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FIT, FAITH, AND FEAR: EVIDENCE AND EVIDENTIALISM

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE  
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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*Dedicated to*

*Aimee and Sophia, two good reasons*

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## Abstract

This dissertation is an elaboration and application of evidentialism, the view that a proposition is justified for a person just in case it fits (is supported by) that person's evidence. I elaborate on evidentialism by developing a view of the evidential fit relation. Some evidentialists claim that a proposition, *p*, fits one's evidence, *e*, only if one is (potentially) aware of the explanatory connection between *p* and *e*. I argue by way of example that this version of explanationism fails. As a result, I suggest a friendly revision of explanationism that excludes an awareness condition. In addition, I field some objections to my version of explanationism.

I offer two applications of evidentialism. First, I apply a broadly evidentialist conception of justification, phenomenal conservatism, to a debate about the epistemology of religious experience. According to phenomenal conservatism, if it seems to a person, *S*, that *p*, then *S* has some justification for *p*, absent defeaters. Several authors utilize phenomenal conservatism to argue that some people have justification for certain religious propositions (e.g. that God exists), since these propositions sometimes seem true to them. I argue that, given the way these authors understand "seeming" states, phenomenal conservatism is mistaken. Sometimes a seeming can clash with experience (perceptual, introspective, memorial), in which case such a seeming lacks justificatory force. I go on to argue that seemings which are grounded in experience may be justificatory. However, the religious seemings mentioned so far in the literature don't appear to be grounded in experience. I suggest that religious epistemology pay more attention to religious experiences, and less to religious seemings.

A second application of evidentialism assesses pluralistic ignorance, a social-psychological phenomenon in which an agent believes that their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs are different from those of others, despite the fact that their public behavior is identical. I argue



that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are epistemically irrational. I accomplish this, first, by rebutting a recent argument for the rationality of pluralistic ignorance. Next, I offer a defeat-based argument against the epistemic rationality of pluralistic ignorance. Third, I examine a type of case in which the pluralistically-ignorant agent's belief is irrational, despite the fact that this belief lacks a defeater. Finally, I consider instances of pluralistically-ignorant agents whose beliefs are not irrational, but explain why such cases are not problematic for my main thesis. This critical discussion allows me to offer an important amendment to an extant account of pluralistic ignorance.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This dissertation concerns *epistemic justification*, the sort of justification thought by many contemporary philosophers to be necessary for knowing that a given proposition is true.<sup>1</sup> I adopt a broadly *evidentialist* view about justification, according to which a proposition, *p*, is justified for a person, *S*, just in case *p* fits *S*'s evidence.<sup>2</sup> To say more about this topic, we'll need to make a number of clarifications and distinctions.

Evidentialism is generally classified as an *internalist* theory of justification. Internalism says that what justifies *S*'s belief is internal to *S*'s mind.<sup>3</sup> Beyond this bare bones characterization, internalists may spell this out in few different ways. It may be said that what justifies my belief is something I'm aware of, potentially aware of, or perhaps something I can access or potentially access on reflection alone. *Externalism* denies that what justifies my beliefs is wholly internal to my mind.<sup>4</sup> One popular externalist conception of justification is reliabilism, according to which my belief is justified just in case it is the output of a reliable belief-forming process, whether or not I'm aware or potentially aware of how this belief came about.

It's important to distinguish *propositional* justification from *doxastic* justification. To illustrate, suppose that local weather forecasters that I know are reliable have said with high confidence that it will be rainy tomorrow. Suppose I have no other information about tomorrow's weather. In such a scenario, the proposition that *it will rain tomorrow* is propositionally justified for me. Assuming I form the belief that it will rain tomorrow on the basis of what the weather

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<sup>1</sup> So, it is distinct from such things as moral or prudential justification.

<sup>2</sup> See Feldman and Conee (1985) for a more detailed formulation and defense.

<sup>3</sup> For defense of internalism, see Conee and Feldman (2001).

<sup>4</sup> For a defense of externalism, see Goldman (1999).

forecasters have said, I will also have a doxastically justified belief that it will rain tomorrow. In the former sense of justification, a proposition, *p*, is justified for a person, *S*, when (roughly) *S*'s reasons or evidence on balance support the truth of *p*. In the latter sense of justification, *S*'s belief that *p* is justified just in case: (1) *p* is propositionally justified for *S*; and (2) *S* *bases* her belief that *p* on the reasons that propositionally justify *p* for *S*.<sup>5</sup> Thus understood, doxastic justification applies to *beliefs*, while propositional justification concerns *propositions*. Evidentialism, as formulated above, is a theory of propositional justification.

It should be noted that it's possible for me to have (propositional) justification for *it will rain tomorrow*, believe that it will rain tomorrow, and not be (doxastically) justified in believing it will rain tomorrow. For example, instead of forming the belief that it will rain tomorrow on the basis of what the weather forecasters say, I could form this belief because my fear that it will rain tomorrow has gotten the better of me and has started to influence what I think will happen. In such a case, while the proposition that it will rain tomorrow is justified for me, my belief that it will rain tomorrow is not. So, it's possible to have propositional justification without doxastic justification. But it's not possible to have doxastic justification without propositional justification. For example, if the weather forecasters in the area (whom I give equal weight) are conflicted about whether it will rain tomorrow, then (arguably) my evidence doesn't on balance support either the proposition that it will rain tomorrow or that it will not rain tomorrow. Assuming I have no further information about the weather forecast for tomorrow, I will not be justified in believing either of these. My lack of propositional justification implies that I can't have a doxastically justified belief about this matter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For recent discussion of the basing relation, see Carter and Bondy (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> For a challenge to this standard picture of the relation between propositional and doxastic justification, see Turri (2010).

A common view among evidentialists is that evidence consists only of (a proper subset of) one's *mental states*.<sup>7</sup> Typically, mental states such as hoping or dreading that p are not evidence for p. On the other hand, states like perceiving, intuiting, or remembering that p are usually considered evidence for p. The difference between these states is that the latter represent the world as being a certain way and appear to suggest that the world is that way. The former states don't appear to suggest that their content is true, unlike the latter. We can refer to the position that evidence consists only of mental states (and that justification is only a matter of evidence) as *mentalism* or *mentalist evidentialism*.

The chapters of this dissertation assume mentalist evidentialism (and, thus, internalism). Since I will not provide an argument for this view in the papers, I'll briefly indicate here the sorts of considerations that could be advanced in its favor. Conee and Feldman (1985, 2008) have motivated their view by pointing out that it correctly classifies cases of obviously justified belief and cases of obviously unjustified belief. That is, they claim that evidentialism yields the right verdicts in examples in which it is intuitively obvious that a proposition is justified for an agent, and in examples in which it is intuitively obvious that a proposition is not justified for a given agent. As they say, "A main source of support for evidentialism is its capacity to account for intuitive epistemic judgments" (2008, p. 89). They add that evidentialism is also supported by the phenomenon of disagreement about hard cases: "People vary in what they find intuitively justified for a person at a time. These varying judgments are correlated with varying judgments about what evidence the person has at the time" (p. 89).

Here are some examples they think bear out these claims. They say that "when a physiologically normal person under ordinary circumstances looks at a plush green lawn that is

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<sup>7</sup> As Feldman and Conee (2001, p. 2) say, "The justificatory status of a person's doxastic attitudes strongly supervenes on the person's occurrent and dispositional *mental states, events, and conditions*" (emphasis mine).

directly in front of him in broad daylight, believing that there is something green before him is the attitude toward this proposition that fits his evidence” (1985, p. 15). And it seems clear that believing that proposition is justified for him. In a second example, they claim that it’s obvious that we should suspend judgement (neither believe nor disbelieve) concerning the proposition that an even number of ducks exist, since we lack evidence concerning whether the precise number of extant ducks is even or odd. Our total evidence supports neither belief nor disbelief. A third example is that we should disbelieve the proposition that sugar is sour. The reason is that our gustatory evidence tells against that proposition.

Consider two further examples that Conee and Feldman use to support their account of justification:

Example 1: Bob and Ray are sitting in an air-conditioned hotel lobby reading yesterday's newspaper. Each has read that it will be very warm today and, on that basis, each believes that it is very warm today. Then Bob goes outside and feels the heat. They both continue to believe that it is very warm today. But at this point Bob's belief is better justified (2001, p. 3).

Conee and Feldman comment that “Bob's justification for the belief was enhanced by his experience of feeling the heat, and thus undergoing a mental change which so to speak “internalized” the actual temperature. Ray had just the forecast to rely on” (p. 3).

Consider a second example with two variations:

Example 5: Hilary is a brain in a vat who has been abducted recently from a fully embodied life in an ordinary environment. He is being stimulated so that it seems to him as though his normal life has continued. Hilary believes that he ate oatmeal for breakfast

yesterday. His memorial basis for his breakfast belief is artificial. It has been induced by his envatters. Here are two versions of relevant details.

(5a) Hilary's recollection is very faint and lacking in detail. The meal seems incongruous to him in that it strikes him as a distasteful breakfast and he has no idea why he would have eaten it.

(5b) Hilary's recollection seems to him to be an ordinary vivid memory of a typical breakfast for him (2001, p. 4).

Conee and Feldman comment that:

Although in both (5a) and (5b) Hilary's breakfast belief is false and its basis is abnormal, the belief is not well justified in (5a) and it is well justified in (5b). Hilary in (5a) differs internally from Hilary in (5b). His mental states in (5b) include better evidence for the belief in (5b) than he has in (5a) (2001, pp. 4-5).

Two of the following papers (Chapters 2 and 3) adopt a view about the structure of justification called *foundationalism*. Foundationalism claims that while some of our beliefs are justified because they are based on other (justified) beliefs, other beliefs of ours are justified but are not themselves based on any state that itself needs to be justified. The former beliefs are *inferentially justified* (or non-basic), since their justification derives from making an inference from other beliefs which are justified. The latter beliefs are *non-inferentially justified* (or basic). Foundationalism claims that the justification of all of our beliefs ultimately traces back to basic beliefs, those beliefs whose justification is non-inferential.

What is the source of non-inferential justification? Evidentialists who are foundationalists distinguish between *ultimate* and *intermediate* evidence, and take the former to be the only source of non-inferential justification. Ultimate evidence is a type of evidence that can (non-

inferentially) justify propositions, but does not itself stand in need of justification. Intermediate evidence, on the other hand, can (inferentially) justify propositions, but must itself be justified in order to do so. The justification of an item of intermediate evidence must eventually trace back to an item of ultimate evidence. Whatever the correct account of ultimate evidence is, it will arguably include such things as memory experiences, perceptual experiences, rational intuitions, introspective experiences, and perhaps testimonial experiences (though counting this latter item is controversial). Intermediate evidence includes such things as beliefs. For example, my visual experience of a green tree is an item of ultimate evidence, while my belief that there is a green tree is intermediate evidence. Since this belief receives its justification from my visual experience (and not other beliefs), it would count as non-inferentially justified or basic.

Another important notion that will help to understand two of the papers in the present volume is that of a *defeater*. To illustrate, suppose I see from a distance someone I take to be an old friend at the airport and form the belief that he's just up ahead. However, I then remember that this friend told me earlier today that he'll be in the office all day. I now have a *rebutting* defeater for the proposition that my friend is just up ahead. That is, I have a reason to think that this proposition is false. The testimonial evidence I received earlier in the day gives me a reason to think that it's false that my friend is just up ahead (what he said implies that he won't be at the airport). To understand another type of defeater, imagine an alternative version of the case in which I had not spoken to my friend earlier in the day. However, I've just taken a hallucinogen that makes other people seem more familiar to me than they really are. I seem to see my friend up ahead and form the belief that he is. I then recall that I've just taken a hallucinogen. I now have an *undercutting* defeater for my belief that my friend is up ahead. That is, I have a reason to think that the basis on which I formed my belief is not truth-conducive. My realization that I've

just taken a special hallucinogen gives me a reason to think that my perceptual experience as of my friend up ahead is not a reliable indication of whether or not my friend is up ahead.

## 1. Roadmap

The title of this dissertation is “Fit, Faith, and Fear: Evidence and Evidentialism.” The first paper in this volume (“Fit”) addresses the notion of *evidential fit*. This notion is crucial for spelling out evidentialism, the view that a belief is propositionally justified just in case it fits (is supported by) one’s evidence. A fully developed evidentialist theory of justification will require an account of the evidential fit (support) relation, along with an account of the ontology of evidence<sup>8</sup>, what it means to possess evidence<sup>9</sup>, and perhaps the basing relation.<sup>10</sup>

Some evidentialists, such as Conee and Feldman (2008) and McCain (2013; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018) have embraced an *explanationist* account of the evidential fit relation. Some of these accounts, particularly McCain’s, place an *awareness* requirement on evidential fit. That is, they claim that a proposition,  $p$ , fits a subject’s evidence,  $e$ , only if the subject is (potentially) aware of the explanatory connection between  $p$  and  $e$ . I argue against this claim. First, I explicate recent explanationist accounts of fit offered by both Conee and Feldman (2008) and McCain (2014; 2015). Next, I argue that McCain’s most recent account must be refined in order to escape (slightly modified versions of) extant counterexamples in the literature. Third, I argue by way of example that, nonetheless, this version of explanationism fails, since it mistakenly claims that one must be aware of the explanatory connection between one’s evidence and a proposition in order for the latter to fit one’s evidence. As a result, I suggest a friendly revision of

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<sup>8</sup> See, e.g. Turri (2009) and McCain (2014, ch. 2).

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g. Feldman (1988) and McCain (2014, Ch. 3).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g. McCain (2014, ch. 5).



explanationism that excludes an awareness condition. Finally, I field some objections to my version of explanationism.

The second paper (“Faith”) applies a broadly evidentialist conception of justification to a debate about the epistemology of religious experience. In particular, this paper assesses a debate about the evidential (thus, justificational) significance of mental states called *seemings*. A seeming occurs when a person experiences a propositional content with a certain forcefulness, or felt veridicality. Several authors adopt *phenomenal conservatism*, according to which seemings that p prima facie (or always) provide justification (or evidence) for p. Proponents of phenomenal conservatism hold that seemings are a type of ultimate evidence: a seeming that p can provide justification for a belief that p, but the seeming itself does not need to be justified. Tucker (2011), Burns (2017), and McAllister and Dougherty (forthcoming) argue that, given phenomenal conservatism, people who have theistic seemings (e.g. that God exists) thus have justification for theistic beliefs.

I argue that, given the conception of seemings above, phenomenal conservatism is mistaken. Sometimes a seeming that one has can clash with experience (perceptual, introspective, memorial), in which case our inclination is to deny that such a seeming has any justificatory force. For example, after having watched an extremely engrossing sci-fi movie, it might seem to me that I’m a brain in a vat, despite the fact that my perceptual experiences of ordinary medium-sized objects continue on as normal. In such cases, I argue, seemings do not have any justificatory force, and so phenomenal conservatism is false. I go on to argue that seemings which are *grounded* in experience (I explicate in detail some possible accounts of grounding) may be justificatory. However, the religious seemings mentioned so far in the

literature don't appear to be grounded in experience. I suggest that religious epistemology should pay more attention to religious experiences, and less to religious seemings.

The final paper in this volume ("Fear") concerns a topic that's long been discussed in social psychology, but that has recently received attention by philosophers. *Pluralistic ignorance* is a social-psychological phenomenon in which an agent believes that their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs are different from those of others, despite the fact that their public behavior is identical. For instance, consider a case of a classroom of students who refrain from asking questions about difficult material the teacher has just presented. Although each student does not fully understand the material, no one asks a question, not wishing to be publicly displayed as the only one who didn't understand the material. Based on the observation that no student in the class asks a question, each student believes that everyone but him believes that the material was not difficult. I argue that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance such as this one are epistemically irrational. Part of my argument consists of the claim that an accurate characterization of pluralistic ignorance will include the idea that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance care what their peers think and fear that if they publicly disagree with those peers that they will be ostracized (or worse). Also, pluralistically ignorant agents tend to see themselves as more fearful in social situations than their peers. This leads them to underestimate the amount of fear in their peers and conclude (irrationally, I argue) that the public behavior of their peers accurately manifests their peers' beliefs.

