

Phenomenal Conservatism and the Demand for Metajustification*

Rogel E. Oliveira

Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS)

School of Humanities

Graduate Program in Philosophy

Porto Alegre, RS

Brazil

rogeleoliveira@gmail.com

Article info

CDD: 121

Received: 30.06.2017; Revised: 01.11.2017; Accepted: 16.11.2017

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0100-6045.2017.V40N4.R0>

Keywords:

Phenomenal Conservatism

Metajustification

Direct Realism

Foundationalism

Epistemic Circularity

ABSTRACT

This paper is on the justification of (PC), the epistemic principle defended by M. Huemer in his Phenomenal Conservatism theory. Put in a straightforward way, we can (and should) ask: what reasons are there for thinking that (PC) is true, that is, for thinking that appearances justify beliefs? This question corresponds – to use L. Bonjour’s vocabulary – to the demand for a “metajustification”. The pursuit of this metajustification can take different directions, depending on the general conception or nature of epistemic justification we are working with and on who is supposed to satisfy the demand. Unfortunately, all of these directions seem to lead (PC) to a dead end. In other words, the apparently fair and even essential demand for a metajustification of (PC) cannot be met by the theory, at least in a satisfactory way. If we are right about that, it will remain the difficult question whether Phenomenal Conservatism is the only one (or even the right one!) to be blamed for this failure. We will briefly talk about that in the conclusion.

* I would like to thank CAPES for a postdoctoral (PNPD) scholarship, as well as the Graduate Program in Philosophy at PUCRS, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. This paper was possible thanks to the former’s financial support and to the latter’s exciting philosophical atmosphere.

As is well known, Michael Huemer (2001, 2006, 2007) has put forward an internalist¹ version of epistemic justification, which he calls “Phenomenal Conservatism” (for short ‘PC’), whose principle is:

(PC) If it seems to S as if P, then S has at least *prima facie* justification for believing that P. (2001, p. 99)

In a revised formulation, addressing criticisms made by Michael Tooley (cf. Huemer 2007, p. 30, note 1) that seemings or appearances² can sometimes be “weak” and “wavering”, Huemer’s principle now claims:

(PC-rev) If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has *at least some degree of* justification for believing that p.³ (2007, p. 30, italics added)

Whether in the original formulation or in its revised form, the principle clearly affirms (or implies) that an appearance that P *can be sufficient* for *prima facie*

¹ We will assume that the reader is familiar with the debate on internalism and externalism in Epistemology. Although Huemer defends his own characterization of internalism (see his 2006), we can adopt BonJour’s general characterization of internalism as the view that what justifies (epistemically) a person’s beliefs “must be something that is available or accessible to him or her”, that is, accessible “from the individual person’s first-person cognitive perspective” (2002, pp. 222-3). Externalism would deny this requirement. It is worth noting that Conee and Feldman have an alternative characterization of internalism – not completely incompatible with BonJour’s -, called by them “mentalism” (see their 2004, p. 55). As to *epistemic* justification, this is the kind of justification - in opposition to other kinds of justification (moral, etc.) - related to the aim of achieving truth and avoiding falsehood; or, alternatively, to the aim of achieving knowledge (*episteme*).

² Here, as in the work of Huemer’s, ‘seemings’ and ‘appearances’ are interchangeable.

³ We should not think that there is some substantial difference in the fact that now Huemer adds the condition “in the absence of defeaters”. Notice that in the first formulation Huemer had talked about “*prima facie* justification”. *Prima facie* justification is justification *not all things considered yet*, being therefore “defeasible” by some counterevidence (or “defeater”) the subject may have. If there is no such a defeater (or the defeater itself is defeated), the *prima facie* justification turns into justification *simpliciter* (or *ultima facie* justification). In this way, ‘*prima facie* justification’, in the first formulation, and ‘justification (*simpliciter*), in the absence of defeaters’, in the new formulation, are *equivalent*. What is new in the revised formulation is the fact that now Huemer adds “*some degree of justification*”.

justification (or justification *simpliciter*, in the absence of defeaters).⁴ Presumably, if the appearance is clear and strong enough, it *is* sufficient for justification (in the absence of defeaters). Huemer thinks that this principle governs the epistemological status not only of non-inferential (or basic, or foundational) beliefs, as it was originally thought by him, but also of *inferential* ones (see his 2007 for the new understanding). We should also note that some authors, like Michael Bergmann (2013, pp. 154-5 note 4), have pointed out that for Huemer appearances are not only sufficient but also *necessary* for justification, as one can infer from various passages of Huemer's work (although that is not inferred from the above principles themselves). In any case, our attention in this paper will be on the foregoing principles, as they state a sufficient condition for epistemic justification.⁵

One can be wondering, of course, about *what exactly* appearances are. Although there are many criticisms of this notion of Huemer's (see, for example, Tooley 2013, pp. 309-18), that will not be our concern here. For our purposes we can concede that appearances are – in Huemer's words – “a kind of propositional attitude, different from belief, of which sensory experience, apparent memory, intuition, and apparent introspective awareness are species” (2007, p. 30). We can also concede that they are “assertive mental representations”, in the sense that they “represent their content as actualized”, and that this constitutes their “forcefulness” (Huemer 2001, pp. 53-4, 66; cf. Tooley *op. cit.*, p. 309). In this paper, moreover, we will assume, for the sake of simplicity, that in general appearances are sufficiently strong and clear (unless

⁴ See the previous note for the notions of *prima facie* justification, justification *simpliciter*, and defeaters.

