Phenomenal Conservatism and the Belief-Appearance Problem

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In his 2010 piece “Against Phenomenal Conservatism”, Nathan Hanna argues that Phenomenal Conservatism (PC) implies absurd epistemic consequences and thus should be rejected. Hanna reasons that because some beliefs might behave as a type of appearance, PC may result in some beliefs justifying themselves. I argue that Hanna's criticism of PC is mistaken and that there is no belief-appearance problem worth considering. To do so, I will respond to Hanna’s critical commentary on the standard account of PC and note one necessary condition of appearance-hood that cannot be satisfied by any sort of belief.

The standard account of PC is provided by Michael Huemer in his Skepticism and the Veil of Perception. According to Huemer, PC is the epistemic principle that:

If it seems to S that p, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some epistemic justification for believing that p (Huemer 200, p. 99).

Therefore, PC is a foundationalist account of epistemic justification that specifies appearances (sometimes referred to as “seemings”) as the foundation for non-inferential beliefs. Additionally, PC is an internalist\(^1\) account of epistemic justification, as one must be aware of the contents of an appearance for it to confer defeasible justification. Importantly, sensory perceptions (seeing, hearing, feeling, etc.) are not the only sort of appearances that confer justification. All sorts of appearances, including memory, intuition, and

\(^1\) Internalism as I use the term is a theory of epistemic justification. For the purposes of this paper I employ the appearance account according to which “all of the conditions that confer justification supervene on how things seem to the subject” (Huemer 2006, p. 148).
introspection, lend the sort of foundational and defeasible justification described by PC.

For Hanna, the problem with PC follows from an insufficient distinction between beliefs and appearances, or as I call it, the belief-appearance problem. In a nutshell, if beliefs and appearances are not distinct, beliefs can behave like appearances and then believing is sufficient justification of belief (Hanna 2009, p. 213). Hanna reasons that it is irrelevant whether beliefs actually are a sort of appearance. All that is required is that some beliefs are similar enough in relevant qualities to appearances that they behave like appearances. Therefore, to refute Hanna’s argument, one must show that beliefs and appearances differ in the epistemically relevant sense, that is, in those qualities that are relevant to the process of epistemic justification. If beliefs and appearances are necessarily different in that sense, then, given the proper criteria, the two should be readily distinguishable from the standpoint of internal awareness.

Before I establish the relevant necessary difference between appearance and belief, let’s examine how Hanna handles Huemer’s account. First, Hanna addresses Huemer’s submerged stick example (Hanna 2009, p. 214). In this example, Huemer argues that beliefs must differ from appearances given that it can seem to S that p but S might not believe that p. For example, it might seem to you that the stick submerged halfway in water is bent but because you understand how water distorts the visual experience of submerged objects, you don’t believe that the stick is bent. This example shows it can seem to one that p without one believing that p. Huemer thinks this says something about the difference between beliefs and appearances, specifically, that epistemically, a belief does not function in the same way as an appearance. Hanna rejects this argument because he feels it only shows that appearances and beliefs can disagree, not that beliefs are a different sort of thing than appearances, for
example, this chair looks old but I remember reading that it is very new; or this table looks like wood but feels like granite. The fact that beliefs can disagree with appearances is no evidence that beliefs are something other than appearances. Beliefs might still be a type of appearance.

While I do not think the submerged stick example is sufficient to draw the line between beliefs and appearances, I do think there is merit to Huemer’s example that goes ignored in Hanna’s response. I read Huemer’s example as illustrating how beliefs and appearances possess different epistemic properties. The reason that it can seem to S that p without S believing that p is that the phenomena of appearing and believing are fundamentally different. In an appearance, p is represented to S as true, whereas in belief, S represents p as being true. As will be discussed later, a belief also represents p as true but does not commit S to the truth of p. It can appear to S that p, or not p, in a variety of ways but those appearances do not rise to the level of commitment implied by “S believes that p”. Only belief implies a commitment to truth. I will explore this commitment in more detail later in the paper.

The only way to determine if there is a substantial difference between belief and appearance is to establish the necessary conditions of appearance-hood and see if belief can satisfy them. Hanna begins by noting two “essential characteristics” of appearance that Huemer admits are shared by belief (Hanna 2009, p. 215). First, both beliefs and appearances have representational content; they both represent the world in a given way. For example, it seems to me that my cup is on the table (appearance) and I believe that my cup is on the table (belief). In both cases, my belief and perception have representational content, and, in fact, they have the same representational content. Importantly, this representation can be expressed as a proposition and as such can be logically related to other propositions. Second, both beliefs and appearances represent their content in an assertive or “forceful” manner (Huemer 2001, p. 77). In other
words, both beliefs and appearances represent their content as being true of the world. For instance, if it seems to me that the cup is on the table, then it appears to me as true that the cup is on the table. The same follows for belief where if I believe the cup is on the table, I am believing that the proposition “The cup is on the table” is true. Therefore, beliefs, like appearances, represent their content as actually being the case.