Evidentialism is a guiding assumption in the paper: whatever an agent is rational in believing depends on what their evidence is (and whether they've based their beliefs on that evidence). Agents have what I (following Bjerring et al (2014)) call introspective evidence and observational evidence. I argue that agents' introspective evidence undercuts their observational

evidence in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance. Thus, an agent that relies on their observations of their peers to form beliefs about what the latter believe are being epistemically irrational.

## Chapter 2

### Explanationist Evidentialism and Awareness

According to evidentialism, a belief is propositionally justified just in case it fits (is supported by) one's evidence. A fully developed evidentialist theory of justification will require an account of the evidential fit (support) relation. Some evidentialists, such as Conee and Feldman (2008) and McCain (2013; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018) have embraced an *explanationist* account of this relation. Some of these accounts, particularly McCain's, place an *awareness* requirement on evidential fit. That is, they claim that a proposition, *p*, fits a subject's evidence, *e*, only if the subject is (potentially) aware of the explanatory connection between *p* and *e*. I argue against this claim. First, I explicate recent explanationist accounts of fit offered by both Conee and Feldman (2008) and McCain (2014; 2015). Next, I argue that McCain's most recent must be refined in order to escape (slightly modified versions of) extant counterexamples in the literature. Third, I argue by way of example that, nonetheless, this version of explanationism fails, since it mistakenly claims that one must be aware of the explanatory connection between one's evidence and a proposition in order for the latter to fit one's evidence. As a result, I suggest a friendly revision of explanationism that excludes an awareness condition. Finally, I field some objections to my version of explanationism.

#### 1. Introduction

Before turning to an examination of Conee and Feldman's (2008) and McCain's (2014; 2015) explanationist proposals, it should be noted that the accounts discussed in this section, since they are offered in an evidentialist context, also double as accounts of *propositional justification*. The reason is that evidentialists say that propositional justification supervenes on evidential fit.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Conee and Feldman (2008, p. 83) and McCain (2014, p. 4).

Actually, for the purpose of this discussion, we should simply assume that a proposition  $p$  fits evidence  $e$  just in case  $e$  propositionally justifies  $p$ . Hence, it should be clear that our focus here is propositional, rather than doxastic justification (I will consider the latter in section 4).

Conee and Feldman's (2008) account of the evidential fit relation is as follows:

*Best Explanation (BE)*:  $p$  fits  $S$ 's evidence,  $e$ , at  $t$  iff  $p$  is part of the best explanation available to  $S$  at  $t$  for why  $S$  has  $e$  (63).<sup>12</sup>

Note that BE makes evidential fit depend on the best explanation *available* to a person. I will examine the availability condition shortly; however, let's set it aside for now.

At first glance, BE is plausible, for often the propositions that fit my evidence are, intuitively, part of the best explanation for why I have that evidence. For example, other things being equal, the proposition that *there is a green tree before me* fits my evidence if that evidence consists of my visual experience as of a green tree before me. And, other things being equal, it seems that part of the best explanation of my visual experience is that there is a green tree before me.

One problem for BE, however, is that it is too restrictive, that is, it does not account for many propositions that do, intuitively, fit my evidence (and, thus, which my evidence justifies). Consider an example from Goldman (2011, pp. 277-8):

ANIMALS<sup>13</sup>

I think there are two squirrels on my deck, and I think there are two birds. So I infer that there are (at least) four animals. Presumably, this arithmetic inference is justified. Is it a case of explanatory inference? Surely not. How does there being four animals explain there being two squirrels and two birds? It doesn't. Still, here is a justified belief that

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<sup>12</sup> BE is McCain's name for Conee and Feldman's (2008) position.

<sup>13</sup> This is McCain's (2014, p. 64) name for the case.

some epistemic principle must cover. But that principle, in turn, cannot be grounded in terms of best explanation.<sup>14</sup>

In response to such examples, McCain attempts to preserve an explanationist approach to fit by offering

*Explanationist Fit (EF):* p fits S's evidence, e, at t iff either p is part of the best explanation available to S at t for why S has e or p is available to S as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to S at t for why S has e (2014, p. 65).

As McCain (2014, p. 74) sees things, EF can handle ANIMALS if we assume that Goldman has a visual experience of two squirrels and two birds on his deck. ANIMALS is not a problem for EF because the proposition that *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* is part of the best available explanation of Goldman's visual experience as of two squirrels and two birds on his deck. And an available logical consequence of the proposition that *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* is that *there are four animals on my deck*.

While EF can handle ANIMALS, it appears to have trouble accounting for the justification of our inductive beliefs about the future. Byerly (2013, p. 235) presents the following example:

GOLF

Suppose I'm on the golf course on a sunny, calm day. My putting stroke has been working for me most of the day, and I'm now on the sixteenth green. It's not a long putt – just six feet. I'm fairly confident. I rotate my shoulders, pulling the putter back, and then accelerate through the ball. It rolls toward the cup. The speed looks good. The line looks on. Yes, I believe it's going in!

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<sup>14</sup> For another example that purports to show that a proposition can be justified for S without being part of the best explanation of S's evidence, see Lehrer (1974, p. 166).

It appears that the proposition *the golf ball will roll into the cup* is justified for Byerly. However, that the golf ball will roll into the cup clearly does not explain why Byerly has the evidence he does (e.g. “My putting stroke has been working for me most of the day,” “It’s not a long put,” “The speed looks good. The line looks on”). Rather, the explanation of the evidence he has now “is a body of current and perhaps past propositions” (236). Thus, EF cannot account for the justification he has for *the golf ball will roll into the cup*.

In response, McCain (2014) argues that EF can account for Byerly’s justification, for while the proposition justified by Byerly’s evidence (*the golf ball will roll into the cup*) is not part of the best explanation available to him for why he has the evidence he does, it (or a similar proposition) is available to him as a logical consequence of the best explanation available to him for why he has the evidence he does. This is so if we adopt an understanding of *epistemic probability* according to which a proposition, p, is probable for someone, S, just in case S’s evidence on balance supports p. McCain argues that

(1) *most golf balls rolling toward a cup in circumstances C* [the circumstances present in Byerly’s case] *go into the cup*

and

(2) *the golf ball is rolling toward a cup in circumstances C*

are part of the best available explanation of Byerly’s evidence. McCain suggests that (1) and (2) entail

(3) *the golf ball will probably roll into the cup*.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, it looks like EF can handle GOLF.

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<sup>15</sup> The propositions do not appear numbered in McCain’s paper. I add them here for ease of exposition.

However, as Byerly and Martin (2015, p. 778) point out (and McCain (2015) acknowledges), (1) and (2) do not entail (3). They say, “propositions of the form  $\langle \text{most } F\text{'s are } G\text{'s} \rangle$  and  $\langle x \text{ is an } F \rangle$  do not entail  $\langle \text{probably } x \text{ is a } G \rangle$ . The reason is that  $x$  might be a member of some other category,  $H$ , such that most members of  $H$  are not  $G$ s.”

Likewise, (1) and (2) don’t logically entail (3).

Consequently, McCain (2015, p. 339) proposes

*Revised Explanationist Fit (REF)*<sup>16</sup>

A person,  $S$ , with evidence  $e$  at  $t$  is justified in believing  $p$  at  $t$  iff at  $t$   $S$  has considered  $p$  and: either (i)  $p$  is part of the best explanation available to  $S$  at  $t$  for why  $S$  has  $e$ , or (ii)  $p$  is available to  $S$  as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to  $S$  at  $t$  for why  $S$  has  $e$ .<sup>17</sup>

As McCain notes, a proposition,  $p$ , is an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to  $S$  at  $t$  when “ $p$  would be better explained by the best explanation of  $S$ ’s evidence available to  $S$  at  $t$  than  $\sim p$  would. In other words, if  $p$  were true, the best available explanation of  $S$ ’s evidence would better explain its truth than it would the truth of  $\sim p$ , if  $\sim p$  were true” (2015, 339). Concerning Byerly’s case, part of the best explanation of his evidence is (1) and (2). While (1) and (2) do not logically entail (3), the latter proposition is an available explanatory consequence of (1) and (2).<sup>18</sup> The reason is that (1) and (2) would explain *the golf ball will roll into the cup* better than they would explain *the golf ball will not roll into the cup*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> McCain refers to his view as “Ex Ej 2.0.” I will use the simpler label “REF.”

<sup>17</sup> See also his (2017) defense of the view from recent objections from Byerly and Martin (2016). While the locution “is justified in believing” in REF appears to concern doxastic justification, it is clear that McCain (2015, p. 334) intends REF to account for propositional, rather than doxastic justification.

<sup>18</sup> For now, we can assume that *the golf ball will roll into the cup* is indeed *available* to Byerly as an explanatory consequence. It will be clear how this assumption can be vindicated when we examine McCain’s account of availability below.

<sup>19</sup> One might wonder if Goldman’s case can be dealt with by REF, given that McCain has replaced the talk of logical entailment in EF with that of explanatory consequence. However, the case can be handled if we take *there are two*



It is now time to consider the question of what it means for an explanation to be *available*. As we'll see, in order to understand the notion of availability, we need a basic understanding of *seemings*. Seemings are propositional mental states that have the “feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (Tollhurst 1998, p. 298-9). A seeming (as McCain (2014, p. 67) understands it) is a sui generis mental state that is distinct from such attitudes as beliefs and inclinations to believe.<sup>20</sup> For example, it might seem to me that I had breakfast this morning, that there is a bridge up ahead, or that  $2+2=4$ .

Keeping this in mind, McCain holds that  $p$  is available as part of the best explanation for why  $S$  has  $e$  just in case:

At  $t$   $S$  has the concepts required to understand  $p$  and  $S$  is disposed to have a seeming that  $p$  is part of the best answer to the question “why does  $S$  have  $e$ ?” on the basis of reflection alone (2014, p. 67).

Having a seeming is not necessary for a proposition to be available to a subject: availability only requires having a *disposition* to have a seeming. McCain holds that a subject has this disposition by virtue of “having certain information as background evidence” (p. 67), which determines the character of the seeming. Concerning the first clause of McCain’s availability statement (having the concepts required to understand  $p$ ), he holds that cognizers need not have the concepts of “evidence” or “explanation” in order for an explanation to be available to them. All a cognizer needs is to understand when something is an answer to a why-question. For example, when one has a visual experience of a red block, it is typically the case that one has a disposition on the

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*squirrels and two birds on my deck* to be part of the best available explanation of my visual experience as of two squirrels and two birds on my deck. An explanatory consequence of *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* is that *there are four animals on my deck* (because *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* (clearly) better explains *there are four animals on my deck* than it would *there are not four animals on my deck*).

<sup>20</sup> See, e.g., Tucker (2010, p. 530).

basis of reflection alone to have a seeming that *<there is a red block is part of the best answer to the question, “Why am I having this visual experience?”>* And having this disposition does not require one to have concepts of evidence and explanation. Thus, this account of what an available explanation is appears to correctly classify *there is a red block* as available in this case and, therefore, as fitting my evidence (and, thus, as justified by my evidence).

What does it mean for a proposition to be *available as an explanatory consequence* of the best explanation for why S has *e*? According to McCain (2018, p. 3044),

for *p* to be available as an explanatory consequence S must have a disposition on the basis of reflection alone to have a seeming that “*p* would be better explained by the best explanation of S’s evidence available to S at *t* than  $\sim p$  would”—that is to say, S must have a disposition on the basis of reflection alone to have a seeming that “if *p* were true, the best available explanation of S’s evidence would better explain its truth than it would the truth of  $\sim p$ , if  $\sim p$  were true.”

So, REF takes fit (and, therefore, justification) to turn on best *available* explanations and *available* explanatory consequences of best available explanations.

## **2. Explanationism Refined**

REF faces two distinct types of challenges. First, leaving aside the availability condition, it appears that satisfying the explanatory constrains in either condition (i) or (ii) is not necessary for a proposition to be justified. Second, REF over-intellectualizes propositional justification by requiring an explanation to be available to a subject (or available as an explanatory consequence of the best available explanation of the subject’s evidence). I will examine this latter challenge in the next section. I will presently argue that the former challenge can be met by slightly modifying what type of evidence the “e” in REF refers to.

The explanatory problem for REF is that it does not seem to account for the justification of propositions in slightly modified versions of ANIMALS and GOLF, cases we'll call ANIMALS\* and GOLF\*. In ANIMALS\*, let us suppose that Goldman explicitly believes (on the basis of his visual experience) that *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck*. Now, according to evidentialism, all evidence is mental and one's explicit (justified) beliefs count as part of one's evidence (McCain 2014, pp. 10-11). Thus, the belief that *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* is part of Goldman's evidence bearing on the proposition that *there are four animals on my deck*. And clearly the proposition that *there are four animals on my deck* fits this (in conjunction with the rest of his) evidence.

However, it doesn't appear that REF can allow this. Clause (i) of REF won't help, since *there are four animals on my deck* doesn't explain *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck*. What about clause (ii)? That *there are four animals on my deck* is not an available explanatory consequence of the best available explanation of Goldman's evidence, since *there are four animals on my deck* is explained directly by Goldman's evidence (*there are two birds and two squirrels*) rather than by the best explanation of that evidence. Thus, REF doesn't seem to have the resources to account for the fact that in ANIMALS\* *there are four animals on my deck* fits Goldman's evidence.

A similar conclusion can be drawn using GOLF\*, where we can suppose that Byerly comes to explicitly believe the following:

(1) *most golf balls rolling toward a cup in circumstances C* [the circumstances present in Byerly's case] *go into the cup*

(2) *the golf ball is rolling toward a cup in circumstances C.*

(1) and (2) are now part of Byerly's evidence bearing on

(3) *the golf ball will probably roll into the cup.*

And clearly (3) fits this evidence.

But, again, REF seemingly cannot allow for this. Again, clause (i) won't help, since (3) doesn't explain the conjunction of (1) and (2). Clause (ii) is not satisfied either. (3) is not an available explanatory consequence of the best available explanation of Byerly's evidence. (3) is explained directly by Byerly's evidence (1) and (2) rather than by the best explanation of his evidence. So, REF seems to be unable to countenance the fact that in GOLF\* (3) fits Byerly's evidence.

To address this objection, we'll need to make an important stipulation about REF. That is, REF can be maintained, but the "e" mentioned therein needs to be understood as what Conee and Feldman (2008, pp. 87-88) term *ultimate* evidence, and should exclude *intermediate* evidence.<sup>21</sup> While McCain (2015) is not explicit on this point, he appears to intend the "e" in REF to include all evidence, rather than merely ultimate evidence. Ultimate evidence is a type of evidence that can justify propositions, but does not itself stand in need of justification. Intermediate evidence, on the other hand, can justify propositions, but must itself be justified in order to do so. The justification of an item of intermediate evidence must eventually trace back to an item of ultimate evidence. I'm not going to try to settle here what counts as ultimate evidence and what doesn't. Whatever the correct account of ultimate evidence is, it will arguably include such things as memory experiences, perceptual experiences, rational intuitions, introspective experiences, and perhaps testimonial experiences (though counting this latter item is controversial<sup>22</sup>). Further, the correct account will exclude such things as beliefs, instead

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<sup>21</sup> McCain (2014, pp. 19-20) also recognizes this distinction.

<sup>22</sup> See Adler (2012).

classifying them as intermediate evidence. For example, my visual experience as of a green tree will qualify as ultimate evidence, but my belief that there is a green tree in front of me will not.

With this distinction in mind, we can amend REF to handle ANIMALS\* and GOLF\*:

*Revised Explanationist Fit\* (REF\*)*

A person, S, with ultimate evidence e at t is justified in believing p at t iff at t S has considered p and: either (i) p is part of the best explanation available to S at t for why S has e, or (ii) p is available to S as an explanatory consequence of the best explanation available to S at t for why S has e.