⁵ Note that sufficient and/or necessary *conditions* for epistemic justification are *not* the same thing as a *general characterization or conception of the nature* of epistemic justification (see Alston 2005, pp. 15ff). This difference will be important below. We can give a *general characterization of the nature* of epistemic justification when we defend, for example, that epistemic justification is that property of beliefs which is *truth-conducive*, making the belief “at least likely to be true” (a “truth-conducivity” conception); or, alternatively, when we say that epistemic justification is a matter of the subject being *responsible* or *blameless* in her believing, fulfilling her intellectual “duty” of seeking to achieve truth (a “deontological” conception) (*ibid.*). How these alternative characterizations relate to (PC) will become clear below.

stated otherwise), so that it will not matter if we refer to (PC) instead of (PC-rev), not considering, therefore, “degrees” of justification.

One important question, however, that we can raise – and which will be the focus of this paper – is about the *justification of (PC)*. Put in a straightforward way, we can (and should) ask: *what reasons are there for thinking that (PC) is true, that is, for thinking that appearances justify beliefs?* That seems a very fair question, and corresponds – to use Bonjour’s (1985, p. 9ff) vocabulary – to the demand for a “metajustification” (i.e., the justification of a principle of justification, by giving (good) reasons for thinking that the principle is true).⁶ In fact, the task of finding such a metajustification seems *essential* to any proposal of a purported principle of justification: to neglect this task, remarks Bonjour, “is to leave one’s epistemological theory quite unsupported at a crucial point, thereby rendering it ungrounded and essentially arbitrary from an epistemic standpoint.” (1985, p. 10).

But *how* exactly can (or should) this demand for metajustification be fulfilled? As we will see more clearly below, the pursuit of a metajustification can take different directions, depending on the *general conception or nature* of epistemic justification we are working with and on *who* is supposed to satisfy the demand.⁷ More specifically, it can take the following directions. First, it can assume a *truth-conducivity* conception of epistemic justification and then understand that the demand is to be satisfied by the *theory* or, which is the same, by the *epistemologist*. Second, still assuming a truth-conducivity conception of epistemic justification,

⁶ Bonjour’s sense of “metajustification” is narrower than the present proposal: it is “to provide an argument or rationale of some sort to show that [the] proposed standards of justification are indeed truth-conducive” (1985, p. 9). We understand that his sense of metajustification is a *particular case* – arguably the *main* one – of the present proposal, one that assumes that epistemic justification must be *truth-conducive*, but it is not the only one, since there is also another interpretation for epistemic justification (see below in the main text). Note also that, *on the metalevel*, justification (i.e., *metajustification*) means – at least, for now – “giving (good) reasons for thinking that the principle is true”, independently of the kind of justification stated in the principle for first level beliefs. One can disagree with this, of course, although it is not at all clear how to avoid giving reasons for the justification of an epistemic principle. More on this below.

⁷ Concerning the “general conceptions” of epistemic justification, we will follow Alston’s classification of the many proposals of epistemic justification into *two* main groups: the “*truth-conducivity*” group and the “*deontological*” group (2005, pp. 15f). See also note 5 above.

it can understand that the demand is to be satisfied by the *epistemic subject, S, herself*. Finally, it can abandon the truth-conducivity conception of justification and take up a *deontological* one – in this case, the epistemologist has to show that the subject, S, is “blameless” in following her own (S’s) appearances.⁸

Unfortunately, however, all of these directions seem to lead PC to a dead end, as we will see. In other words, the apparently fair and even essential demand for a metajustification of (PC) – *what reasons are there for thinking that (PC) is true?* – cannot be met by PC, at least in a satisfactory way. If we are right about that, it will remain the difficult question – briefly talked about in the conclusion –