Having established these similarities between beliefs and appearances, Hanna looks for alleged differences that show that beliefs do not behave like appearances. The primary difference he considers is agency. According to this argument, beliefs differ from appearances insofar as beliefs require that we exercise our agency in a certain way (Hanna 2009, p. 217). For example, whereas appearances simply appear, beliefs require that one choose to believe them. Hanna rejects this argument with a counter-example: many children seem to have been ‘indoctrinated’ with beliefs that they themselves did not choose to believe. Therefore, it cannot be the case that for S to believe that p, S must choose to believe that p. This conclusion seems to get additional support from research on phenomena such as implicit bias where individuals find themselves disposed to certain (often prejudiced) judgments because of some unapparent beliefs. In these cases, it seems clear that the exercise of agency is not necessary for the existence of a belief therefore, it must not be a substantial difference between beliefs and appearances.

Hanna gives an example of the sort of belief just mentioned, namely, a belief that requires no exercise of agency yet because of its appearance-like characteristics, manages to secure justification for itself. Suppose you believe a certain politician to be corrupt though the content of this belief is not conscious to you. Upon seeing the politician on television, the content of the belief comes to mind and it appears to you as if the politician is corrupt – perhaps feeling like an intuition of sorts – even though this was a belief that was formed prior to
Phenomenal Conservatism and the Belief-Appearance Problem

seeing the politician on the television. According to PC, in the absence of any defeaters, you would have some justification for your belief that the politician was corrupt, even though the particular ‘appearance’ that conferred justification was simply the belief itself (Hanna 2009, p. 217). This, Hanna argues, is the sort of absurd epistemic consequence that must result if we are to take PC as it stands.

Going back to Hanna’s discussion of agency, let’s say that the indoctrinated children grow up believing that the earth is flat. Even if at no point in their lives they decided, “Now I am going to believe the earth is flat”, they do represent the proposition, “The earth is flat,” as true simply by believing it. The same applies to cases of implicit bias and all other beliefs that one may possess but not be aware of. As mentioned earlier, to believe that p is to be committed to the truth of p. Therefore, one may be committed to the truth of p without choosing, or having chosen, to believe that p. Thus while appearances merely represent their content as true, beliefs require some commitment on behalf of the subject to saying, “It does not simply appear to me that p, I believe that p is actually the case.”

One might object that to commit to p is nothing other than an exercise of agency of the kind that Hanna describes. After all, how can one commit to the truth of a proposition without exercising agency in some sense? There are two responses to be made here: [1] strictly speaking, the idea of commitment does not rest on a notion of agency and [2] even if it did rest on some notion of agency, it is not the sort of agency that Hanna has in mind.

To elaborate on point [1], I understand commitment to boil down to an epistemic relation between a subject and her belief. It seems that for a belief to be a belief, it must, in some sense, entail a commitment to the truth of its contents. It follows that to have a belief is to be committed to the truth of whatever contents are represented in that belief. To put it more formally:
Phenomenal Conservatism and the Belief-Appearance Problem

1. S has belief X if and only if X is believed by S.
2. If X is believed by S, then S is committed to the truth of the contents of X.
3. S has belief X
   so,
4. S is committed to the truth of the contents of X.

Notice that nowhere does this argument rely on language that implies an exercise of agency. Instead, I am merely describing how some subject S stands in relation to her belief X. Importantly, this relation would obtain whether S chose to form her belief X, or whether S had her belief X induced without her knowing. All that commitment requires is that we acknowledge the intuition that any belief qua belief must satisfy some relational property such that the representational content of that belief may be rendered as held true by the subject. I would argue that without this property of commitment, the belief that p would be merely the appearance that p. Both represent a proposition as true while only one, the belief, affirms a truth.

With respect to point [2], let’s imagine that commitment does involve the subject’s agency in some way. Does this imply that my argument is refuted by Hanna’s counter-example? Certainly not. Hanna argued, you will recall, that I can believe a politician is corrupt without choosing to believe – without my agency – so the belief behaves just like an appearance. But I can grant that agency, as Hanna means it – some kind of conscious decision-making – can be involved in some believings but it is not the choosing that matters, it is the committing that makes the difference between believing and appearing and not all commitment involves conscious decision-making, as his example illustrates.