This refinement of REF helps to blunt the objection from ANIMALS\* because the fact that Goldman explicitly believes *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* does not change his ultimate evidence, namely, his visual experience of two squirrels and two birds on his deck. It remains the case that *there are two squirrels and two birds on my deck* is part of the best explanation of Goldman's visual experience, and that an explanatory consequence of the former is that *there are four animals on my deck*. Thus, clause (ii) of REF\* implies that *there are four animals on my deck* fits Goldman's evidence. Similarly, GOLF\* no longer poses a problem because the fact that Byerly explicitly believes (1) and (2) does not alter his ultimate evidence, for which (1) and (2) are part of the best explanation. An explanatory consequence of (1) and (2) is (3). So, clause (ii) of REF\* implies that (3) fits Byerly's evidence.

### **3. REF, Availability, and Awareness**

But REF\* is mistaken because, I'll argue, a proposition need not be available, in McCain's sense, in order for it to fit one's evidence. The argument I will make for this claim by way of example involves subjects who don't believe a proposition despite overwhelming evidence. The

cases are counterexamples to REF\* because there is a strong intuition that the proposition in question is justified by (fits) the subject's evidence, even though it is not available to the subject.

Consider the following case:

#### MANUFACTURING PLANT

Smith has held a job at a manufacturing plant for a number of years. He enjoys his work, his colleagues, and the role the plant plays in the community. One morning he overhears a news story that corporate executives have decided to close the plant. Upon hearing the story, he dismisses it and wishfully believes that *corporate executives have not decided to close the plant* ( $\sim p$ ). Later that day, Smith discovers that the company who owns the plant has just made a formal announcement about their decision to close the plant this year.

Further, he comes to know that the company has made dozens of such announcements at other locations in the past and all have turned out to accurately represent the decisions of company executives. After receiving all of this information (call it  $e$ ), Smith, due to his wishful thinking, is still disposed to have a seeming that *corporate executives have not decided to close the plant* ( $\sim p$ ) is part of the best answer to the question: Why  $e$ ?>. Thus, Smith is *not* disposed to have a seeming that *corporate executives have decided to close the plant* ( $p$ ) is part of the best answer to the question: Why  $e$ ?>.

REF\* has the implausible implication that Smith's evidence does not justify the proposition that *corporate executives have decided to close the plant* ( $p$ ). The reason is that  $p$  is not part of the best explanation of  $e$  available to him. And  $p$  is not available to him in this way because Smith, due to wishful thinking, lacks the requisite dispositional seeming.

Can one plausibly insist that Smith's evidence doesn't justify  $p$ ? No. Suppose that the following day (Day 2), after weighing the evidence more carefully, Smith finally is able to admit

to himself that corporate executives have decided to close the plant. Presumably, such an attitude is supported by his evidence and Smith would correctly view his previous attitude (on Day 1) as one that was contrary to his evidence. But REF\* does not allow for this commonsensical assessment and must instead say, implausibly, that Smith's evidence on Day 2 supports  $p$ , but does not on Day 1. Thus, REF\* incorrectly holds that a proposition must be *available* as part of the best explanation of one's evidence or *available* as an explanatory consequence of the best available explanation of one's evidence in order for it to be justified by one's evidence.

Another way in which a subject might fail to have the relevant dispositional seeming is by believing a bad explanation due to fallacious reasoning. Consider the following case:

#### COIN TOSS

Jones has seen a coin flipped 5 times and each time it has landed heads, but has also been told by multiple coin experts that the coin is a fair one (call all of this evidence,  $e$ ). Given this, the proposition that *the next flip is equally likely to land heads as it is to land tails* ( $p$ ) is justified by her evidence. However, suppose she is under the grip of the gamblers fallacy and so instead thinks *the next flip is a lot more likely to land tails* ( $q$ ). As a result, she does not have the (dispositional) seeming that  $\langle p$  would be better explained by the best available explanation (that the coin is fair) of  $e$  than  $\sim p$  would  $\rangle$ . Rather, she has a (dispositional) seeming that precludes having the above (dispositional) seeming, something like the seeming that  $\langle q$  would be better explained by the best available explanation (that the coin is fair) of  $e$  than  $\sim q$  would  $\rangle$ .

REF\* implies that *the next flip is equally likely to land heads as it is to land tails* is not justified by (does not fit) Jones's evidence. But, intuitively, it is and Jones should believe it. We can see this even more clearly if we consider a version of the case in which Jones, by thinking more

carefully about it comes to realize that she has fallen prey to the gamblers fallacy and, as a result, revises her belief from q to p. Presumably, p is supported by her evidence and Jones would correctly view her previous attitude (q) as one that was contrary to her evidence. But, again, REF\* does not allow for this commonsensical assessment and must instead say, implausibly, that Jones's evidence now supports p, but didn't when she was influenced by the gambler's fallacy.

Given these problems for REF\*, I propose a simple alteration:

*Revised Explanationist Fit\*\* (REF\*\*)*

A proposition, p, is justified for a person, S, with ultimate evidence e at t iff either (i) p is part of the best explanation for why S has e at t, or (ii) p is an explanatory consequence of the best explanation for why S has e at t.

REF\*\* allows that p is justified for both Smith and Jones, even while they refused to believe it and even if they hadn't considered p.

#### **4. Objections and Responses**

##### *4.1 Do Smith and Jones Have the Right Seeming-Dispositions?*

One might object that Smith and Jones do in fact meet REF\*'s requirements for justification, even before they come to realize their mistakes. That is, one might claim that Smith and Jones do in fact have the relevant seeming-dispositions. After all, Smith does form the relevant seeming on Day 2. This would show that he really does have the appropriate seeming-disposition on Day 1. Thus, REF\* can acknowledge that p is justified for Smith and Jones.

The problem with this objection is that there is no plausible sense in which Smith and Jones have the relevant seeming-dispositions. This is especially so if the story stipulates that neither Smith nor Jones would have answered p if questioned about their evidence. For example, we can suppose that Smith's spouse has asked him throughout the week about the evidence (that



seemingly indicates that corporate executives have decided to close the plant) and it has never seemed to Smith that p is part of the best answer to: Why e? We can suppose further that Smith has been reacting this way when friends, relatives, strangers, and further news reports have raised for him the question: Why e? In such a case, it is highly implausible to hold that Smith on Day 1 has the disposition to have a seeming on reflection alone that p is part of the best answer to: Why e? Thus, it's clear that on Day 1 p is not available to Smith as part of the best explanation of his evidence.

#### *4.2 Does Linking Evidence Make a Justificatory Difference?*

One might object that my case against REF\* incorrectly assumes the agents' evidence remains the same after they realize their earlier mistakes. But clearly, Smith's evidence increases when he becomes aware of the explanatory connection between e and p. On Day 2 Smith acquires linking evidence (an awareness of the explanatory connection between p and e), and this evidence, the objection goes, makes a difference to whether or not p is justified for him.

Plausibly, linking evidence is a kind of ultimate evidence, since seemings are standardly thought to be able to transmit justification without needing justification themselves. But it would be unwise for someone like McCain to make this reply. Treating linking evidence as part of e in REF\* leads to a vicious regress.

This idea drives one of Appley and Stoutenburg's (2017) arguments against explanationism. They argue that versions of explanationism that have an awareness requirement, like REF\*, are faced with a vicious regress of (propositional) justification. The regress proceeds as follows. According to the proposed response, in order for p to be justified for me due to p's being part of the best explanation of my evidence, e, I need to be potentially aware (have a disposition to have a seeming) that 'p is part of the best explanation of e'. But then this

awareness, since it is relevant to the justification of p, is now part of my evidence. Thus, my evidence has now grown. Let's call it e'. In order for e' to justify p, I need to be potentially aware that 'p is part of the best explanation of e''. But then this new instance of awareness is now part of my evidence for p, which has grown more still. We can call it e''. In order for e'' to justify p, I'll need to be potentially aware that 'p is part of the best explanation of e''''. And so on, ad infinitum. I can never achieve the awareness needed for my evidence to justify p. This means that REF\* cannot include linking evidence.

The defender of REF\* faces a dilemma, neither of whose horns are palatable. If she includes linking evidence (dispositions to have seemings) in her formulation of the view in order to claim that p is justified for Smith on Day 2 but not Day 1, then she faces a vicious regress. On the other hand, if she excludes linking evidence from her formulation of REF\* in order to escape a vicious regress, she will have to concede that p is justified for Smith on both Day 1 and Day 2, despite Smith not having any linking evidence on Day 1.<sup>23</sup>

REF\*\* does not require S to be (even potentially) aware of the explanatory connection between p and e in order for S's (ultimate, non-linking<sup>24</sup>) evidence to justify p.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, it easily handles MANUFACTURING PLANT and COIN TOSS. In the former, p (*corporate executives have decided to close the plant*) is part of the best explanation of Smith's evidence. So, REF\*\*'s clause (i) implies that p is justified for Smith. In the latter, the best explanation of Jones's evidence (the coin is fair) is part of the best explanation for p (*the next flip is equally likely to land heads as it is tails*). So, REF\*\*'s clause (ii) implies that p is justified for Jones.

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<sup>23</sup> For a response to this objection from Appley and Stoutenburg in defense of McCain's explanationism, see Lutz (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> The "e" in REF\*\* should be understood as ultimate, non-linking evidence. Henceforth, when I speak of "evidence" I mean to refer to ultimate, non-linking evidence, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>25</sup> Appley and Stoutenburg argue that giving up the awareness condition is problematic for the explanationist. I address this concern in section 4.4 below.

### 4.3 Does REF\*\* Make Propositional Justification Too Easy?

One might object that REF\*\*, unlike REF\*, makes propositional justification too easy. An example from McCain (2014, p. 61) due to Conee and Feldman might be used to motivate this concern<sup>26</sup>:

#### LOGIC TA & STUDENT

A logic TA and a beginning logic student are looking over a homework assignment. One question displays a sentence that they both know to express a truth and asks whether certain other sentences are true as well. The TA can easily tell through simple reflection that some other sentences express logical consequences of the original sentence and thus she is justified in believing they are true as well. The student is clueless (Conee and Feldman 2001, p 4).

According to McCain, intuitively the logical consequences fit the TA's evidence, but not the student's. One reason might be that only the TA, but not the student, is disposed to have the relevant seemings (or other awareness states). For example, suppose some of the relevant sentences are

(4) If P, then Q.

(5)  $\sim$ Q.

(6)  $\sim$ P.

According to this line of thought, the fact that the student doesn't see the connection between (4), (5), and (6) (specifically, that the latter follows from (or is best explained by) the former) implies that (6) is not justified for him.

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<sup>26</sup> McCain suggests (personal correspondence) that the following example can motivate what I've been calling an awareness requirement.

I reject McCain's claim that (6) doesn't fit the student's evidence. It's more plausible to hold that despite his level best, the student fails to see that (6) fits his evidence. Intuitively, the student may be criticized for failing to realize the logical connection between (6) and (4) and (5). But McCain's position makes such criticism odd, since he holds that (6) is not propositionally justified by the student's evidence. How should we understand the student's epistemic shortcoming? In my view, the student may be criticized for failing to see that (6) fits his evidence.

#### *4.4 Is there a Cost to Giving Up the Awareness Condition?*

Another potential objection comes from Appley and Stoutenburg, who anticipate that explanationist evidentialists may opt to escape the vicious regress presented earlier by rejecting any awareness condition on evidential fit, and instead require only that a subject be aware of a certain portion of her evidence for *p*. However, they think such a move is problematic. They appeal to the following example from BonJour (1985, p. 41) to illustrate:

Norman, under certain conditions that usually obtain, is a completely reliable clairvoyant with respect to certain kinds of subject matter. He possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind for or against the general possibility of such a cognitive power, or for or against the thesis that he possesses it. One day, Norman comes to believe that the President is in New York City, though he has no evidence for or against this belief. In fact, the belief is true and results from his clairvoyant power, under circumstances in which it is completely reliable.

According to Appley and Stoutenburg (2017, p. 3081), "Cases like Norman the clairvoyant put pressure on those who would reject a requirement that subjects possessing justification for a proposition must be aware (in some way) of the connection between their evidence and the

proposition supported by that evidence.” Appley and Stoutenburg (2017, p. 3082, fn 28) worry that rejecting any awareness requirement will not “satisfy those who find the Norman intuition compelling.”

Unfortunately, Appley and Stoutenburg misconstrue Bonjour’s example. Bonjour explicitly states that Norman lacks evidence concerning a number of important propositions. Norman “possesses no evidence or reasons of any kind” for or against the general possibility of clairvoyance. Bonjour adds that Norman believes the President is in New York even though “he has no evidence for or against this belief.” Hence, the problem is not that he has evidence for the president’s being in New York and is unaware of how this evidence bears on his belief. Rather, Norman doesn’t have any evidence at all that the president is in New York.<sup>27</sup> But if so, there is no relevant explanatory relation (between *e* and *p*) that Norman can be aware of in the first place.

But suppose we change the example and stipulate that Norman has evidence that clairvoyance is possible, that he has such a power, and that the president is in New York. We can also add that *the president is in New York* is part of the best explanation of this evidence. If we do this, however, the idea that Norman’s belief is unjustified is much less compelling and there seems to be little reason to think that, in addition to having evidence for which *the president is in New York* is part of the best explanation, Norman needs to fulfil a special sort of awareness requirement.

#### *4.5 Is REF\*\* Compatible with Internalism?*

A related objection might be lodged against REF\*\* on the grounds that it is not amenable to an internalist evidentialist approach to justification, since it doesn’t have an awareness

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<sup>27</sup> Comesaña (2010, 582-3) responds similarly. For another discussion of Bonjour’s case, see Conee and Feldman (1985, 27-30).

requirement.<sup>28</sup> On one influential account, internalism is distinguished from externalism by its embrace of the Subject's Perspective Objection (SPO) in light of cases such as Norman above:

If the subject holding a belief isn't aware of what that belief has going for it, then she isn't aware of how its status is any different from a stray hunch or an arbitrary conviction. From that we may conclude that from her perspective it is an accident that her belief is true. And that implies that it isn't a justified belief (Bergmann 2006, p. 12).

According to Bergmann, the internalist says that in order for my belief to be justified, I have to be aware of "what that belief has going for it." In an explanationist context, that may be understood as some kind of awareness of the explanatory connection between that believed proposition and my evidence. Does REF\*\* run afoul of this core internalist commitment?

No. Accepting REF\*\* does not preclude one from adopting the SPO. The reason is that the SPO states a requirement for the subject *holding* a given belief. That is, the SPO is a principle about doxastic, rather than propositional, justification. So, it is open to the proponent of REF\*\* to claim that an internalist account of doxastic justification must accept the SPO, all the while denying that the awareness mentioned therein needs to be present for propositional justification. One way to do this would be to look to the basing relation. On the standard view,<sup>29</sup> one's belief is doxastically justified just in case it is propositionally justified and based on what propositionally justifies it. A proponent of REF\*\* who wishes to maintain an internalist account of doxastic justification could claim that basing one's belief on what propositionally justifies it involves the required sort of awareness. While a fully developed account of the basing relation is

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<sup>28</sup> On some accounts of internalism some kind of awareness is an essential element of justification. See, e.g., Bergmann (2006). Interestingly, Bergmann (2006, p. 48-65) doesn't classify Conee-and-Feldman-style evidentialism as a version of internalism.

<sup>29</sup> For a challenge to the standard view, see Turri (2010).

beyond the scope of this paper, we can at least sketch in broad outlines the type of account that a proponent of both REF\*\* and the SPO could adopt.

Two of the most popular accounts of the basing relation are the *causal* model and *doxastic* model. Causal models claim that it is a necessary (and/or sufficient) condition for basing a belief that *p* on some evidence, *e*, that *e* causally sustain one's belief that *p*. Doxastic models claim that it is a necessary (and/or sufficient) condition for basing a belief that *p* on some evidence, *e*, that one have a belief that *e supports p* (or some such). As is clear, doxastic models require for basing the sort of awareness we've been discussing above, awareness of the connection between a proposition and one's evidence. So, a proponent of REF\*\* could adopt a doxastic account of the basing relation and, thus, affirm that being doxastically justified in believing *p* requires some type of awareness of the explanatory connection between *p* and the evidence, *e*, which it explains. Thus, a defender of the REF\*\* account of propositional justification can, in principle, retain their internalist credentials.