⁸ Concerning *who* is supposed to satisfy the demand for metajustification, it is worth noting that there is some *ambiguity* and perhaps even *confusion* about that among the writers, as we will show below in the paper. Sometimes the *same author* assumes, in one passage, that the *epistemologist* should meet the demand, and then, in other passage or paper, that the *subject S* should do it, without indicating (and apparently realizing!) the shift. Sometimes it is not even clear whether the author is thinking of the epistemologist or, instead, the subject meeting the demand! And there is even the case where the author clearly defends that *both* the epistemologist *and* the subject should satisfy the demand, as is the case of BonJour in his (1985). This last case is worth quoting. First, concerning the *epistemologist*: “[I]t is incumbent on the proponent of such an epistemological theory to provide an argument or rationale of some sort to *show* that his proposed standards of justification are indeed truth-conducive” (1985, p. 9; his italics). Also: “[T]he main task of a theory of empirical knowledge divides into two parts, both equally essential. The first part is to give an account of the standards of epistemic justification; and the second is to provide what I will call a *metajustification* for the proposed account [...]” (ibid.; his italics). On the next page, however, BonJour adds, concerning the *epistemic subject*: “If a given putative knower is himself to be epistemically responsible in accepting beliefs in virtue of their meeting the standards of a given epistemological account, then it seems to follow that an appropriate metajustification of those standards must, in principle at least, be available *to him*. [...] Why should the fact that a metajustification can be supplied from the outside by an epistemologist, or is available in some other way which is beyond the believer’s own cognitive grasp, mean that his belief (as opposed to an analogous belief held by the outside observer) is justified?” (ibid., p. 10; his italics). It is not at all clear, however, whether BonJour was aware that the demand for metajustification can have *different consequences or results* when it is required of the “putative knower” or subject in comparison with when it is required of the epistemologist, as we will see below. To be sure, the difference seems to be more relevant in the case of a truth-conducivity conception of epistemic justification. That’s why we can ignore the “who” issue when considering the deontological conception.

whether PC is the *only* one (or even the *right* one!) to be blamed for this failure. A full discussion of this issue, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

1. A Truth-Conducivity Conception of Justification:

If we assume that epistemic justification (henceforth, just ‘justification’) must be *truth-conducive* – as many (if not most of) contemporary epistemologists do –, we will require that justification somehow *have or establish a (reliable) connection to truth*, even if fallible. Within an *internalist* framework, adopted by Huemer and Bonjour, among others – according to which what justifies a person’s belief must be accessible to him or her⁹ –, that assumption will imply that ‘to be justified in believing a proposition’ will mean, roughly, – to use Bonjour’s suitably broad characterization¹⁰ – that “there is good reason or basis for thinking that [the] belief [i.e., the proposition believed] [...] is true”, or “likely to be true” (2004, pp. 349 and 358 note 21), or “at least approximately true” (Bonjour and Sosa 2003, p. 5). So, on this interpretation, Phenomenal Conservatism can be taken as in fact claiming the following sufficient condition for justification (assuming S has no defeaters for believing that P):

(PC*) If it seems to S that P, then S has good reason or basis for thinking that *P* is true (or likely to be true).¹¹

A demand for *meta*justification requires that (PC*) itself be justified, that is, that there be good reasons for thinking that (PC*) is true, or, more exactly, good reasons for thinking that *an appearance or seeming* (that P) *is good reason or basis for thinking that the proposition (P) is true (or likely to be true)*. As we said before, that seems a fair (not to say “essential”) demand. After all, one should not accept

⁹ See also note 1 above.

¹⁰ This is a (suitably) “broad” characterization because by “reason or basis” Bonjour means “anything to which one has cognitive access”, *not* only another belief (2004, p. 349, n.2), allowing the possibility of a non-doxastic basis, like experiences or appearances. At the same time, the *truth-conducivity* constraint on justification is clear: it must be some good reason or basis for thinking that the belief is *true* or *likely to be true*.

¹¹ We use italics to *denote* propositions. So, ‘*P*’ means the same as ‘the proposition that P’.

(PC*) arbitrarily, without good reasons. But *who* exactly should satisfy this demand for metajustification?

1.1. *Metajustification required of the Theory or Epistemologist:*

We can consider that the demand for metajustification is to be satisfied by the *epistemological theory* or, which is the same, by the *epistemologist*. Bonjour's (2004) criticism of Phenomenal Conservatism (and of direct realism in general) as well as Huemer's (2007) response to it consider the demand in this way. In the section where he addresses this issue, Huemer (2007, pp. 50ff) does not use the exact form of (PC), (PC-rev), or even (PC*). Instead, he considers two other formulations that, in any case, should be understood as *other versions* of the *same* principle defended by Phenomenal Conservatism, *if* justification is explicitly understood in a truth-conducive way (and the term 'justified' is replaced accordingly). We will call them '(PC**)' and '(PC***)':

(PC**) If a belief is based on an appearance, then it is likely to be true. (ibid., pp. 50-51)¹²

And, in a "general proposition":

(PC***) Probably, most of the things that seem true to us are true. (ibid., pp. 52-53)

According to the present metajustificatory requirement, the epistemologist (i.e., Huemer) needs to give reasons for thinking that (PC**) and/or (PC***) are true. Let us start with (PC**). How can Huemer give reasons for (PC**)? More exactly, how can he give reasons for thinking that a belief based on an appearance