Hanna formulates an argument from agency quite similarly to how I formulated

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my own argument earlier:

When I believe a proposition, I represent it as true. In perception, however, it is not me but my sensory faculties that represent propositions as true (Hanna 2009, p. 217).

This seems right to me. But whereas Hanna wants to associate the epistemic relation, “I represent it (the proposition) as true,” with some kind of conscious decision-making, I argue that the only necessary association (if there’s any at all) between that epistemic relation and agency would be with some notion of agency just thick enough to include the notion of commitment.

A way to get a handle on the idea of commitment is to compare it to the phenomenological exercise of bracketing. Phenomenologists bracket their beliefs about phenomena so that they may contemplate only the object or content of their perceptual experience as it really appears without concern for truth-value (Sokolowski 2000). The simple lesson here is that, as in Huemer’s submerged stick example, such-and-such can appear to be the case without one believing that it is so, and thus, without committing to the truth of it. This necessary difference between belief and appearance forms what I consider to be the phenomenal property that distinguishes between the two, the property which characterizes how something is experienced internally by the conscious mind – what it is like to be conscious of such-and-such. Thus, there is an important sense in which having a belief that p behaves differently from having an appearance that p with respect to the relevant justificatory processes of the subject. This is the presence or absence of commitment, which Hanna’s argument fails to take into account..

The relational property of commitment entails at least one necessary condition for belief that no appearance can satisfy: beliefs are normatively
assessable with respect to epistemic justification while necessarily appearances are not. We commit a category mistake if we claim that an appearance is 'justified' or 'unjustified'. A category mistake is committed when a predicate of a judgment cannot apply to the concept in question, e.g. “The number 5 is blue.”

Thus, appearances cannot be normatively assessed because they are not the sort of things that one can logically make justificatory judgments about (Huemer 2001, p. 97) – 'justified appearance' and 'unjustified appearance' are misnomers. As an example, imagine watching birds fly around your house and a neighbor saying, “Your visual experience of the birds is unjustified.” The statement is nonsensical. As Huemer notes, appearances represent the world to us in a way that is both assertive and “automatic,” which is to say appearances are delivered directly by our cognitive and sensory faculties3 in such a way that they seem to just happen (Huemer 2001, p. 97). Because of this, appearances entail no commitment to their representational content, and therefore, cannot be evaluated in terms of epistemic justifiability.

The foregoing has implications for the phenomenology of belief. The subject may experience a mental state as subject to the norm of epistemic justifiability or not. If she does, then it must be a belief. If she does not, then it must be an appearance or some unassertive mental state (e.g. an instance of imagination or desire, etc.). Thus, there is an easy test for appearance-hood from the standpoint of internal awareness. Simply ask, “Is what I am conscious of

3 The term category mistake was introduced by Gilbert Ryle in his criticism of cartesian dualism. To summarize Ryle, it’s nonsensical to refer to the mind as a “substance”, in the Cartesian sense, as the mind (according to certain understandings of it) cannot meaningfully said to be a substance. For more on this notion, see Ryle, Gilbert. 1949. The Concept of Mind. London: Hutchinson.

4 Hanna makes a similar statement in his formulation of the argument from agency discussed earlier, “[I]n perception, however, it is not me but my sensory faculties that represent propositions as true” (Hanna 2009, p. 217).
right now capable of epistemic justification?” If so, then it must be a belief. If not, it may indeed be an appearance.

Hanna or others may object that there is some important sense in which appearances themselves are normatively assessable. If I have the appearance that my cup of coffee is on the table, then certainly one may ask whether my cup of coffee is actually on the table – that is, one may ask if my appearance was veridical or accurate. To put it simply, appearances may be assessed on their veridicality in representing the world. This is significant considering, as Huemer argues, the truth (or falsity) of an appearance partially determines whether it counts as an instance of awareness. However, to say that an appearance may be assessed for truth is not the same as saying it may be assessed for justification. The possibility of normative assessment (with respect to epistemic justification) is based on a commitment to truth. So, while both beliefs and appearances may be assessed for accuracy because they represent the world assertively, only beliefs entail a commitment to representations as true. Therefore, only beliefs may be assessed with respect to their epistemic justifiability.

Imagine that Hanna or another critic has accepted all that’s been argued thus far. They may, nevertheless, make an appeal to our intuitions on the matter and argue that no one really possesses the sort of control or mental awareness over her beliefs and appearances that my account would imply. For example, if I

5 “S is aware of x if and only if [...] x exists and at least roughly satisfies the content of that representation…” (Huemer 2001, p. 55). Satisfying the content of the appearance is what makes the I refer to as the accuracy of the appearance.