One problem with this approach, however, is that the simple doxastic account of basing above leads to a vicious regress. Presumably, a proponent of the account should say that the belief about *e*'s support of *p* is justified. But if so, this belief will need to have some basis, *e*<sub>2</sub>, and there will need to be another belief whose content concerns the relation between the previous belief and *e*<sub>2</sub>. And so on. A better approach would be to modify the doxastic account to instead require a seeming (or a disposition to have a seeming) that *e supports p*. Commonly understood, seemings are entities that can justify, but are not themselves capable of being un/justified. Thus, they are suitable regress-stoppers. In an explanationist context, we might add that the seeming should concern the explanatory relationship between *p* and *e*. Thus, a proponent of REF\*\* could claim that basing one's belief that *p* on *e* requires one to have either a seeming that (i) *p is part of*

*the best explanation for why e* or (ii) *the best explanation of e explains p better than it explains ~p*. Applying this account to the examples in the previous section, we could say that when Smith finally realizes he has been deluding himself and comes to believe that *corporate executives have decided to close the plant*, he has a seeming that the former proposition is part of the best explanation for why he had the evidence he did. Similarly, we can imagine that when Jones realizes she has used the gambler's fallacy and now comes to believe that *the next flip is equally likely to land heads as it is tails*, she has a seeming that the best explanation of her evidence (the coin is fair) explains the former proposition better than its negation. Thus, a proponent of REF\*\* could endorse the SPO, all the while rejecting an awareness requirement for propositional justification.

## **5. Conclusion**

Explanationist evidentialists need not take propositional justification for p to require any sort of awareness of the explanatory connection between one's evidence and p. In fact, REF\*'s overly demanding account of propositional justification actually makes it too easy for intuitively epistemically irrational subjects (e.g. Smith and Jones) to be beyond reproach epistemically. In light of REF\*'s problem's, I proposed REF\*\*, according to which a proposition, p, fits one's evidence, e, just in case p either is part of the best explanation of e or is an explanatory consequence of part of the best explanation of e. REF\*\* is an important improvement over REF\* because only the former can withstand the awareness-based objections presented above against REF\*.



## Chapter 3

### Religious Experience, Evidence, and Phenomenal Conservatism

#### 1. Introduction

Phenomenal conservatism (PC) has become a popular principle among epistemologists. On one conception (Huemer 2007), PC claims that if it seems to S that p, then, absent defeaters, S thereby has at least some justification for believing p.<sup>30</sup> More recently still, those working in religious epistemology have used PC or similar principles to vindicate the (non-inferential) justificatory status of various types of religious beliefs, especially those based on religious experience.<sup>31</sup> I argue, by contrast, that PC (and similar principles) cannot vindicate the (non-inferential) justificatory status of religious beliefs discussed by theistic proponents of PC, particularly those based on religious experience. Part of the issue concerns seemings. Those who use PC to argue for the justification of religious beliefs take a seeming to be a sui generis propositional attitude that p, distinct from such things as beliefs and inclinations to believe.<sup>32</sup> But, as we will see, not every seeming is epistemically appropriate. What I'll call a *grounded seeming* is a seeming that p that is grounded in a type of experience (perceptual, introspective, memorial) that is a basic source of justification. I'll argue that if "seems" is understood the way proponents of PC in religious epistemology understand it, then PC (and related views) are mistaken. On the other hand, if "seems" in PC refers only to grounded seemings, then, while PC may well be true, those using PC in religious epistemology have so far failed to provide

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<sup>30</sup> For similar principles, see, e.g., Tucker (2010) and Dougherty (2014).

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g. Tucker (2011), Dougherty (2014), Burns (2017), Swinburne (2018), and Mcallister & Dougherty (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> See Tucker (2013, pp. 3-7).

examples of grounded religious seemings. The result is that PC is unable to play an important role in religious epistemology.

## 2. PC and Seemings

PC is a theoretically significant principle in epistemology. Huemer has used it to justify our ethical beliefs<sup>33</sup> and account for the core insight (as he sees it) that motivates epistemic internalism.<sup>34</sup> The principle has also been used by others to defend internalism from recent attacks.<sup>35</sup> Huemer states the principle of Phenomenal Conservatism as follows:

PC<sub>J</sub>: If it seems to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of (non-inferential) justification for believing that P (2007, p. 30).<sup>36</sup>

Tucker's version, which focuses on evidence, holds:

PC<sub>E</sub>: If it seems to S that P, then S has evidence which supports P (2011, p. 55).<sup>37</sup>

Arguably, the plausibility of both versions of PC depends on what it means to *seem to S that p*. A widely-defended view takes seemings to be sui generis propositional attitudes that have the “feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (Tollhurst 1998, p. 298-9). Tucker writes, “The phenomenology of a seeming makes it feel as though the seeming is ‘recommending’ its propositional content as true or ‘assuring’ us of the content’s truth” (2010, p. 530). Seemings have also been described as having a “felt veridicality,” (Tolhurst 1998) “assertiveness,” (Tucker 2010) and “forcefulness” (Huemer 2001) that distinguishes them from such things as beliefs and inclinations to believe.<sup>38</sup> For example, it might seem to me that I had breakfast this morning, that there is a bridge up ahead, or that  $2+2=4$ , and so on. Supporters of

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<sup>33</sup> See his (2005).

<sup>34</sup> See his (2006).

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Rogers and Matheson (2011).

<sup>36</sup> PC is a principle of propositional, rather than doxastic, justification.

<sup>37</sup> Tucker simply calls his view “Phenomenal Conservatism.”

<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Tucker (2010, p. 530). For a recent defense of this view, see McAllister (2018).

PC take seemings to be a source of non-inferential justification, mental states capable of providing justification, but not needing justification of their own.

It is crucial to distinguish seemings from experience. Commonly, when I have an experience as of *p*, it also seems to me that *p*, which can make it hard to pull these two notions apart. For example, when it seems to me that there is tomato before me, I'm having a visual experience as of a tomato and the proposition that there is a tomato just "feels true" to me. However, suppose a trusted source informs me that I've unknowingly taken a drug that causes hallucinations of vegetables. In such a case, it will no longer seem to me that a tomato is present, despite the fact that I still have a sensory experience that represents a tomato. Other, more familiar, instances of perceptual experiences like these include visually seeing a pencil look bent in a glass of water and a desert road looking wet up ahead. In both sorts of cases, my sensory experience represents *p*, even though I don't have a seeming that *p* (that the pencil is bent and that the road is wet). Though there is a sense (the phenomenal sense) of "seems" according to which the pencil seems bent and the road seems wet (Chisholm 1957), that is not the sense that Tucker, Tollhurst, et. al. have in mind.

According to Tucker, our perception of our environment involves both seemings and sensory experiences. Tucker (2010) argues that only seemings, rather than sensory experiences, serve to justify our perceptual beliefs. On his view, a seeming that there is a table in front of me provides justification for my belief that there is a table in front of me, regardless of the sensory experiences I may or may not have.

Tucker motivates the distinction between seemings and sensations by arguing that it can explain two phenomena from empirical psychology. First, he considers the phenomenon of *blindsight*:

Subjects who have a damaged visual cortex often emphatically report that they cannot see anything within a certain region of their visual field. Nonetheless, such subjects often show remarkable sensitivity (though less than properly functioning humans) to such things as motion, the orientation of objects, and the wavelength of light within their reported “blind spot” (p. 530).

Tucker’s proposed explanation is that the subjects’ blind spots are regions of their visual field that lack visual imagery and, therefore, do not produce visual experiences. But, he claims, “the mechanisms that produce seemings function well enough to provide information about the region of the environment that corresponds to the subjects’ blindspots” (p. 530). Further, “The subjects are not confident about their guesses, because the relevant seemings are very weak and the subjects understandably assume that, in the circumstances, they do not have any reliable access to what is taking place in their blindspot” (pp. 530-1). In other words, while such subjects lack visual sensations, they are able to make reliable judgements about their environment because they host the appropriate, albeit weak, seemings.

The other phenomenon Tucker uses to motivate the distinction is *associative agnosia*: “When shown a familiar object, such as a ring or a pen, subjects are able to draw the item they see with great success. Although the subjects apparently remember what rings and pens are, they still cannot recognize the objects as rings or pens...” (p. 531). Tucker proposes that “the mechanisms that produce visual imagery are functioning properly enough for a normal subject to identify the object; however, the mechanisms that would ordinarily produce the seemings *that the object is a ring or that the object is a pen* are malfunctioning” (p. 531, emphasis in original). While subjects have visual sensations of rings and pens, they lack seemings about rings or pens,

and so they cannot recognize anything in their visual field as a ring or pen. So, sensations and seemings are, according to Tucker, distinct.

Not everyone shares Tucker's view that seemings and perceptual experiences are distinct. Huemer, for instance, doesn't. But, given our purposes, this won't matter, since Huemer doesn't try to put  $PC_J$  and  $PC_E$  to work in religious epistemology. In section 8, however, I will consider whether Huemer's view of seemings could prove useful in religious epistemology.

It should also be noted that the sorts of beliefs  $PC$ 's defenders take to be immediately justified by seemings concern the external world, rather than one's sensory experience. For example, its seeming to me that there is a chair before me immediately justifies the proposition that *there is a chair before me*, rather than the proposition that *there seems to be a chair before me*. On the standard picture, one forms the belief that there is a chair before one directly on the basis of a chair seeming, rather than on the basis of the belief that there seems to be a chair before one. This view of the relation between seemings and beliefs is open to challenge, but for present purposes I will assume it is accurate.

Finally, it is controversial whether or not intuition experiences are just seemings. For example, consider my intuition that  $2+2=4$  or that  $q$  follows from the conjunction of  $p$  and  $p \rightarrow q$ . One may argue that these intuitions are seemings, because they just are instances of felt veridicality, assertiveness, forcefulness, and the like. Perhaps, but I will not attempt to settle the issue. Rather, I will focus my attention on perceptual, memorial, and introspective experiences. If seemings in any of these latter three areas do not always provide defeasible justification, then  $PC_J$  is false, whether or not intuitive seemings always provide defeasible justification.

Presently, I'll examine a line of criticism against  $PC_J$  that has recently been discussed by Huemer (2013).

### 3. The Current Debate

One of the most popular examples used against PC<sub>J</sub> involves an expert and a novice, who are searching for gold, and come across a yellow nugget. The nugget seems to the expert to be gold because of previous training in gold identification. The nugget seems to the novice to be gold because of wishful thinking. Both the expert's and the novice's beliefs that the yellow nugget is gold are justified, according PC<sub>J</sub>. But, intuitively, the novice's belief is not justified. His seeming provides no justification for his belief that the nugget is gold.

Huemer's inclination is to say that if the subject is unaware that his seeming that p is caused by wishful thinking, the subject has justification for p. It is worth noting that Huemer invokes an internalist conception of justification. I will not challenge internalism in what follows. Huemer provides an example to motivate the idea that a seeming/appearance that P can confer justification for P even if, unbeknownst to the subject, the seeming is caused by an unreliable process, or originates from an unjustified belief or an epistemically blameworthy state:

CAT<sup>39</sup>

Suppose that I have a brain manipulation device lent to me by the local mad brain scientist...If I push a button on the device, it will cause me to hallucinate a cat outside while simultaneously erasing my memory of having pushed the button and my knowledge of the nature of the device. I have a desire to see a cat, due to my irrational belief that cats are messengers of God. This desire causes me to activate the device, leading to a cat hallucination, which makes me think a cat is present (p. 344).

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<sup>39</sup> My name for the example.

Huemer suggests that the belief that the cat is present is justified. However, assuming we accept his verdict, it's not clear to what extent my seeming in CAT is doing epistemic work. We can more easily test the epistemic power of seemings by considering a modification of CAT:

CAT2

I have a desire to see a cat, due to my irrational belief that cats are messengers of God. This desire causes me to activate the device. However, the device malfunctions and causes me to hallucinate dog-like visual (audible, etc.) phenomenology. Nonetheless, due to my extreme wishful thinking, it seems to me that instead a cat is present, which makes me think a cat is present.

My belief in CAT seems justified, at least given internalist assumptions. I hosted ordinary cat-like visual imagery, which made it seem to me that there was a cat present. And I had no reason to doubt the veracity of my experience, given my memory erasure. However, in CAT2, although I had dog-like visual imagery instead of cat-like visual imagery, I had a seeming that a cat was present. In this latter case, it's implausible that my seeming that a cat is present provides justification for my belief that a cat is present, contrary to PC<sub>J</sub>. It is also implausible that my cat seeming provides me evidence which supports my belief that a cat is present, contrary to PC<sub>E</sub>. Huemer may not count this as a seeming. However, Tucker would classify it as a seeming. So, CAT2 poses problems for PC<sub>J</sub> and PC<sub>E</sub> if Tucker's conception of seemings is adopted. The next section more thoroughly examines the type of problem that cases like CAT2 pose for PC<sub>J</sub> and PC<sub>E</sub>.

#### **4. The Epistemic Primacy of Sensory Experience**

What CAT2 appears to show is that the epistemic appropriateness of a seeming depends on sensory experiences. I'll argue here for the broader conclusion that the appropriateness of a

seeming depends on sensory experience and the analogues of such states for other basic sources of justification (memory, introspection). The reason is that sensory-like states often explain why a given seeming is epistemically appropriate or not. This suggests that sensory experience is more epistemically fundamental, that it has a better claim than seemings to be a kind of *ultimate evidence*. Ultimate evidence is a type of evidence that can justify propositions, but does not itself stand in need of justification. *Intermediate evidence*, on the other hand, can justify propositions, but must itself be justified in order to do so. The justification of an item of intermediate evidence must eventually trace back to an item of ultimate evidence. Whatever the correct account of ultimate evidence is, it will arguably include such things as memory experiences, perceptual experiences, rational intuitions, introspective experiences, and perhaps testimonial experiences (though counting this latter item is controversial). Seemings, by contrast, are (at least sometimes) derivative or intermediate evidence, capable of being justified or unjustified. And if this is so, then seemings that p do not always provide justification for p (even in the absence of defeaters).

Below I will present three cases in which a person has a seeming that intuitively fails to provide justification for believing its content. The reason, to be explored further later, is that the seeming isn't appropriately related to experience (sensory or otherwise). Consider first a case involving perceptual experience:

#### MATRIX

After watching the movie *The Matrix*, I fancy that none of my perceptual experiences accurately depict the external world, since they are caused by malevolent entities not wanting me to have perceptual knowledge. I'm so immersed in fantasy that I start to accept the idea that my sensory experiences are caused by malicious non-human agents that cannot be sensorily detected. As a result, when I walk around in my garden, looking



at the plants, it still seems to me that I'm a brain in a vat, rather than that I'm in my garden. Clearly, in this case, my seeming is epistemically inappropriate. It simply does not fit my evidence (unlike the seeming that I'm in my garden) and, thus, is unable to justify the proposition that I'm a brain in a vat.

Huemer might reject the idea that I have a seeming in this (and the other two) case. It's not clear what he could say in defense of this, but as mentioned previously he does not clearly distinguish seemings from sensations as Tucker does. At any rate, what Huemer himself thinks about the case is not relevant for my purposes.

Another area in which seemings can fail to fit one's evidence is memory. In that light, consider a second case:

#### FLOWER BED

A neighbor whose flowerbed has apparently been trampled asks me if I know anything about how it may have happened. I tell her I'll think about it. Upon reflection I recall visual images of my dog walking all over her flowers. However, I value my relationship with this neighbor and I would be too embarrassed to admit that it was my dog that ruined her flowerbed. Thus, I wishfully convince myself that the memories I recalled were probably a dream and that the dog of another neighbor (whom I have recently had a conflict with) must be the culprit. It now seems to me that somebody else's dog trampled my neighbor's flowerbed. However, it appears that this seeming is epistemically inappropriate. It simply does not fit my evidence and, thus, is unable to justify the proposition that somebody else's dog trampled my neighbor's flowerbed.