¹² We have replaced "has φ " in the original by "is based on an appearance", as the context suggests. It is worth noting that, although Huemer's principles (PC) and (PC-rev) – and also (PC*) – have to do with *propositional justification* (that is, a relation between a subject, S, and a *proposition*, regardless of S holding or not a belief), (PC**) has to do with *doxastic justification*, since it is about the justification of a *belief*. So, strictly speaking, (PC**) is a *doxastic* (and *truth-conducivity*) *version* of (PC) and (PC-rev). This shift, however, brings no harm for the discussion below. For more on the difference between propositional and doxastic justification, see Bergmann (2006, p. 4).

is likely to be true? According to Huemer himself (ibid., p. 51-2), he *cannot!* In fact, he *should not* even try to do it! For Huemer, it would be contrary to the “foundational” role of an appearance “to supply reasons” for thinking that a belief based on it is true. In other words, if an appearance is a source of *non-inferential* justification, we should not “demand reasons” for a belief based on it! Such a demand would “beg the question” against the foundationalist, since it assumes that a foundational belief is not in fact foundational! Comparing his position (i.e., direct realism) to the rationalist’s, he says:

The direct realist takes perceptual beliefs to be foundationally justified, no less than the rationalist takes intuitive beliefs to be foundationally justified. The direct realist view is *not* that we first notice that we have a perceptual experience with a certain character, and then infer that the external world is a certain way. And just as it would beg the question to object that the rationalist has failed to supply reasons for our intuitive beliefs, it would beg the question to object that the direct realist has failed to supply reasons for our perceptual beliefs. (Ibid., p. 52; his italics)

Huemer’s response can obviously be questioned. His objection might be right if we required reasons of the *believer* or *subject*, *S*, whose belief based on an appearance is purportedly foundational. But since we are considering the reasons that the *epistemologist* has to give for thinking that a subject’s belief based on an appearance is likely to be true, the accusation of begging the question seems misplaced. (After all, the epistemologist is expected to give an account (and a good one!) of the justification of *foundational* beliefs as much as he is expected to give an account of the justification of *inferential* beliefs, isn’t he? And how could he/she do that but by “supplying reasons”?). It is important to note, on this issue, that at one point of his article Huemer (ibid., p. 51-2) starts to use the *first person* plural (“*we* notice”, “*our* perceptual beliefs”) when talking about the foundational beliefs (see quotation above). This is certainly misleading, since it conflates the roles of the *epistemologist* and of the *epistemic subject*, allowing the kind of objection Huemer gives. In any case, let us see the answer that Huemer gives for the other formulation, (PC***).

Huemer (ibid., p. 52-4) thinks that to provide reasons for thinking that the “general proposition” (PC***) is true does not appear to beg the question as before. How can he, then, as an epistemologist, give reasons for thinking that the proposition

(PC***) Probably, most of the things that seem true to us are true
is true?

First, the theorist (i.e., Huemer) has to choose the notion of *probability* that he will work with. He could work, for example, with a *physical* concept of probability, like *frequency*. In such a case, presumably, the theorist would have to show that there is a *high proportion* of cases where things that seemed true to us were in fact true. But that is an *externalist* notion of justification – points out Huemer! –, appealing to “factors external to our minds” (ibid., p. 52). And Huemer, as an *internalist* epistemologist who “reject[s] externalism”, thinks Phenomenal Conservatism, an *internalist* theory of justification, could not be itself justified by epistemic *externalism*! So, this option is not available for him, as he recognizes it!¹³

The most interesting option for Phenomenal Conservatism, according to Huemer, seems to be an adoption of a *logical* or *epistemic* notion of probability, where ‘probability’ now means the degree to which one’s total evidence supports a given proposition.¹⁴ For Huemer, adopting this epistemic notion means that “the metajustificatory demand, applied to a particular epistemological theory, amounts in essence to a demand to show that we are *justified in believing* that most beliefs that are justified according to the theory are true.” (ibid., p. 53; his italics). So, according to Huemer, he has to show that “we” – presumably Huemer and his readers – are *justified* in believing the proposition “Most of the things that seem true to us are true”. How can he show that we are justified in believing this proposition? For Huemer (ibid., pp. 53f), there is no other way but to rely on PC itself! After all, PC is a “comprehensive theory” of justification - it purports to cover *all* cases of justification, even of *itself*! In this way, the theorist – Huemer – simply has to show that the proposition “Most of the things that seem true to us

¹³ One could object that an *externalist metajustification* (a *second-order* justification) might be compatible with an *internalist principle of justification* for *first-order* beliefs, provided the task of metajustification is met by the *epistemologist*, not the epistemic subject herself. We will not pursue this suggestion, however, since Huemer explicitly rejects it.