6 It’s worth noting that the subject of this assessment is best understood as the believer rather than the belief. When we say a belief is justified, we often mean that S is justified in believing that p. Therefore, the question of such an assessment would be whether S has accrued the appropriate, justification-conferring reasons for believing that p. In other words, does S have the epistemic right to commit to p?
Phenomenal Conservatism and the Belief-Appearance Problem

see my cup of coffee in front of me, I am seeing my cup of coffee in front of me. I am not having the appearance of my cup of coffee in front of me, and I am certainly not having that appearance then deciding to commit myself to its representational content. Often it seems that there is no strict sequence of mental events and judgements and certainly no time to concern oneself with phenomenal properties or normative assessability. There are two responses that ought to be made: (i) the subject doesn't have to have the technical vocabulary used there to experience these various mental events and their relations, and (ii) while my account may seem counterintuitive with respect to the average daily experience, there are certainly many instances where its plausibility is more obvious.

To elaborate on the first point, we are often ignorant of the aforementioned cognitive processes because they are built into our daily experience. Appearances are experienced as appearances, beliefs as beliefs, and the underlying cognitive processes pass “automatically” just as our intuitions would make it seem. Now, how is this not simply begging the question by assuming a fundamental difference between beliefs and appearances?

Considering we’ve already established the fundamental difference between appearances and beliefs, it is not begging the question to state that the everyday experience does not require an explicit conceptual grasp of all the cognitive processes at play for them to make a difference in how we experience the world. Specifically, they enable us to be aware of when we are entertaining beliefs and when we are entertaining mere appearances, when it is appropriate to assess epistemic justifiability or accuracy and when not. So my solution to the belief-

7 S may be aware that X is different than Y without being necessarily aware of whatever conditions make that difference actual. For example, I may be aware that green is different from blue without being aware of all the scientific facts regarding light and refraction that make the two different.
Phenomenal Conservatism and the Belief-Appearance Problem

appearance problem requires no counterintuitive notion of control or mental awareness on the part of the subject.

With respect to the second point, it seems there are a wide variety of everyday experiences where the plausibility of my account is undeniable. For example, consider our everyday confrontations with complex matters of, say, politics, religion, or even interpersonal relationships. Often these matters require us to closely separate appearances from beliefs and analyze our epistemic positions carefully. In these instances, it seems clear that we are more likely to employ the kind of “control” that Hanna or other critics say my account implies. But these sorts of cases are not the norm; normally we just know we can be held accountable for some of our mental states and not others. This seems intuitively evident so it’s up to Hanna et al. to provide their own account of how this is possible.

How exactly does this all pertain to Hanna’s final example regarding the corrupt politician? Given what we have established thus far, what Hanna describes is logically impossible. Belief requires some property, internally accessible to the subject, that makes it assessable with respect to epistemic justifiability. If the subject were internally aware of a mental state without being aware of that property, then it could not be a belief. In other words Hanna makes the category mistake described earlier of attributing certain properties to an appearance that it, by necessity, cannot have.

However, for the sake of argument, let’s consider some possibilities where his example looks logically possible. First, perhaps the belief in question was actually an appearance of a belief about the politician. In other words, it did not appear that the politician was corrupt, but it appeared to the subject that she held the belief that the politician was corrupt. This poses no threat to PC as...

8 Many of our beliefs are not apparent to us. These beliefs may become apparent to us via an appearance – a process that I suspect Hanna is describing in his
appearances regarding beliefs do not justify those beliefs that one appears to hold. For example, it appears to me that I believe the Earth is round but the appearance that I hold such a belief does not itself confer justification on that belief. Second, perhaps the belief about the politician and the appearance of the politician were entirely separate mental states. Perhaps the subject really did have the appearance that the politician was corrupt, but her prior belief regarding the politician was independent of the appearance as such. In this instance, the appearance would confer defeasible justification on the belief since appearance might count as evidence for the belief. However, this is no issue for PC. I believe that my car is black, I go outside and see my car, and sure enough it appears black. The belief is not justifying itself but rather an appearance with similar propositional content is conferring defeasible justification upon it. Whether that sort of appearance tends to justify true beliefs is no concern for PC. All that matters is that such examples would not show beliefs behave like appearances in the relevant epistemic way contrary to what Hanna proposes.

Once a more robust understanding of appearances and beliefs has been established, there’s no room for the worrisome idea that beliefs behave like appearances in being self-justifying. In the simplest terms, certain epistemic qualities imply beliefs are necessarily and substantially different from appearances. Therefore, there is no belief-appearance problem for Phenomenal Conservatism.

**Bibliography**


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