Finally, consider a case of introspection:

#### BUNGEE JUMPING

I'm a first-time would-be bungee jumper about to jump. Suppose that, just as I'm about to jump, I feel anxious, afraid, and extreme nervousness in my stomach. But I have an intense desire not to back out of the jump, and I want to fit in with my peers, who have already jumped. As a result, I misinterpret my feelings and it now seems to me that I'm thrilled and excited to jump. In such a case, my seeming does not fit my evidence, namely, my feelings of fear, anxiety and nervousness. Thus, this seeming does not provide justification for my resulting belief that I'm thrilled and excited to jump. Like sensations and memorial images, introspectively accessible feelings can provide normative constraints on the seemings that are appropriate for one to have.

It's worth noting that Burns (2017) adopts PC<sub>J</sub> in arguing for the justification of theistic beliefs that arise from theistic seemings. Further, Burns agrees with Tucker that seemings should be distinguished from sensations: "It may be easy to conflate seemings with sensations. For example, when I seem to see a desk, this may easily be conflated with the mere having of certain sensations. This would be a mistake, chiefly because I often have seemings without sensations" (p. 255). Thus, it is significant that these cases target both PC<sub>J</sub> and PC<sub>E</sub>.

One might defend PC<sub>J</sub> by claiming that in the cases above the subjects aren't justified in believing as they do because they have a *defeater* for p. For example, in MATRIX it might be said that my garden-like sensory experience is a rebutting defeater. That is, it gives me a reason to think that *I'm a brain in a vat* is false (by giving me a reason to think there is a garden before me). Thus, in such a case, PC<sub>J</sub> can acknowledge that my seeming that I'm a brain in a vat provides no justification for my belief that I'm a brain in a vat.

This response is certainly open to advocates of PC<sub>J</sub>, but it would be an odd move, since seemings would be of dubious epistemic importance. If sensory (or introspective or memorial)

experiences provide reasons to believe their content, then seemings are largely unnecessary to account for our stock of non-inferentially justified beliefs. Concerning perception, the vast majority of my beliefs about middle-sized physical objects in my vicinity arose because of particular sensory experiences. Thus, it appears that sensory experience alone can account for the vast majority of my justified beliefs about physical objects in my vicinity. At best, seemings would overdetermine the justification we already have (through experience) of our perceptual, memorial, and introspective beliefs.

Thus, the claim that the experiences of subjects in the three cases are defeaters threatens the significance of  $PC_J$ . It does so because it implies that seemings are relatively unimportant when it comes to (non-inferential) justification. Allowing experiences to count as defeaters increases their (experiences) epistemological importance to such an extent that seemings become largely epistemologically superfluous.

Perhaps for this reason Tucker claims that seemings are the only source of justification for our perceptual beliefs. Sensory experiences, on this picture, are epistemically impotent. He concludes that “no sensation can *prima facie* justify its content” (2010, p. 534). Rather, the only justificationaly valuable portion of perceptual experiences (which Tucker thinks typically include both sensations and seemings) are seemings. Claiming that I have a defeater (in MATRIX) is straightforwardly incompatible with this view.

But  $PC_E$  is nonetheless made implausible by the three cases above. For instance, in MATRIX  $PC_E$  implies that I have evidence that I’m a brain in a vat, even while I’m having sensory experiences of my garden. After all, it seems to me that I’m a brain in a vat. However, it is implausible to think that I have evidence that I’m a brain in a vat. Furthermore,  $PC_E$  is even more implausible than  $PC_J$ , since the former would imply that I have evidence that I’m a brain in

a vat even if I know that my seeming is based entirely on my immersion in fantasy and that the latter is evidentially irrelevant. In other words, I would have evidence that I'm a brain in a vat, even when I have a decisive undercutting defeater.

FLOWER BED and BUNGEE JUMPING also cause trouble for PC<sub>E</sub>. In the case of memory, my seeming that someone else's dog trampled my neighbor's flowerbed does not provide evidence for its content, since the seeming does not fit my memorial evidence. In the third case, my seeming that I'm thrilled and excited to bungee jump does not provide evidential support for the belief that I'm thrilled and excited to jump. After all, it doesn't fit with my feelings of fear, anxiety, and nervousness.

Tucker may reply that although my seeming that I'm thrilled and excited does not provide sufficient evidence for me to justify a belief that I am, it does provide *some*, perhaps weak, evidence. But this is implausible. Tucker supposes that "stronger seemings provide better evidence" (2011, p. 66), by which he means that the more a proposition feels true, the greater the evidence one has for it. Consider the seeming that I'm thrilled and excited to bungee jump. In one scenario, this seeming aligns with feelings as intense joy, passion, etc. In another scenario, this seeming is paired with anxiety, fear, and extreme nervousness. But suppose the seeming is equally strong in both cases. If so, then the evidential force of both seemings is the same, which is absurd. Intuitively, the first seeming provides more evidence than the latter.

## **5. Grounded Seemings and the Three Cases**

We've so far used a conception of a seeming as a sui generis propositional attitude that "has the feel of truth," that "recommends" believing its (propositional) content, and so on. What I'll call a grounded seeming that p is a seeming that p that is grounded in an experience that is a basic or

ultimate<sup>40</sup> source of justification (e.g., memory, perception, introspection). While I won't argue that a principle like PC<sub>E</sub> or PC<sub>J</sub> is true of grounded seemings, I will show that the three cases would not amount to successful counterexamples against such a view. Others have also expressed views that would appear to link the epistemic importance of seemings with experience. Audi (2013, p. 190) argues that “the clear cases of normatively supportive seemings go with the basic sources,” each having a distinctive phenomenology. Dougherty endorses a view similar to PC<sub>J</sub> and characterizes a seeming as the “phenomenal character of the impression that something is true generated by a “faculty” or source of basic justification” (Dougherty 2018, p. 45).<sup>41</sup> Beyond these rough characterizations, few have given a precise picture of what's required for a seeming to be grounded in a basic or ultimate source of justification.<sup>42</sup> In a moment I'll offer a novel account of this “grounding.”

First, to help get a better idea of the notion of a grounded seeming, consider this example: “when you have a visual experience of a tomato, it thereby seems to you as if a tomato is present, then and there” (Huemer 2001, p. 77). In this case your seeming that a tomato is present is grounded in your visual experience. You have (i) a sensory experience as of the tomato being present; and (ii) the proposition *a tomato is present* feels true to you, like it accurately depicts reality. I suggest that PC is plausible if taken to be referring to grounded seemings

Since Tucker is an internalist, let us limit our search for an account of grounding to internalist-friendly accounts. What might an internalist-friendly account of grounded seemings look like? I will present two.

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<sup>40</sup> I use these terms synonymously.

<sup>41</sup> Others who've argued that seemings must be associated with the experiences provided by the basic sources of justification if they are to provide justification include Brogaard (2013) and Chudnoff & DiDomenico (2015).

<sup>42</sup> One exception is Brogaard (2013, p. 277-8).

One idea is that I've got a grounded seeming that p just in case the truth of p seems to be fleshed out in my experience of the world.<sup>43</sup> To be more precise, we could say that a seeming that p is grounded in experience just in case it has a *presentational phenomenology*. On Chudnoff's (2013, p. 37) understanding of this notion, "What it is for an experience of yours to have presentational phenomenology with respect to p is for it to both make it seem to you that p and make it seem to you as if this experience makes you aware of a truth-maker for p." While Chudnoff does not offer an account of grounding, we can take the notion of presentational phenomenology as inspiration for one:

$G_P$ : A seeming of the form [It seems to A as if q] is grounded in a content p of a particular perceptual, introspective or memory-related experience e had by A iff A's experience of p makes it seem to A that A is aware of a truth-maker for q.

$G_P$  need not require that A's seeming that A is aware of a truth-maker be grounded. This seeming of A's would at least be closely aligned with A's experience. In any case, my goal here is not to offer a full defense of  $G_P$ , but simply to briefly explore a pair of options available to the internalist. I leave a fuller explication and defense of  $G_P$  for another occasion.  $G_P$  implies that, for example, the seeming that *there is a lamp before me* that I have when I have an ordinary visual experience as of a lamp in my office is grounded because my visual experience seems to make me directly aware of the fact that makes the content of my seeming true (i.e. the physical lamp being before me). By contrast, my seeming that *there is a lamp before me* is not grounded when it results from standing in a dark room and simply wishing that a lamp is before me. The reason is that my experience of a dark room does not even apparently make me aware of a truth-maker for *there is a lamp before me*. This view of grounding would correctly classify Huemer's

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<sup>43</sup> See Chudnoff and DiDomenico (2015, pp. 545-6).

tomato case as one in which you have a grounded seeming and, thus, justification for the belief that a tomato is present. When it seems to you as if a tomato is present, your visual experience as of a red tomato makes it seem to you that you are aware of a fact that makes it true that a tomato is present.

In a previous section I spoke of seemings fitting or failing to fit one's (experiential) evidence. The notion of evidential fit has received much treatment by epistemologists in recent years.<sup>44</sup> One popular account of evidential fit is *explanationism*<sup>45</sup>, according to which (roughly) a proposition fits one's evidence just in case it best explains that evidence. Taking inspiration from this literature, one could propose an explanationist account of grounded seemings:

$G_E$ : A seeming of the form [It seems to A as if q] is grounded in a content p of a particular perceptual, introspective or memory-related experience e had by A iff the truth of q best explains why A is having an experience with content p.

$G_E$  yields the right result in Huemer's tomato case. That a tomato is present (q) is plausibly part of the best explanation of why you are having a visual experience of a tomato (p). So, you have a grounded seeming that a tomato is present, which PC correctly implies provides justification (or evidence) for believing a tomato is present.

Yet other accounts could be proposed, but for our purposes it is enough to know that there are at least two prima facie plausible accounts of grounded seemings that internalists can choose from. If  $PC_J$  and  $PC_E$  are principles about grounded seemings, then, plausibly, the three cases of the previous section do not refute either. The reason for each case is that it doesn't appear that the subject hosts a seeming that is grounded in a basic source of justification. In the first case, I have sensory experiences (of my garden), but these aren't best explained by the

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<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Comesaña (2010).

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., Conee and Feldman (2008), McCain (2014), and my (forthcoming)

content of my seeming (*I'm a brain in a vat*).<sup>46</sup> Thus, according to the explanationist account, my seeming that I'm a brain in a vat is not grounded. So, my belief that I'm a brain in a vat is not justified, but the revised versions of PC<sub>J</sub> and PC<sub>E</sub> don't imply that it is.

The presentational phenomenology account of grounding delivers a similar result for the other examples. Consider FLOWER BED. I have memorial experiences of my dog in my neighbor's flower bed, but these don't make it seem to me that I'm aware of a truth-maker for the content of my seeming (*somebody else's dog trampled my neighbor's flowerbed*).

## **6. Grounded Seemings and Religious Experience**

The cases in section 4 do not refute PC<sub>J</sub> and PC<sub>E</sub> if these principles are restricted to grounded seemings. So, these principles can be of use in religious epistemology, but discussion must center on grounded seemings. I will now assess whether talk of grounded seemings could appropriately fit with Tucker's proposal. I will conclude that Tucker cannot use grounded seemings in his model to vindicate the non-inferential justification of religious beliefs based on religious experience. Thus, ultimately, neither PC<sub>J</sub> nor PC<sub>E</sub> will be of much use.

Tucker seeks to explain "how an appreciation of the glories of nature contributes to the justification of religious beliefs" (Tucker 2011, p. 73) Importantly, he seeks to explain how religious beliefs that result from such an appreciation are justified non-inferentially. He is not alone in this regard. For example, Plantinga takes it that we have a religious faculty, the *sensus divinitatis*, that is designed to form beliefs about God in various circumstances (2000, p. 173-75). On Plantinga's model, humans are designed to take a visual image of a sunset (for example), perhaps in conjunction with a feeling of awe, and form a belief about God, such as *God loves me*. Tucker is unsatisfied with Plantinga's model of the *sensus divinitatis*, in part because it doesn't

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<sup>46</sup> For a recent defense of the idea that skeptical hypotheses aren't the best explanations of ordinary sensory experience, see McCain (2014, pp. 125-142).



seem that having a visual experience of a sunset (with or without a feeling of awe) evidentially supports the belief that God loves one. He proposes a slightly more complicated model according to which the *sensus divinitatis* “takes an appreciation of a sunset as an input and produces, not a belief, but a seeming that God loves one” (p. 73). Tucker argues that this seeming is evidentially significant by arguing for  $PC_E$ . The seeming that God loves one, rather than a visual experience of a sunset, is what provides evidence for the belief that God loves one. Thus, experiences of nature can give rise to non-inferentially justified theistic beliefs, when (and only when) relevant seemings occur.

As I’ve argued,  $PC_E$  is implausible (given Tucker’s conception of seemings). But Tucker may wish to modify  $PC_E$  to be a principle about grounded seemings instead. The problem with this response is that, if  $PC_E$  is modified to be a principle about grounded seemings, it will not be of use for Tucker, since on his model theistic seemings aren’t grounded.

On Tucker’s model of the *sensus divinitatis*, when people have a visual image of a sunset, they often have a seeming that *God loves me*, which, according to  $PC_E$ , provides evidence for this belief. However, the seeming that *God loves me* in this instance doesn’t appear to be a grounded seeming. The subject’s state of mind involves a perceptual experience of some natural phenomenon and an associated seeming. Recall that we have two possible models of grounding. On the presentational phenomenology model, the seeming that *God loves me* is grounded in my visual experience of a sunset just in case that experience appears to make me aware of a truth-maker for *God loves me*. It doesn’t appear that a visual image of a sunset does this, since what would make it true that God loves me is a fact about God’s mind. And the experience does not make it seem to me that I’m aware of a fact about God’s mind. Rather, the experience makes it appear to me instead that I’m aware of a truth-maker for the proposition that *the sun is setting*.

How does Tucker's proposal fare on the explanationist model? We need to determine if *God loves me* best explains why one has a visual image of a sunset. It doesn't appear that *God loves me* is the best explanation of one's visual image of a sunset. A proposition that better explains why one has a visual image of a sunset is that *the sun is setting*.

## **7. Experience, Background Beliefs, and Seemings**

The seemings in Tucker's model do not have an appropriate connection to experience and, thus, are not grounded. McAllister and Dougherty's (forthcoming) model is an improvement over Tucker's in that the former attempts, as I have, to link the appropriateness of religious seemings to experience. McAllister and Dougherty argue that Tucker's model of the *sensus divinitatis* is superior to Plantinga's but still think that "On both Tucker's and Plantinga's models, the *sensus divinitatis* is a bit of a black box. It takes in sensations and outputs seemings or beliefs with no deep explanation for why or how this occurs" (p. 11). McAllister and Dougherty seek to improve upon Tucker's and Plantinga's proposals by offering a reductive account of the *sensus divinitatis* that relies on the existence of certain background beliefs to produce theistic seemings. They propose that one can obtain non-inferential justification for theism "by tacitly perceiving support relations between the content of our experiences (in conjunction with our background information) and propositions implying the existence of God. The latter propositions then seem true, conferring non-inferential justification on them..." (p. 11). A mundane example can be used to illustrate their approach (p. 9). Suppose that it seems to you that your spouse is home after seeing their keys on the table. McAllister and Dougherty claim that "...no conscious reasoning took place. You did not stop to consider explicitly the evidential connection between the keys and your spouse's presence in the home. The best explanation seems to be that you tacitly perceived the connection" (p. 9). So, it seems to you that your spouse is home "when you

subconsciously perceive that the content of your perceptual experience [of the keys], along with your background evidence, supports these claims” (p. 10).

McAllister and Dougherty think these sorts of seemings sometimes arise in religious contexts. They give the following example:

We undergo an experience with propositional content; for instance, it seems that you have violated a moral law....we intuitively grasp a support relation between this experiential content, in conjunction with your background evidence, and a proposition about God; for instance, you tacitly perceive that violating a moral law implies that there is a moral law, that the existence of a moral law supports the existence of a moral lawmaker, that the only plausible moral lawmaker is God, and, hence, that violating the moral law makes you guilty before God (p. 11).

The result is “a seeming with theistic content – e.g., that you are guilty before God – the strength of which corresponds to the probability of the supporting propositions and the strength of the perceived support relation” (p. 11). The justificatory significance of theistic seemings is underpinned by their adoption of the following principle:

Reasons Commonsensism (RC): If it seems to S that p, then S thereby has a pro tanto reason for believing p (forthcoming, p. 4).