¹⁴ A *subjective* notion of probability, in terms of *degrees of belief*, would turn the metajustification demand into something very easy and trivial to satisfy, as Huemer points out: “if likelihood is just defined in terms of our degrees of belief, it is analytic that our beliefs are likely to be true” (2007, p. 53).

are true” *seems true to us!* As we should expect, for Huemer this general proposition *does* seem true – at least to him:

We might try to satisfy this demand from within the theory of justification in question. [...]. In the case of Phenomenal Conservatism, we might try to show that the proposition, "Most of the things that seem true to us are true," seems true to us, or is supported by things that seem true to us. Well, it certainly *seems to me* that most of the things that seem to me to be true are true. It seems to me that there is a table here, and that's true. It seems to me that $2 + 2 = 4$, and that's true. It seems to me that I exist, and that's true. When I think about examples like this, it seems to me that my appearances are reliable - in short, that most of them are true. (ibid., p. 53; his italics)

The above “argument” is clearly a form of *epistemic circularity* (cf. Alston 1986; Bergmann 2006, chapter 7). It *assumes* (not explicitly) that appearances *are a reliable source* of justification in order to show that appearances *are a reliable source* of justification! In other words, the argument *depends on X* in order to show that X is reliable! (cf. Bergmann 2006, pp. 179ff). Even if Huemer (2007, pp. 53f) could be right about the fact that a *comprehensive* theory of justification cannot avoid applying the theory to itself, the circularity here does not seem “benign” – to use Bergmann’s (2006) term –, since it is in a context in which it clearly begs the question against the critic of PC!¹⁵ Huemer should not rely on appearances to establish, against the critic of PC, that appearances are reliable! Huemer’s “argument”, in fact, shows *at most* that PC *is not incoherent with itself* or *self-defeating* – what is a desirable thing, of course! –, avoiding the embarrassing situation of a theory that, according to its *own criteria*, should not be accepted!¹⁶

So, what do we have so far? In trying to satisfy what seems to be a very plausible demand – the justification of a principle of justification, that is, the justification of (PC) in (at least) one of its several versions –, Huemer (and we) at

¹⁵ According to Bergmann (2006, cap. 7), epistemic circularity is “benign” when it is in a context in which there is *no doubt* or *question* about the reliability of the belief’s source. It is “malignant” when it is in such a context of doubt.

¹⁶ Logical Positivism’s “verifiability criterion of meaningfulness” could be charged of this sin!

first assumed two things, besides internalism: (i) justification is truth-conducive (in the sense of Bonjour's "having good reason or basis for thinking that *P* is true or likely to be true"); and (ii) the task of metajustification is to be satisfied by the theory or epistemologist. Where did he arrive? In one case, he could not do the task because doing that – according to him - would beg the question against the foundationalist (that is, against himself!). In another, he could not do it because he would have to base his *internalist* principle on epistemic *externalism!* In the last attempt, he clearly falls in "malignant" epistemic circularity, begging the question against the critic of PC!

What would happen if the demand for metajustification were to be satisfied by the *believer or subject* herself? Let us now see.

1.2. *Metajustification required of the Subject*

In a reply to DePoe (2011), Huemer (2011) addresses again the demand for metajustification. This time, however, he considers the case where the demand is to be satisfied by the *subject* – a "PC version" of Norman, the clairvoyant (cf. Bonjour 1985, pp. 41ff), whose faculty of clairvoyance, now, "works by producing appearances" (Huemer 2011, pp. 8ff). Norman has no idea about the reliability of his faculty, although it is in fact reliable: his beliefs based on his appearances are all true. The criticism against Huemer and PC is that Norman could *not* be justified in his beliefs, unless Norman had evidence (presumably, an argument) that his faculty is reliable. Norman lacks that. According to Bonjour/DePoe's criticism, from *Norman's perspective*, his beliefs are all *accidentally* true!

The metajustificatory demand, therefore, takes here this form: the believer or subject, *S*, has to have evidence – an argument – that her appearance-producing faculty(ies) is (are) reliable, otherwise *S*'s beliefs are not justified by her appearances. What is Huemer's response to this demand?¹⁷ For him, it is too demanding! "Ordinary people" have no argument for the reliability of sense perception, memory, etc., being "unable to provide any arguments" for these faculties (2011, p. 10). They have no "independent corroboration" for the beliefs produced by those faculties, accepting them "in the same unreflective way" as

¹⁷ Since Huemer is an *internalist*, he could not simply reply that it is enough that the faculty *is* reliable. That would be an *externalist* position!

Norman does. So, ordinary people are in the same situation as Norman's. If we impose on a subject such a demand, "then almost all beliefs held by almost everyone in history have been unjustified" (*ibid.*), what seems absurd. (Huemer does not use that word, but that is clearly suggested). In other words, this kind of metajustificatory demand should be abandoned. As for the problem of a belief's being accidentally true from S's perspective – explains Huemer –, we should only impose "a negative condition on justified belief: if S believes or has grounds for believing *P is at best accidentally true*, then S is not justified in believing *P*" (Huemer, 2013, p. 337; italics added; cf. *Idem*, 2011, p. 10-11).¹⁸

We could change, however, the form of the metajustificatory demand imposed on the subject. Instead of demanding from her an argument for the *reliability* of her appearance-producing *faculty(ies)*, we could focus on *particular appearances*. We could require that for S to be justified in believing that P based on an appearance that P, S has to have good reason, evidence, etc., for believing that the appearance is somehow relevant (epistemically) to the truth of P. This can seem very plausible initially. However, we have now a *big* problem – and it is not Huemer's fault!¹⁹ As we know from Fumerton (1995, p. 64) and Bergmann (2006, pp. 14ff), this kind of requirement boils down to the following form (put in terms of propositional justification):

(X) S is justified in believing that P only if (i) there is an X (e.g. an appearance) that is (epistemically) relevant to the truth of P and (ii) S is justified in believing that X is relevant to the truth of P.²⁰

¹⁸ By the way, this is Huemer's response to the dilemma offered by Bergmann (2006, pp. 13ff), concerning "The Subject's Perspective Objection", or SPO. We have replaced the brackets in the original by italics as the way to denote the proposition.

