal in speed requires being faster than oneself. To be faster than oneself is metaphysically impossible and that “ideal” can't even be approached by possible runners—getting faster does not help—and so does not provide a useful or illuminating yardstick against which to compare actual or possible runners. As Aristotle (2008) said in his *Politics*, “In framing an ideal we may assume what we wish, but should avoid impossibilities” (1265a17–18).

I would like to say the same thing about skepticism. My inability to believe every logical truth plausibly reflects a respect in which I fall short of an epistemic ideal, even though believing all logical truths is humanly impossible.<sup>42</sup> The ideal of believing all logical truths, while humanly unattainable, is one that could be satisfied by some possible creatures, and we can see how humans can approximate this ideal without ever fully reaching it. But my inability to completely suspend judgment with respect to all possibilities in which things appear as they actually do (or, if we accept the indirect pragmatic picture, to knowingly do this while understanding what that entails) is not a respect in which I fall short of an ideal. If my arguments from section 1 are sound, then this is a metaphysically impossible doxastic state, and it is not even clear what possible doxastic states would count as approximations to the impossible agnostic one—it

42. See Christensen 2004 for the idea that logical omniscience is an epistemic ideal, albeit a psychologically unattainable one.



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does not make for a useful or illuminating benchmark against which to compare the doxastic states of actual or possible believers.<sup>43</sup>

Suppose the skeptical epistemologist rejects the appeal to unsatisfiable epistemic obligations—might there be another way out? Here's one possibility. It is natural to understand the original skeptical argument as resting on two main claims. First, for any two hypotheses that are consistent with present appearances, we have no reason to think either is any more likely than the other. Second, when we have no reason to think one hypothesis is more likely than another, we ought to be agnostic as to which is true. Given these two claims, we ought to be agnostic about quite a lot. But even if we reject the second claim and reject the conclusion, the first on its own is enough to generate surprising and counterintuitive results. Not only are we normally inclined to deny that we ought to be agnostic between commonsense hypotheses and skeptical ones, we also think we have good reasons for believing in common sense.

We might imagine a fallback skeptical position according to which anything goes in the realm of belief—the skeptical epistemologist would hold that while we ordinarily take ourselves to have reason to believe in commonsense hypotheses, in fact these hypotheses are on an epistemic par with skeptical ones, and we would be just as well within our epistemic rights to believe in deceiving demons and clever vatmasters as we are to believe in tables and chairs. The skeptical epistemologist's fallback position is a version of epistemic permissivism—the view that after we have fixed a body of evidence, there might be many permissible sets of beliefs one might adopt on the basis of the evidence, and no one set of beliefs need be epistemically mandatory (see White 2005). This is an intriguing suggestion, but I won't take it up here.

### 3. Conclusions

I have argued against the skeptical view that we ought to be agnostic between all hypotheses that are consistent with how things appear to us. Plausible views about the nature of belief—the direct and indirect pragmatic pictures—imply that we cannot be agnostic in this way, or cannot knowingly be agnostic in this way. Since ought implies can in

43. I believe that similar considerations tell against the skeptical fallback position according to which we face an *epistemic dilemma*, in that we have various epistemic obligations that can be fulfilled individually but not jointly. Discussing this, however, would make an already long essay longer.