According to Dougherty, a pro tanto reason for something is a “consideration that counts in favor of” (2018, p. 42, fn 11). Thus, according to RC, a seeming that I’m guilty before God is a pro tanto reason for me to believe that I’m guilty before God, one that, in the absence of reasons to the contrary, provides justification for the proposition that I’m guilty before God.

How does McAllister and Dougherty’s account fare? On first glance, it appears to be in better shape than Tucker’s, since McAllister and Dougherty recognize the epistemic importance

of seemings fitting one's evidence (experience and background beliefs). However, their proposal, like Tucker's, also faces a challenge: RC is implausible as a principle that concerns seemings in general (and not only grounded seemings). According to RC, in MATRIX its seeming to me that I'm a brain in a vat, even though I have no sensory (or other) information indicating this, is a consideration that counts in favor of believing I'm a brain in a vat. However, intuitively, this doesn't appear to be the case. My seeming does not fit my (sensory) evidence and, thus, cannot justify my seeming and resulting belief. RC is also committed to the implausible view that my seeming that I'm a brain in a vat would provide a reason to believe p even if I knew it arose from my fascination with *The Matrix*.

McAllister and Dougherty might wish to modify RC to be a principle about grounded seemings. However, it doesn't appear that the seemings mentioned in their model are grounded. Consider the seeming that *I'm guilty before God*. It does appear to come about in part because of a basic source of justification, namely, the intuition that I have violated the moral law. But is this moral intuition best explained by the proposition that one is guilty before God? It doesn't quite seem so, since the proposition that *I have violated the moral law* more directly explains my intuition experience.

It might initially appear that the presentational phenomenology account of grounding is favorable to their proposal. After all, it appears commonsensical to say that my experience of having violated the moral law appears to make me aware of what would make it true that *I'm guilty before God*, since part of what would make the latter claim true is that I've done something wrong. However, presumably part of what makes it true that I'm guilty before God has to do with God's being a kind of moral authority. So, in order for my seeming that *I'm guilty before God* to be grounded it would have to be the case that my experience of having violated the

moral law seems to me to make me aware of God (or a particular aspect of God). But it doesn't appear to do so. A seeming like *I'm guilty before God* may well have presentational phenomenology in certain cases, but the reason is that in such cases the subject has an experience (not merely a seeming) with theistic content. But in such a case, it is experience, rather than seemings, that provide justification for the theistic belief. At any rate, it doesn't appear that McAllister and Dougherty have provided an example of a grounded theistic seeming.

McAllister and Dougherty's model faces another problem. The reason one might want to use a principle like RC (or PC<sub>E</sub> or PC<sub>J</sub>) in the present context is to show that theistic seemings can do significant epistemological work. But it appears that on McAllister and Dougherty's model, seemings don't do any distinctive work. We can start to see this by recalling the key example. Suppose that instead of your visual experience of the keys (along with your background beliefs) producing a *seeming* that your spouse is home it produces a *belief* (without a seeming) that your spouse is home. It appears that it is equally appropriate in both cases to think your spouse is home. Your experience and background beliefs alone appear to be doing the epistemic work.

This point applies also to their model of religious experience. We can see this clearly by imagining how their model would be affected if seemings weren't included. At present, the idea is that one has an experience (e.g. an intuition that I've violated the moral law) that, coupled with certain background beliefs, produces a seeming that p (I'm guilty before God), which supports a belief that p (I'm guilty before God). Let's suppose instead that one has an intuition that one has violated the moral law that, combined with certain background beliefs (that violating a moral law implies that there is a moral law, that the existence of a moral law supports the existence of a moral lawmaker, that the only plausible moral lawmaker is God (p. 11)), leads directly to the

belief that one is guilty before God. One way to measure the epistemic importance of seemings in the model is to ask whether my belief that I'm guilty before God is now less justified (or not justified at all), due to the absence of a seeming that I'm guilty before God. It doesn't appear that my belief that I'm guilty before God is any less justified than it was when my experience+background beliefs produced a seeming that I'm guilty before God. It appears that if my background beliefs (in conjunction with my intuition experience) are justified, then I would be perfectly justified in forming the *belief* that I'm guilty before God, without the intermediate step of hosting a *seeming* that I'm guilty before God.

To appreciate how this point applies in a more mundane context, consider McAllister and Dougherty's key example from earlier. I'm justified in believing my spouse is home when I have a perceptual experience of keys being on the table which, when combined with certain background beliefs (that keys on the table suggest that someone is home and that that person is most likely my spouse), leads me have a seeming that my spouse is home. This seeming provides justification for my belief that my spouse is home. However, it appears that forming a belief that my spouse is home on the basis of my perceptual experience of the keys, coupled with certain background beliefs, is entirely appropriate, even without forming beforehand a seeming that my spouse is home. As with the previous case, the seeming appears justificatorily superfluous.

So seemings (and, thus, RC) appear irrelevant on McAllister and Dougherty's model. What appears to be doing much of the work of providing justification for theistic belief are the background beliefs, and McAllister and Dougherty don't attempt in the present work to argue for the truth of those beliefs. Of course, that is entirely appropriate, since their task is not to argue for the existence of God. But it's noteworthy that seemings would not appear to play a significant role in that task either.

## 8. From Seemings to Experience

So, appeal to seemings appears to be less than promising in religious epistemology. Given the conception of seemings at play,  $PC_J$ ,  $PC_E$  and  $RC$  are false, and so cannot be used to defend the epistemic importance of religious experience. We noted that perhaps these principles could be modified to refer instead to grounded seemings. I offered no objection to such a modification. However, we also found that both Tucker and McAllister and Dougherty failed to give examples of grounded seemings that would justify religious beliefs. It looks like, either way, epistemic principles about seemings are not useful in religious epistemology.

One might point out that Tucker's conception of seemings is not universally accepted. Perhaps putting forward a different conception of seemings would make  $PC_J$ ,  $PC_E$ , and  $RC$  more plausible. For example, we could hold, along with Huemer (2001, pp. 58-79; 2007, pp. 30-1) and Tolhurst (1998, p. 300) that "sensations are a kind of seeming" and that "we have seemings of many kinds—perceptual, memorial, and intellectual, perhaps among others, and the perceptual seemings are identical to sensations. Its seeming to you that the book is before you is identical to the visual image you have of the book's being before you" (Tucker 2013, p. 7). This would appear to neutralize the force of the three cases of section 4, since it's not clear that the bizarre mental states that the subjects hold would qualify as seemings in this sense. For example, since my "seeming" that I'm a brain in a vat has no perceptual, intuitive, memorial, or introspective experience attached to it, it arguably isn't a seeming at all on this view.

However, there are at least two problems with this view. First, this view implausibly restricts what it means to say that something seems true to us. Something can seem true to me in a number of ways. My perceptual experience makes some propositions about the external world to seem true. Propositions I infer from other propositions that seem true on the basis of Modus

Ponens seem true to me. Sometimes a proposition seems true because I really desire that it be true. In each instance, my use of “seem” appears appropriate. But the present view only allows the first example to count as a seeming.

The second problem with this response is that, if we restrict what it means for something to seem true in this way, it is not clear that Tucker or McAllister and Dougherty have given examples of theistic seemings. In Tucker’s case, my seeming is a visual image of a sunset, and so does not itself have theistic content. It’s not clear that my “seeming” that God loves me would qualify as a seeming on this view. Concerning McAllister and Dougherty, my (intuitive) seeming is that I’ve violated that moral law, which does not itself have theistic content. It’s not clear that my “seeming” that I’m guilty before God would qualify as a seeming.

So, using seemings in religious epistemology appears unwise, whether we adopt Tucker’s understanding of seemings or Huemer’s. However, for all I’ve said, it may well be that there are grounded theistic seemings, even if so far we haven’t seen any obvious examples of such. Arguably, there are many types of religious experience that feature grounded seemings that are epistemically significant. Swinburne (2004) delineates five kinds of religious experience, three of which appear to potentially include grounded seemings. For instance, there are cases where a “subject has a religious experience in having certain sensations private to himself, sensations of a kind describable by the normal vocabulary used for describing the sensations that result from the use of our five senses” (299). An example of this sort might be someone having an apparition of Jesus that includes visual sensations.<sup>47</sup> Space considerations prevent me from considering these sorts of cases in detail, but I suspect that focusing on them is more promising than focusing on the sorts of religious seemings discussed above. In any case, Tucker’s account would have little

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<sup>47</sup> For particular examples and discussion see, e.g., Wiebe (1997).



to say about these cases, whose evidential impact may differ widely, whether or not the strength of the subject's seeming is the same. Further, we should be open to the possibility that experience can be epistemically significant in the context of religious experience even if subjects lack religious seemings. Like in the three cases of section 4, a subject may have an experience, but fail to see its epistemic significance (and so fail to have a seeming). I suggest that religious epistemologists focus more epistemological attention on the phenomenology of religious experience.

## **9. Conclusion**

Phenomenal conservatism (PC<sub>J</sub>, PC<sub>E</sub>, RC) is implausible given the conception of seemings employed by Tucker and other authors using the principle in religious epistemology. While ordinarily seemings and experiences (sensory, introspective, memorial) align (e.g. having a visual sensation of a tree and having a seeming that a tree is before me), there are instances where the two clash. Using the three cases above, I've argued that seemings that don't align with experience do not provide evidence or justification for believing their content. But seemings grounded in experience provide evidence or justification. The religious seemings mentioned by Tucker and others don't appear to be grounded, according to the two accounts of grounding I sketched above. Of course, it is open to Tucker and others to propose alternative accounts of grounding that may imply that the seemings he has mentioned are grounded in experience. However, I suggest a more fruitful approach is to focus more on the different phenomenology of religious experiences.

## Chapter 4

### The Irrationality of Pluralistic Ignorance

Pluralistic ignorance has received much attention in recent years in formal and social epistemology. Roughly, pluralistic ignorance is a social-psychological phenomenon in which an agent believes that their attitudes, feelings, and beliefs are different from those of others, despite the fact that their public behavior is identical.<sup>48</sup> Bjerring et al. (2014) argue that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance can be and often are epistemically rational. In this paper I argue that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are epistemically irrational. In order to show this, I first explicate the account of pluralistic ignorance that Bjerring et al. offer. Next, I respond to their argument for the rationality of pluralistically-ignorant agents. Third, after arguing that their account of pluralistic ignorance neglects a crucial feature, I offer a defeat-based argument against the epistemic rationality of pluralistic ignorance that draws on this feature. Next, I examine an objection derived from the work of Miller and McFarland (1987, 1991) that claims that pluralistically-ignorant agents do not hold a defeated belief. Finally, I respond to an objection that claims that pluralistically-ignorant agents are not necessarily irrational.

#### 1 Bjerring et al. on Pluralistic Ignorance

To get a better grasp of the phenomenon, it will help to start with some examples. Drawing from examples in the literature on pluralistic ignorance, Bjerring et al. (2014, p. 2448) present the following paradigmatic cases:

##### Classroom Case

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<sup>48</sup> See Bicchieri (2006, pp. 186-188).

A teacher has just finished presenting some difficult material in class and asks the students whether they have any questions. Although each student does not fully understand the material, no one asks a question. Based on the observation that no student in the class asks a question, each student believes that everyone but him believes that  $[\neg P]$  the material was not difficult. To avoid being publicly displayed as the only one who did not understand the material, no student dares ask a question.

### **College Drinking Case**

A group of freshmen students have just arrived at their new dorm. At the inauguration party, each student drinks excessively, although each student in fact believes that  $[P]$  drinking is not enjoyable. Upon observing the excessive drinking of others, however, each student forms the belief that everyone but him believes that  $[\neg P]$  drinking is enjoyable. To avoid being publicly displayed as the boring one, every student continues to drink excessively at the party.

### **Emperor's Case**

In Hans Christian Andersen's fable "The Emperor's New Clothes" (1837), we meet two impostors who sell imaginary clothes to an emperor. They claim that those who cannot see the clothes are either not fit for their office or just truly stupid. In fear of appearing unfit for his office and truly stupid, the emperor—as well as everyone else—pretends to be able to see the garment. Yet, everyone believes that  $[P]$  the emperor is in fact naked. Based on the observation that everyone acts as if the emperor is dressed, however, each person forms the belief that everyone but him believes that  $[\neg P]$  the emperor is dressed. To avoid being publicly labelled as someone who is unfit for his office or truly stupid,

everyone pretends that the emperor is dressed—except for the little boy who after a while cries out: “but the emperor has nothing on at all!”

With these sorts of examples in mind we can provide a more formal characterization of pluralistic ignorance. Perhaps the most formal and detailed characterization of the nature of pluralistic ignorance comes from Bjerring et al. (2014). Consequently, their account can serve as a nice starting point for discussing the epistemic rationality of pluralistic ignorance. In light of the above cases, Bjerring et al. take pluralistic ignorance to characterize social situations in which “group[s] of individuals all have the same attitude toward some proposition or norm, all act contrary to this attitude, and all wrongly believe that everyone else in the group has a certain conflicting attitude to the proposition or norm” (Bjerring et al. 2014, p. 2446). More specifically, after examining three other accounts and finding them wanting, they propose (Bjerring et al. 2014, p. 2558):

(PI) “Pluralistic ignorance” refers to a situation where the individual members of a group

(i) all believe some proposition  $P$ ;

(ii) all believe that everyone else believes  $\neg P$ ;

(iii) all act as if they believe  $\neg P$ ;

and where

(iv) all take the actions of the others as strong evidence for their belief that the latter

believe  $\neg P$ .<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For the sake of clarity, (PI) is a slightly amended version of their (PI<sub>4</sub>).

My question is whether the belief in (ii) is epistemically rational.<sup>50</sup> Bjerring et al. make the case that it can be and often is epistemically rational for agents to conform to condition (ii).<sup>51</sup> In the following section I'll consider their argument for this claim.

## 2 Bjerring et al.'s Defense of the Epistemic Rationality of Pluralistic Ignorance

Why might one think that the belief in (ii) is epistemically rational? In attempting to establish the possibility that pluralistically-ignorant agents are epistemically rational, Bjerring et al. (2014, p. 2463) consider the following question: “[W]hich epistemic factors can help explain why an agent ignores—or at least assigns a very low credence to—the possibility...that other agents in the social group, like him, do not reflect their private beliefs in their public behavior?” They take it that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance have two main items of evidence concerning what others in the group believe. First, agents have *observational evidence*: they are observing others act as if they believe  $\neg P$  (e.g. that drinking is enjoyable). Second, agents know from simple reflection that they themselves are acting contrary to their belief that  $P$  (e.g. that drinking is not enjoyable) and that it's possible that other people are doing the same. Bjerring et al. describe the latter as *introspective evidence*. So in order to determine whether the agent's belief that others believe that  $\neg P$  is epistemically rational, we need to ask “whether the agent's observational evidence outweighs his introspective evidence. If it does, we have an explanation of why the agent...has epistemic reasons to ignore the possibility that the actions of others do not truly reflect what they believe” (Bjerring et al. 2014, p. 2464).

Bjerring et al. hold that there are cases where an agent's observational evidence outweighs her introspective evidence. They say, “In most cases of pluralistic ignorance, it seems,

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<sup>50</sup> Like Bjerring et al., I'll take “epistemically rational” to be synonymous with “epistemically justified.”