¹⁹ Huemer had already pointed out, concerning (PC**) above, that this requirement seems to beg the question against the foundationalist, according to whom we should not *demand reasons* for *foundational* beliefs. After all, such beliefs are (supposedly) *foundational!* Although we said this response seems misplaced when applied to the *epistemologist* (as opposed to the *epistemic subject*), it might be right when applied to the *epistemic subject*. Even so, a coherentist (e.g. Lehrer 2000) or infinitist (e.g. Klein 1999) - both *internalists* like Huemer – would still say we could "demand reasons" from the subject, even for beliefs based on (i.e., caused by) appearances!

²⁰ We are assuming that "to have good reason or evidence for believing that Q" is equivalent to "being justified in believing that Q" (assuming there are no defeaters).

As is now clearer, this kind of requirement gives rise to an *infinite regress* that is quite bad, because it involves not only an infinite number of levels of justification, but also an infinite number of levels of justification “of ever-increasing complexity”, to quote Fumerton (1995, p. 64). After all, to be justified in believing that P (based on X, an appearance), S has to be justified in believing that *X (an appearance) is relevant to the truth of P*. But to be justified in believing that *X is relevant to the truth of P*, (i) there must be a Y (another appearance?) that is (epistemically) relevant to the truth of *X is relevant to the truth of P* and (ii) S must be justified in believing that *Y is relevant to the truth of [X is relevant to the truth of P]*. And so on. Of course, nobody deserves such a requirement! We should reject this demand as unachievable, at least for us, human beings.²¹

So, what do we have now? Assuming a *truth-conducivity* notion of justification as well as the understanding that the metajustificatory demand is now to be satisfied by the *subject*, Huemer and PC get *either* to the unacceptable conclusion that almost everyone in history has been *unjustified* in their beliefs because ordinary people simply lack an argument for the reliability of their appearance-producing faculties²² - which seems absurd, Huemer suggests -, *or* to the situation of an infinite regress of levels of justification of “ever-increasing complexity”, which is unachievable for human beings. Either way, we have the same negative result.

Perhaps, the metajustificatory demand might be satisfied if (and only if) we abandon the truth-conducivity notion of justification and take up a *deontological* one. That is what we will try to do.

That’s why we say that the new requirement “boils down” to this formula. The fact that this formula concerns *propositional* justification (as opposed to *doxastic* justification discussed by Fumerton (op. cit.) and Bergmann (op. cit.)) brings no harm for our point. For the difference between propositional and doxastic justification, see note 12 above.

²¹ Rogers and Matheson (2011) and Crisp (2009) do not think that such a regress is vicious. We won’t discuss their papers here, though. Most philosophers would agree that such a condition should be avoided.

²² Besides the fact that, according to Alston (1993), we cannot argue for the reliability of sense perception without falling in epistemic circularity!

2. A Deontological Conception of Justification and the Metajustification of PC:

If we give up the constraint that justification is a matter of having (objectively speaking) “good reason or basis for thinking that a belief is true”, in BonJour’s words, adopting instead a notion that justification is a matter of being *blameless* in our epistemic “duty” of achieving truth (cf. Plantinga 1993, pp. 11ff), PC might perhaps be more fortunate in satisfying the metajustificatory demand. In fact, although Huemer does not explicitly say that, his main arguments for PC (mentioned briefly below) could be understood as presupposing this deontological notion of justification (see BonJour 2004, p. 360, n. 23). In this way, the metajustificatory task now would be for *the epistemologist to show that an epistemic subject, S, is not “guilty” or “blameworthy” when holding beliefs based on her appearances.*²³ To be more exact, the epistemologist – in our case, Huemer – would have to give reasons for holding this *deontological version* of (PC), which we can call ‘(PCd)’:

(PCd) If it seems to S that P, then, if S has no defeaters, S is not (epistemically) blameworthy in believing that P.