<sup>51</sup> They also argue that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance may be pragmatically and all-things-considered rational.

an agent has indeed good epistemic reasons to give more weight to his observational evidence than to his introspective evidence” (Bjerring et al. 2014, p. 2464). They think the College Drinking Case is just such an example (Bjerring et al. 2014, p. 2464):

In standard cases such as the College Drinking Case, agents lack any observational evidence for seriously doubting that the group’s behavior does not reflect what each member in the group in fact believes. In the College Drinking Case, there is no striking conflict between the agent’s belief that drinking is not enjoyable, his observations of the group’s behavior, and his higher-order belief that everyone but him finds drinking enjoyable. Rather, the agent’s observations of the excessive drinking in the group makes it epistemically rational for him to maintain the higher-order belief in question. If so, it is sensible to hold that the agent’s observational evidence outweighs his introspective evidence in these sorts of cases...<sup>52</sup>

This argument fails, though, because it does not acknowledge that some evidence is capable of epistemically undercutting other evidence or beliefs. When an item of evidence functions in this way, it acts as an *undercutting defeater*, a “reason[ ] to question whether your evidence or reasons or grounds for a belief actually indicate that the belief is true” (Bergmann 2006, p. 159). Bjerring et al. appear not to countenance undercutting defeaters. However, we can see why undercutting defeaters should be acknowledged by contrasting two examples, one in which two competing sets of evidence are on a par, and another in which one set of evidence defeats a competing set. For the first case, suppose that, Lisa, one of my colleagues, tells me that

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<sup>52</sup> Bjerring et al. allow that examples such as the Emperor’s Case will likely make agents who continue to be pluralistically-ignorant epistemically irrational. The reason is that, in addition to their introspective evidence that they act as if they believe  $\neg P$ , though they believe  $P$ , and that others may well be doing the same, they have observational evidence that the emperor is naked. This, combined with the thought that other people’s perceptual faculties are working properly, gives the agent a strong reason to deny that everyone else believes that the emperor is clothed. Such an agent cannot be epistemically rational in continuing to be pluralistically-ignorant.

it's raining out. Another, Aldo, tells me that it's not. In coming to a conclusion about whether it's raining on the basis of this information, epistemic propriety might require that I simply weigh the testimony of Lisa against that of Aldo. But consider another case, one in which I visit a furniture store, seem to see a red table in front of me, and, on the basis of that visual experience, form the belief that there is a red table before me. A minute later I'm told by a sales clerk that there is actually a red light shining on the table that I'm looking at. Unlike the first case, this case involves defeating evidence: the testimony of the sales clerk is an undercutting defeater of my observation-based belief that the table in front of me is red. Consequently, upon receiving this testimony, I can no longer rationally believe that the table is red; the new evidence disqualifies the old, rendering it epistemically impotent, unlike in the previous case. As I'll argue below, many cases of pluralistic ignorance involve agents who have an irrational belief due to an undercutting defeater.

### **3 A Defeat-Based Argument Against the Rationality of Pluralistic Ignorance**

My argument against the epistemic rationality of agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance draws on a feature of these situations not mentioned in (PI). The latter account is importantly incomplete in that it does not recognize that, as in the examples from Bjerring et al. and those in the wider literature on pluralistic ignorance, non-conformity on the part of pluralistically-ignorant agents is potentially costly. That is, agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance act as if they believe  $\neg P$  because there is a perceived risk associated with acting on their actual belief that  $P$ . This perceived risk varies from one case to another, but it concerns the potential social cost of actions that reflect the agent's frame of mind. The classic cases of pluralistic ignorance discussed in Prentice and Miller (1993), Miller and McFarland (1987, 1991), Kauffman (1988), Matza (1964), Schanck (1932), Katz and Allport (1931), and Andersen (2000) all have this

feature.<sup>53</sup> Consider a couple examples. Bjerring et al.'s College Drinking Case involves students who act as if they like drinking “to avoid being publicly displayed as the boring one” (2014, p. 2448). Kauffman (1988, p. 246-248) finds that many prison officers occasionally have sympathetic attitudes toward inmates, but disguise these attitudes by adopting a cold and indifferent façade on the job. The reason they adopt this façade is, in part, that they fear rejection from their fellow officers if they show sympathy toward inmates. Another reason that (PI) is inadequate concerns the fact that pluralistic ignorance is commonly recognized as an explanation for the existence and persistence of unpopular social norms. Unlike (PI), an account of pluralistic ignorance that acknowledges that agents face potential social costs when deciding whether to conceal their belief that P is able to do this explanatory work. Thus, the following revised version of (PI) is a more accurate account of pluralistic ignorance:

(PI') “Pluralistic ignorance” refers to a situation where the individual members of a group

(i) all believe some proposition P;

(ii) all believe that everyone else believes  $\neg$  P;

(iii) all act as if they believe  $\neg$  P **because of a perceived potential social cost;**

and where

(iv) all take the actions of the others as strong evidence for their belief that the latter believe  $\neg$  P.

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<sup>53</sup> Note that while Andersen (2000) doesn't describe his story as a case of pluralistic ignorance, it is taken as a standard example by, e.g., Bicchieri (2006) and Bjerring et al. (2014).



The following example, which is similar to the Emperor's Case, provides a dramatic illustration of a situation in which the perceived risk of acting on one's beliefs is especially elevated:

### **Dictator Case**

Dictator has a cabinet of 30 advisors. Dictator has selected his advisors for the purpose of providing input in various matters concerning the operations of the state. He is known to treat advisors with whom he disagrees with great cruelty, sentencing some of them to death. Recently, Dictator has aired a policy idea to his advisors. Advisor A believes that [P] Dictator's policy is unsound, but is quick to voice support for it in meetings, much like the rest of A's fellow advisors. Based on their outward behavior and positive statements about Dictator's policy, Advisor A believes that everyone but her thinks that  $[\neg P]$  the policy is sound.

Is Advisor A's belief that everyone but her agrees with Dictator epistemically rational? Recall that she formed this belief by observing the pro-policy behavior of her fellow advisors. Given this fact, it seems that the rationality of her belief is undermined by an undercutting defeater. After all, she believes

B: Everyone else believes that  $[\neg P]$  Dictator's policy is sound.

But she has a reason to think that the ground of this belief (observations of other people's behavior) is not a reliable indicator of truth under the circumstances. That is, she has good reason to believe

D: My fellow advisors would act as if they believe that  $\neg P$  whether or not they actually do.

Advisor A's support for D is strong because, she realizes, if the other advisors are anything like her, they wish to avoid the high risks of speaking out. While under normal circumstances Advisor A would rationally take people acting as if  $\neg P$  to be evidence that they in fact believe  $\neg P$ , she cannot rationally do so here. The reason is that she is well aware of the fact that an advisor who believes that P would have a very good reason to misrepresent what they believe in order to save their neck. Note that this diagnosis is not mere speculation on her part, for all she needs to do is attribute to others the kind of practical reasoning she herself performed. Assuming that Advisor A has no reason to doubt that other advisors are rational and care about their well-being, her belief that B is epistemically irrational.

Many instances of pluralistic ignorance conform to this characterization of the Dictator Case: the risk of acting in accordance with one's belief that P is high enough to warrant the belief that others reasoned in the same way and decided to act as if they believe that  $\neg P$ . However, not all instances of pluralistic ignorance are such. Take the Classroom Case. The student believes that

B2: Everyone else believes that [ $\neg P$ ] the material was not difficult.

Unlike in the Dictator Case, it seems the student doesn't have a compelling reason for thinking that the ground of this belief (observations of other people's behavior) is not a reliable indicator of truth under the circumstances. That is, he doesn't have a good reason to believe

D2: My fellow classmates would act as if they believe that  $\neg P$  whether or not they actually do.

Again, contrasting this case with the Dictator Case, Advisor A (like most of us) has very good reason to believe that very few people would be willing to risk their lives over a simple public policy disagreement. Thus, her evidence for D is strong. In contrast, the student (like most of us)

does not have good reason to believe that his classmates would be unwilling to accept the possible social costs associated with displaying their ignorance. For all the student knows, his classmates are willing to tolerate the possible social costs, such as embarrassment or disapproval for interrupting the lecture, if it means advancing their own learning. Thus, his evidence for D2 is fairly weak. If so, his belief that B2, if it is epistemically irrational at all, is not so for the same reason that Advisor A's belief that B is irrational.

Nonetheless, I think the student, like Advisor A, ought to withhold judgement regarding his belief that B2. In other words, both B and B2 are irrational to believe. The reason B is irrational for Advisor A is that she has an undercutting defeater for B. The reason that B2 is irrational for the student, however, is not that he, like Advisor A, has a reason to think that his evidence for B2 is misleading. Rather, the reason is that he cannot rule out the *non-remote possibility* that his evidence for B2 is misleading. Consider the student's evidence for B2. On the one hand, he observes his classmates acting as if  $\neg P$ . On the other, he knows that he himself is acting contrary to what he believes. This latter, introspective evidence raises the non-remote possibility that the student's evidence for B2 (his observations of others' behavior) is misleading. After all, the student knows that his own behavior is misleading in this scenario. Assuming he has no reason to think he is unique in this regard (we'll examine this assumption further in the next section), it is an open question whether or not the behavior of his peers regarding P is misleading or not.

If there is a non-remote possibility that his evidence for B2 is misleading, then the student should suspend judgement regarding B2. Consider a version of the example offered in the previous section. Suppose that, after having formed a belief that the table before me is red (on the basis of my visual experience) and before I encounter the sales clerk, I read the price tag

attached to the table, which says at the bottom, “Note that this table may not be colored as it appears. This store occasionally switches to non-ordinary lighting colors throughout the week.” Assuming there is no immediate way for me to tell whether the lighting conditions in the store are ordinary or not, I should withhold belief regarding the color of the table. And this is so even though I don’t have enough evidence to think that my visual experience as of a red table is misleading, just that it’s a non-remote possibility that it’s misleading. Things are similar in the Classroom Case. Given that it’s a non-remote possibility that the behavior of his peers regarding P is misleading, the student ought to refrain from believing (on the basis of his observations of his peers’ behavior) that his peers believe that  $\neg P$ . The rational thing for him to do, like Advisor A, is to suspend judgement regarding B2.

These considerations generalize to other standard cases of pluralistic ignorance. In some of these, such as the Dictator Case, the agent has a reason to think that her observational evidence concerning what others believe is misleading. In these cases, agents have an undercutting defeater for their belief that others believe that  $\neg P$  (mentioned in (ii)). Other cases are like the Classroom Case: while agents don’t have a reason to think that their observational evidence is misleading, their belief that others believe that  $\neg P$  is still irrational because there is a non-remote possibility that their observational evidence is misleading. This non-remote possibility is present because the agent knows that her own behavior regarding P is misleading. Unless she has a reason to think that she is unique in this regard, reflection on her own case raises the non-remote possibility that the behavior of her peers is similarly misleading. But if so, then her belief that everyone else believes that  $\neg P$  is irrational. So, pluralistically-ignorant agents are not rational in believing (as they do in (ii)) that everyone else but them believes  $\neg P$ .

So, I am arguing that the rational doxastic attitude for an agent in a situation of pluralistic ignorance to take is that of withholding. But it might be objected that pluralistic ignorance, intuitively understood, could still obtain if agents adopted that attitude. That is, we could still have a case of pluralistic ignorance on our hands even if conditions (ii) and (iv) of (PI') were not met. For example, the student in the Classroom Case believes the lecture was difficult and, due to the threat of potential social costs, acts as if he thought it wasn't difficult. Would the situation be much different if we simply added that, on reflection, the student did not take the actions of others as strong evidence for what they believe about the lecture and, thus, refrained from believing that his classmates thought it difficult? After all, the student might still act in a way that conceals what he actually thinks about the lecture because he is unsure if others will share his assessment (even if he doesn't form the belief that they won't).

However, while this is an interesting scenario and may be worth further study, it should not be classified as a case of pluralistic ignorance. The idea that subjects believe that others disagree with them (not just believe that they *might* disagree) is indispensable to the concept of pluralistic ignorance, as it is generally understood. Halbesleben and Buckley (2004, p. 126), in their examination of the history of the study of the phenomenon, understand pluralistic ignorance as a "social comparison error where an individual holds an opinion, but mistakenly believes that others hold the opposite opinion." Other general characterizations in the literature also mention agents holding a mistaken view or having a misperception about what other agents believe. Interest in studying what is now called pluralistic ignorance grew out of Allport's (1924) work on the illusion of universality of opinions, "the tendency of individuals to believe that opinions are universally held by members of a social group" (Halbesleben and Buckley 2004, p. 128). An early detailed treatment of pluralistic ignorance is that of Katz and Allport (1931), which found

that a majority of students in their study believed that racial minorities should be admitted to fraternities, but (mistakenly) believed that others would not agree (Halbesleben and Buckley 2004, p. 128). Schanck (1932) explored the religious and ethical views of residents in a small community with a large Methodist presence and found that residents tended to think, with respect to a number of issues, that the others residents held more conservative views than they did. Discussions of pluralistic ignorance, from the start, have been concerned to study a believed self/other divergence in opinion. Cases where agents withhold, by contrast, don't involve any doxastic commitment on the part of the agent concerning whether her views differ from those of others in the group. For this reason, they should be classified differently.

Another reason not to treat cases of withholding as cases of pluralistic ignorance is that the two phenomena likely have distinct consequences. For example, in cases involving alcohol consumption among college students, Prentice and Miller (1993) found that subjects who mistakenly believed their peers to be more comfortable with drinking than themselves 1) felt alienated as a result of thinking their views diverged from the norm (both males and females); and 2) felt pressure to change their views over time to align with what they took their peers to believe about drinking (males). While I know of no literature that has directly studied what might result if a student simply withholds judgment about what their peers believe, it seems that in general these two consequences would be significantly less likely to result. For example, the work of Schroeder and Prentice (1998) points in this direction. The former examined the effects on subsequent drinking behavior of educating incoming college freshmen about pluralistic ignorance. The students who participated in the study were divided into two groups, one which was informed via group discussion that they may be overestimating how comfortable their peers are with drinking, another which engaged in non-peer individualistic discussion focused on

decision-making in a drinking situation. Schroeder and Prentice found that the first group of students reported drinking significantly less than the second. In theorizing about how, exactly, the first group of students may have been led to drink less, Schroeder and Prentice suggest that in drinking situations the former adopted a skeptical attitude with regard to whether their peers' drinking behavior revealed what the latter actually believed about drinking:

When they saw their peers looking relaxed with, and even amused by, excessive alcohol consumption, they knew enough to discount their perceptions. They knew that public acquiescence did not necessarily signal private acceptance. Thus, from the outset, these students probably experienced little social pressure to conform to local drinking practices (p. 1273).

Thus, it appears that, from how pluralistic ignorance has historically been understood in the literature and the distinct consequences that result from believing one's peers' views diverge from one's own, cases of withholding judgement about the attitudes of others in the group should not be treated as cases of pluralistic ignorance.

#### **4 A Defeater-Defeater?**

One might object to my analysis by claiming that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance have reason to think that they are not like their peers in relevant respects. So, the fact that they are misrepresenting themselves gives them no reason at all to think that others might be doing the same. Put differently, my objector might concede that we typically have no reason to doubt that we are like other members of our peer group in relevant respects, but insist that subjects in states of pluralistic ignorance do have a reason to doubt that they are like everyone else in relevant respects. That is, my objector might claim, they are typically in possession of a *defeater-defeater*, a reason that removes (defeats) the rationality-defeating power of the original defeater.

To illustrate, let's return to the furniture store example. Suppose that just as the sales clerk is finished telling me that a red light is shining on the table I'm looking at, a group of her co-workers walks over to the conversation. While they are all chuckling, one of them speaks up: "She's pulling your leg. She's been saying that to all of the customers who've been looking at that table." This new testimonial evidence serves to defeat the rationality-defeating power of the original sales clerk's testimony. The result is that my belief that the table before me is red, formed on the basis of its appearing to be red, is now as rational as it was before I heard the sales clerk's testimony. One might propose that such a situation obtains in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance. If so, then pluralistically-ignorant subjects' beliefs about what others believe can be rational after all.

What might this defeater-defeater be? One might claim that the agent has a reason to think she is *unique* in relation to her peers. Miller and McFarland (1987, 1991) provide a fairly detailed, experimentally supported, account of the cognition of agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance. One of their conclusions is that:

...people believe that they possess a greater degree of traits that lead to social inhibition than does the average other. We proposed that it is people's belief that they are generally more bashful, hesitant, self-conscious, and so on than the average other that leads them to infer the situationally specific differences between self and others that constitute pluralistic ignorance (Miller and McFarland 1987, p. 300).

Relatedly, Miller and McFarland (1991, p. 298) say that people generally think they are more fearful of embarrassment than the average other. For the sake of specificity, let's take the subject's uniqueness belief to be the following:



FE: Fear of embarrassment is a more potent determiner of my behavior than the behavior of others.

Contrary to my proposed analysis, pluralistically-ignorant agents see themselves as unique in this way and so don't take the fact that they are misrepresenting themselves to make it any more likely that others might do the same. On this view, they would properly take the fact that other people act as if they believe  $\neg P$  to be strong evidence that they do in fact believe  $\neg P$ . Thus, FE serves to reinstate the full evidential force of the observed behavior of others by casting doubt on propositions like D and on the idea that it is a non-remote possibility that others' behavior is misleading. But if so, then pluralistically-ignorant agents can be epistemically rational in believing propositions like B and B2 in light of their observational evidence. As Miller and McFarland (1991, p. 298) say, "If people believe that they possess a greater degree of a particular trait than does the average other, it seems reasonable for them also to expect that their behavior in situations that engage that trait would be different from that of the average other." Given that subjects believe FE, it is reasonable that they would take the behavior of others at ordinary face value and believe that others believe  $\neg P$ .

This objection is unsatisfactory, however, for we can ask about the rationality of FE. It seems that Miller and McFarland are inclined to say that, given that a subject holds FE, it's reasonable for him or her to take the observed behavior of others (acting as if  $\neg P$ ) at ordinary face value and believe something like

EB: Everyone else but me believes  $\neg P$ .

The agent would reason that if others believed P, then that belief would be reflected in their behavior, given that nothing like FE applies to them. It's epistemically reasonable to infer EB from FE and the observed behavior of others. However, our question is whether FE is believed

rationally in the first place. If it is not, then subjects are epistemically irrational in believing EB.<sup>54</sup> Miller and McFarland seem to think that FE can be rationally believed. They remark that “people have access to more cues pertaining to the presence of internal traits in self than in others.” Or, put slightly differently, “...individuals have more data relevant to the existence of internal traits in self than in others” (Miller and McFarland 1987, p. 301). In an important sense, then, agents’ belief in FE is based on the evidence they have.

But Miller and McFarland’s remarks do not show that the belief that FE is rational. While the agent’s evidence about their internal traits makes rational their belief that *their own* behavior is in many cases influenced by fear, it does not rationally allow them to form any views regarding the extent that fear influences the behavior of *others*. It certainly does not allow them to rule out the possibility that others’ behavior is also in many cases influenced by fear. At most, this internal, introspective evidence supports something like

FE\*: Fear of embarrassment is a potent determiner of my own behavior.

Thus, the fact that agents’ belief in EB is (typically) based in part on an irrational belief in FE implies that their belief in EB is not rational.

While the work of Miller and McFarland might be good as a descriptive account of the psychology of pluralistically-ignorant agents, it is not adequate as a normative account. Their work helps us to see why agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance form the beliefs they do about what others believe. But it does not vindicate the epistemic rationality of pluralistically-ignorant agents. Rather, their work helps us to locate the source of epistemic irrationality in such agents. Instead of showing that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance have a defeater for

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<sup>54</sup> It’s a fairly uncontroversial constraint on inferentially-justified belief that if one’s belief that P is to be justified on the basis of an inference from Q, then Q needs to be justified. Both “inferential internalists” and “inferential externalists” agree on this much.

their defeater of the belief that everyone else believes  $\neg P$ , Miller and McFarland's work lends credence to the idea that typical agents are epistemically irrational. This is so whether the focus is on agents' belief in FE itself or on their inference to EB on the basis of (in part) FE.

One might object that subjects who form the belief that FE, whether or not as a result of cognitive biases, are more likely to act in a rational way. If they fear the potential consequences of letting others know they believe P, and if they use FE to infer EB, it seems to make sense for them to refrain from acting on their actual belief that P. In the College Drinking Case, students who believe FE will infer EB and, due to their fear of being considered boring by their peers, rationally refrain from displaying their view that drinking is not enjoyable. In other words, believing FE ultimately leads to prudentially rational action.<sup>55</sup> Further, one might argue that it's appropriate for subjects in situations of pluralistic ignorance to believe that FE because doing so confers a benefit to the group by increasing social integration. Social integration might occur because agents who believe FE (and use it to infer EB) will think their views sharply diverge from those of their peers and, thus, will be less likely to spread (what they think is) their deviant view to other members of the group.<sup>56</sup> In the College Drinking Case, students who believe FE will infer EB and, thus, think that nobody else shares their view that drinking is not enjoyable. Because of their fear of being considered boring, they will not spread what they take to be a deviant view to other members the group. As a result, the current uniform drinking norm of the group will remain intact.

While I do not deny that there may be cases in which agents' forming FE would lead to prudentially rational action or that agents' forming FE could lead to increased social integration

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<sup>55</sup> For an argument that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance can be prudentially rational to conceal their belief that P, see Bjerring et al. (2014, p. 2463).

<sup>56</sup> For a similar idea, see Noelle-Neumann (1974, p. 43).

for the group, the focus of this paper has been *epistemic* rationality, rather than prudential rationality. By “epistemic rationality” I have in mind the sort of rationality that one’s belief has when it is supported by (and formed on the basis of) one’s evidence. The fact that the belief that FE may lead to prudentially rational action, does not entail that that belief is epistemically rational. There are many situations in which it’s in an agent’s self-interest to believe something that is not supported by her evidence. Likewise, the fact that a widely shared belief increases social integration does not imply that the belief is supported by evidence. Further, even if the social integration resulting from agents’ believing FE is so beneficial as to be evolutionarily advantageous, it still does not mean that FE is supported by agents’ evidence. Some beliefs that lead to evolutionary advantages might well be adopted for reasons entirely unrelated to their truth-value or epistemic support.<sup>57</sup> But then it’s difficult to maintain the idea that agents’ belief that FE must be epistemically rational if it benefits the group.

### **5 Is Pluralistic Ignorance *Always* Epistemically Irrational?**

One might object that I haven’t shown pluralistic ignorance to be an epistemically irrational phenomenon because I haven’t shown that *all* pluralistically-ignorant agents are epistemically irrational. Rather, what I’ve shown is merely that *standard* instances of pluralistic ignorance involve epistemically irrational agents. By a “standard instance of pluralistic ignorance,” I mean a case that conforms to (PI’) and in which the agent’s epistemic position regarding other participants’ beliefs is comparable to that of the agents involved in cases commonly discussed in the literature on pluralistic ignorance. Now, not all cases of pluralistic ignorance are such.

Consider a case just like the Classroom Case, except that the instructor starts the lecture by stating that the upcoming lecture topic should be easy to understand and that in the last several

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<sup>57</sup> See, e.g., Churchland (1987, p. 548-549).

years, every previous student who has heard it had no trouble grasping it. The instructor's statement is false, but seems sincere and accurate. In this case (call it the *Deceitful Instructor Case*), it appears that the student believes rationally that the other students believe the material was not hard. Or consider a case in which pluralistically-ignorant agents have evidence for FE. Suppose each individual's therapist has informed them that they are more fearful than the average person. In this case (call it the *Informative Therapist Case*), it would be rational for these agents to take the behavior of others at face value and believe that they believe  $\neg P$ ; their own misleading behavior wouldn't give them a reason to be suspicious about whether others were doing the same.

While it seems reasonable to allow that the above cases are both genuine cases of pluralistic ignorance and that agents in such cases may be rational in believing that their peers believe  $\neg P$ , such cases differ from what I call standard cases. The cases in the wider literature on pluralistic ignorance exclude a significant feature that is present in the current examples. That is, standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are such that the only evidence the subject is using to form beliefs about what others in the group believe is what the subject can gather on *introspection* and the *observation* of others' behavior, perhaps along with some general folk psychological assumptions (e.g. that people's behavior regarding P generally reflects their attitude regarding P). But in the Deceitful Instructor Case and the Informative Therapist Case there is another source of evidence: the testimony of the professor and therapist, respectively. Thus, such cases should not be thought of as standard ones; they are not in the spirit of cases of pluralistic ignorance discussed in the literature. Now, I am not in a position to specify in a non-trivial way what demarcates standard cases from non-standard ones, mainly because it does not seem possible to formulate a precise criterion for what counts as admissible background

knowledge in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance. General beliefs about the kind of thing people fear are allowed, but specific beliefs about how fearful one is relative to others are not. Beliefs about what the teacher has said are acceptable, except when these beliefs concern a misleading statement the teacher made about the difficulty of the material. The task of specifying what makes a piece of evidence admissible in a standard case of pluralistic ignorance seems hopeless.

However, standard cases do appear to differ importantly from non-standard ones. In the Deceitful Instructor Case and Informative Therapist Case, the agent's belief that others believe  $\neg$  P is clearly rational, and the rationality of this belief has a straightforward explanation: the agent possesses specific evidence warranting her belief. For this reason, the two non-standard cases do not raise the kind of puzzle that standard cases generate. Let me elaborate on this point a little further.

Pluralistic ignorance is commonly treated among those who study it as an undesirable state of affairs, one that (other things equal) ought to be dissolved.<sup>58</sup> The reason it is treated as such is that it often has bad consequences. For example, standard cases often perpetuate unpopular social norms. The College Drinking Case illustrates this. While most students prefer not to drink, most end up doing so due to the potential social costs of refraining. And this drinking behavior further supports the impression that most students prefer drinking, which continues to impel students to act contrary to their preferences and engage in behavior that may be harmful. By better understanding these cases we might hope to understand more about how to keep them from arising and/or dissolve them, thus preventing these bad consequences. My arguments against the epistemic rationality of pluralistic ignorance, if successful, contribute in a

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<sup>58</sup> See, e.g., Prentice and Miller (1993, p. 254) and Bicchieri (2006, pp. 193-196).

modest way to our understanding of the phenomenon by pointing out that pluralistically-ignorant agents epistemically err in a particular way. Given that they increase our understanding in this way, perhaps they further suggest that efforts to prevent or dissolve situations of pluralistic ignorance should address the cognitive biases of those involved. At any rate, since my discussion applies to the vast majority of actual cases, very little seems to be lost when it comes to solving the real-world problems associated with pluralistic ignorance; a discussion that covered all cases (both actual and possible) wouldn't amount to a significant improvement in this regard.

## **6 Conclusion**

In the course of arguing that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are epistemically irrational I argued that (PI) neglects an important feature of situations of pluralistic ignorance. That is, it ignores the fact that agents in such situations believe that there is a potential social cost to acting on their belief that P. I thus proposed (PI'), which in turn served as the basis of my defeat-based argument against the epistemic rationality of pluralistically-ignorant agents. Miller and McFarland's work, rather than casting doubt on my contention, helped us to locate the source of irrationality. My view is not that standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are irrational by definition. Rather, I define "standard cases" ostensibly by pointing to the extant literature on pluralistic ignorance, which happens to include cases that involve epistemically irrational agents.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

This dissertation concerned evidentialism. I have explicated key aspects of this approach and applied it to some issues. We've seen the difficulty of providing an explanatory account of the evidential fit relation that appeals to a state of awareness. In light of this difficulty, a new account was proposed. In addition, a view similar to evidentialism (i.e. phenomenal conservatism) was shown to be an inadequate way to defend the justification of certain types of religious beliefs. Finally, we've seen how evidentialism implies that agents in situations of pluralistic ignorance are epistemically irrational.

Explanationist evidentialists need not take propositional justification for  $p$  to require any sort of awareness of the explanatory connection between one's evidence and  $p$ . In fact, accounts of propositional justification that do require this sort of awareness appear to make it too easy for intuitively epistemically irrational subjects to be beyond reproach epistemically. In light of problems with these accounts, I proposed a new account, REF\*\*, according to which a proposition,  $p$ , fits one's evidence,  $e$ , just in case  $p$  either is part of the best explanation of  $e$  or is an explanatory consequence of part of the best explanation of  $e$ . REF\*\* is an important improvement over accounts like McCain's because only the former can withstand the awareness-based objections presented against REF\* in chapter 1.

My discussion aimed to show, in part, that denying an awareness requirement on propositional justification does not require the rejection of an awareness requirement for doxastic justification, something most internalists want to retain. Plausibly, an account of doxastic justification would invoke the notion of *basing*. Further research might consider in detail the nature of the basing relation. I gestured at an account of basing that involves a kind of awareness



(having a seeming about the explanatory connection between p and one's evidence) that would ensure that justifiedly believing that p requires an awareness of the connection between p and one's evidence. It might be a fruitful task to further develop this type of account of the basing relation.

My first application of evidentialism was to claims made about seemings in religious epistemology. I argued that phenomenal conservatism, a view similar to evidentialism, is implausible given the conception of seemings employed by Tucker and other authors using the principle in religious epistemology. While ordinarily seemings and experiences (sensory, introspective, memorial) align, there are instances where the two clash, or fail to have the appropriate kind of relation to each other. Using three cases, I argued that seemings that don't align with experience do not provide evidence or justification for believing their content. But seemings grounded in experience provide evidence or justification. The religious seemings mentioned by Tucker and others don't appear to be grounded, according to the two accounts of grounding I sketched in chapter 3.

I suggested a more fruitful approach was to focus on the different phenomenology of religious experiences. The reason, in addition the arguments I offered in the paper, is that I'm inclined to think a religious seeming often doesn't tell us a lot about the religious experience from which it arose. For example, it appears that the seeming that *God exists* could be grounded in (or not) many different types of religious experiences of varying degrees of evidential significance. My proposal is to focus on the phenomenology of the experiences from which the seemings arise (and perhaps those religious experiences from which no seemings arise). Part of

this involves taking another look at particular experiences that others have already written about<sup>59</sup>, with an eye toward considering them from different epistemological angles.

Finally, I put evidentialism to work in assessing the epistemic rationality of pluralistic ignorance. In the course of arguing that agents in standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are epistemically irrational I argued that one prominent account of pluralistic ignorance neglects an important feature of the phenomenon. That is, it ignores the fact that agents in such situations believe that there is a potential social cost to acting on their belief that P. I thus proposed an alternative account, (PI'), which in turn served as the basis of my defeat-based argument against the epistemic rationality of pluralistically-ignorant agents. Further, I argued that even if a pluralistically-ignorant agent does not have a defeater for her belief that everyone else believes  $\neg$  P, there is (in standard cases) a non-remote possibility that her evidence for this belief is misleading. But if so, her belief that everyone else believes  $\neg$  P is epistemically irrational. These arguments depend on the claim that agents' introspective evidence (about their own motives for concealing what they believe) raises the real possibility that their observational evidence (about what their peers believe) is misleading. In the absence of further evidence on the matter, agents should withhold judgement about what their peers believe regarding P. Miller and McFarland's work, rather than casting doubt on my contention, helped us to locate the source of irrationality. My view is not that standard cases of pluralistic ignorance are irrational by definition. Rather, I define "standard cases" ostensibly by pointing to the extant literature on pluralistic ignorance, which happens to include cases that involve epistemically irrational agents.

Evidentialism could be helpfully applied to other social phenomena. For example, there's been recent discussion about the extent to which epistemic notions such as knowledge and belief

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<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., Alston (1991) for examples of what he calls mystical experience.

could be applied to group agents. There's also been some discussion of group justification<sup>60</sup> and group defeat.<sup>61</sup> It would be interesting to explore whether evidentialism about group justification is as plausible as evidentialism about individual justification. Part of that exploration would involve trying to understand how key evidentialist notions (e.g. evidence-possession) could be applied to a collective.

Beyond the topics I've touched on in this dissertation, there is important future work to be done defending, explicating, and applying evidentialism. Some important challenges have been raised against evidentialism in recent years, including those from virtue epistemologists, reliabilists, and pragmatic encroachment theorists. An important task would be to respond to these challenges, in addition to considering the viability of hybrid versions of evidentialism that have been proposed in the wake of these challenges. Second, there is more work to be done fleshing out the thesis of evidentialism itself. For example, there is currently little work on the question of what it means to *possess* evidence. Finally, evidentialism is an appropriate guide in almost any arena where there are serious questions about the rationality of a person's beliefs.

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<sup>60</sup> See, e.g. Lackey (2016) and Silva (forthcoming).

<sup>61</sup> See Carter (2015).

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