We will not discuss here Huemer’s “Self-Defeat Argument” (2007, pp. 39ff), which deserves a separate paper. In any case, it has received many criticisms (cf. DePoe, 2011; Hasan, 2013), and even some proponents of PC do not accept it (cf. Tucker 2013, p. 9). On the other hand, his “Internalist Intuition Argument” (see Huemer 2006, pp. 149ff) fits in very well here. Basically, Huemer defends PC by pointing out that, when two propositions *P* and *Q* “seem alike”, from S’s perspective, “in all epistemically relevant respects”, it would be “intuitively irrational” if S had *different* doxastic attitudes towards them (ibid.). It would even be “absurd” for S to report: ‘*P* and *Q* seem alike for me in all epistemically

²³ To be exact, the deontological notion of justification fits in well on the *first level*, that is, the level of the *subject’s* beliefs. On the *meta-level*, that is, the level of the *epistemologist*, or of the *theory or principle*, however, it seems that we continue with a notion of “good reason or basis for thinking that the proposition (or principle, or theory) is true”, when talking about (meta)justification. In effect, it would be awkward to say that the epistemologist (or a theory) is “blameless” in holding that the subject is blameless! Although some may not share this intuition, this point does not seem to impair what follows.

relevant respects, but I believe *P* and disbelieve *Q*?. So, any epistemological theory (either externalist or even internalist) that claims or implies that appearances are *not sufficient* for justified belief and that the subject should (also) follow other criteria of justification would be liable to such bizarre cases, imposing on S such irrationality. (Any other criterion would be, by hypothesis, beyond S's appearances, and so it would justify that kind of "absurd" report by S!). This seems to be a good argument, based on a clear "intuition".

As we said above, this argument fits in very well with a demand for metajustification when we consider justification as a matter of not being blameworthy. In fact, when S follows her appearances – and appearances are *all* that she ultimately has, reminds us Huemer, including the appearances of defeaters –, it seems right to recognize that S is not epistemically blameworthy in her believing. She is doing her *best* – all that we should expect from her, epistemically speaking, she is fulfilling. (PCd), therefore, seems *justified*.²⁴

Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that this is all true. (PCd), the deontological version of PC, was *shown* to be true. Is the demand for metajustification satisfied for the sake of PC? A positive answer for this question may still be very controversial. If one sticks to the (previous) understanding that *epistemic* justification has to be *truth-conducive*, and not (merely) deontological, one will not see the demand as satisfied. That is Bonjour's complaint, which is worth quoting:

If there were in fact no way to discriminate among seemings with respect to whether they yield genuine reasons for thinking that the corresponding claims are true, then it would be plausible enough that a person who accepted beliefs on the basis of seemings generally would be epistemically blameless simply because that is the only epistemic alternative that would be open. As I have argued elsewhere, however, being epistemically blameless (or satisfying other similar deontological requirements) is not enough for genuine epistemic justification: the aim of epistemic

²⁴ In fact, this may not be really true. As Richard Swinburne (2001) has defended, there is a kind of "diachronic" justification that is extremely important. That means that the subject S has to engage herself in serious *investigation* concerning *P* in order to be (diachronically) justified in believing that *P*. So, thinking in *deontological* terms, S may follow her appearances but be "blameworthy" for not fulfilling her "duty" of engaging in serious investigation. In this way, (PCd) can be true (at most) if we are talking about "synchronic" justification.

justification is truth, and the connection between blamelessness and truth is far too tenuous. (2004, p. 360, n.23)

BonJour concludes: “That we have nothing better to rely on, even if this is (as I doubt) genuinely the case, does not show that the best we have is good enough.” (ibid., p. 360).

So, if BonJour’s verdict is correct – many epistemologists would certainly agree with his remarks –, then the deontological path is not a “genuine” one for metajustification. We have to come back!

Conclusion

Where did we arrive, then? What have we got from Huemer’s efforts for metajustification? Let us review our wanderings with Huemer.

Everything started with a seemingly *plausible* and *fair* demand for justification of a principle of justification - (PC) -, that is, a metajustification. After all, we should not accept any principle of justification, like (PC), arbitrarily. We followed Huemer in his attempts to show, for the sake of PC, that such a demand is satisfied. The choices or directions available for Huemer were to take up either a truth-conducivity conception of (epistemic) justification or a deontological one. Especially in the first alternative, he had further to choose between understanding that the demand was to be satisfied by the epistemologist and understanding that it was to be satisfied by the subject. All directions got to a dead end:

The *truth-conducivity/epistemologist* direction led Huemer either to, according to him, begging the question against the foundationalist (i.e., against himself), or to externalism (also against himself!), or to malignant epistemic circularity, begging the question against his critics. The *truth-conducivity/subject* direction led him either to the unacceptable conclusion that almost everyone in history has been *unjustified* in their beliefs because they lack arguments for the reliability of their appearance-producing faculties, or to the unachievable infinite regress of levels of justification of ever-increasing complexity, with the same negative result. Finally, the *deontological* direction led him to an apparent success that, unfortunately, is not recognized as genuine by many of Huemer’s peers.

What conclusion can we draw from all this? That PC was not able to satisfy the metajustificatory demand and should, therefore, be rejected? That would be

a careless conclusion. Although we could question some of Huemer's responses – especially those concerning the role of the *epistemologist* in the task of metajustification (see section 1.1) –, a careful reflection on these unsuccessful attempts of metajustification may reveal that the “failure” is not *peculiar* to PC (see especially section 1.2) and that the “problem” – i.e., the reason(s) for the failure – can be elsewhere, although it is not easy to locate it precisely. We will be brief in this conclusion. First of all, can the problem be in the *truth-conducivity* conception of justification, since the deontological conception provided (apparently) no obstacles to the metajustificatory demand? The fact that the deontological conception allows an “easy” metajustification is *hardly* a reason for thinking that the truth-conducivity conception is “*the* (or *a*) problem” and that the deontological conception is the right one, though. All that it shows is that the problem arises *in connection with* the truth-conducivity conception, whether this is or not the right conception of epistemic justification. Since many (if not most) epistemologists think the truth-conducivity conception is the right one, it seems important to identify the reasons for the failure to meet the metajustificatory demand when that conception is assumed. Can the problem, then, be in *internalism* as a whole, the requirement that what justifies a subject's belief must be accessible to her? But *externalism* has also had a hard time trying to meet the metajustificatory demand. As Alston (1986; 1993; 2005, pp. 201ff) insisted repeatedly, the externalist cannot show the reliability of sense-perception without falling in *epistemic circularity*!²⁵ How about *foundationalism*? Is *it* the problem? We can doubt it. The alternative to it – i.e., *inferentialism*, whether in its coherentist or infinitist version – does not seem to overcome skeptical results, as we glimpsed in section 1.2.²⁶ Finally – as one may be suspecting –, perhaps the problem is in the *metajustificatory demand itself*! But what this charge implies? That we should *not* try to justify our epistemic principles? That those principles *could* and *should* be accepted without (good) reasons? This cannot be right!

Perhaps, the real problem is that the metajustificatory demand makes us reach the inevitable limits of our epistemic condition. But this deserves another paper.

²⁵ According to Alston (2005, pp. 207ff), epistemic circularity is “pervasive”! Some externalists have tried to solve this difficulty by defending that there is “no problem” in epistemic circularity! (cf. Bergmann 2006, cap. 7; and especially Sosa 2009, pp. 195ff).

²⁶ We do not have space here to develop this point. The reader can see, for example, Bergmann (2006, pp. 185-7) and Bonjour (2002, pp. 202-10).

References

- ALSTON, W. P. "Epistemic circularity". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 47, 1, pp. 1-30, 1986.
- _____. *The reliability of sense perception*. Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993.
- _____. *Beyond justification: dimensions of epistemic evaluation*. Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 2005.
- BERGMANN, M. *Justification without awareness: a defense of epistemic externalism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006.
- _____. "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Dilemma for Internalism". In C. Tucker (ed.). (2013), pp. 154-178.
- BONJOUR, L. *The structure of empirical knowledge*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard Univ. Press, 1985.
- _____. *Epistemology: classic problems and contemporary responses*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.
- _____. "In search of direct realism". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 69, 2, pp. 349-367, 2004.
- _____.; SOSA, E. *Epistemic justification: internalism vs. externalism, foundations vs. virtues*. Malden: Blackwell, 2003.
- CONEE, E., FELDMAN, R. *Evidentialism: essays in epistemology*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004.
- CRISP, T. "A dilemma for internalism?". *Synthese*, 174, pp. 355-66, 2009.
- DEPOE, J. M. "Defeating the self-defeat argument for Phenomenal Conservatism". *Philosophical Studies*, 152, 3, pp. 347-359, 2011.
- FUMERTON, R. *Metaepistemology and skepticism*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995.
- HASAN, A. "Phenomenal Conservatism, classical foundationalism, and internalist justification". *Philosophical Studies*, 162, pp. 119-141, 2013.
- HUEMER, M. *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001.

- _____. “Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition”. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 43, pp. 147-58, 2006.
- _____. “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74, pp. 30-55, 2007.
- _____. “Phenomenal Conservatism and self-defeat: a reply to DePoe”. *Philosophical Studies*, 156, 1, pp. 1-13, 2011.
- _____. “Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles”. In C. Tucker (ed.). (2013), pp. 328-350.
- KLEIN, P. “Human knowledge and the infinite regress of reasons”. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13, pp. 297-325, 1999.
- LEHRER, K. *Theory of knowledge*. 2.ed. Boulder: Westview Press, 2000.
- PLANTINGA, A. *Warrant: the current debate*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993.
- ROGERS, J., MATHESON, J. “Bergmann’s dilemma: exit strategies for internalists”. *Philosophical Studies*, 152, pp. 55-80, 2011.
- SOSA, E. *Reflective Knowledge: apt belief and reflective knowledge*. V. II. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009.
- SWINBURNE, R. *Epistemic justification*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001.
- TOOLEY, M. “Michael Huemer and the Principle of Phenomenal Conservatism”. In C. Tucker (ed.). (2013), pp. 306-327.
- TUCKER, C. (ed.). *Seemings and Justification*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.