CARTESIAN PHENOMENAL CONSERVATISM: A SATISFACTORY RESPONSE
TO RADICAL SKEPTICISM

by

Ross Jensen

A Senior Honors Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The University of Utah
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Honors Degree in Bachelor of Science

In
Philosophy

Approved:

Lex Newman, PhD
Thesis Faculty Supervisor

Matthew Haber, PhD
Chair, Department of Philosophy

Lex Newman, PhD
Honors Faculty Advisor

Sylvia D. Torti, PhD
Dean, Honors College
ABSTRACT

In this paper, I defend an epistemological thesis known as phenomenal conservatism. As introduced by Michael Huemer, phenomenal conservatism states: if it seems to S that p [where the variables S and P represent any subject and any proposition, respectively], then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that p. Roughly, this simply means that, in the absence of positive evidence to the contrary, we have at least some reason to believe that whatever seems to be the case really is the case. After providing an account of phenomenal conservatism, along with a characterization of seemings as sui generis representational mental states, I review a handful of objections to phenomenal conservatism, and I conclude that one objection in particular—namely, what I call the No Grounds Objection—does pose a serious problem for phenomenal conservatism. In responding to the No Grounds Objection, I defend phenomenal conservatism by appealing to relevant metaepistemological insights from Descartes’s Meditations on First Philosophy in order to argue that any reflective rejection of phenomenal conservatism will inevitably lead to self-defeat. I conclude that we have no choice but to accept phenomenal conservatism.
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I. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I defend an epistemological thesis known to contemporary philosophers as phenomenal conservatism. Very roughly, phenomenal conservatism states that, in the absence of positive evidence to the contrary, we have at least some reason to believe that whatever seems to be the case really is the case. Intuitively, phenomenal conservatism strikes me as quite plausible. So plausible do I find phenomenal conservatism, in fact, that many of the standard arguments for its truth seem to me unenlightening at best and perhaps even counterproductive at worst. Nonetheless, I understate the matter when I say that phenomenal conservatives remain (for now) epistemological outliers. Consequently, those of us who have embraced phenomenal conservatism still have philosophical work to do. For my part, I argue in what follows that a “Cartesian” version of phenomenal conservatism—namely, a theory of epistemic justification that incorporates both phenomenal conservatism and some important insights from the work of René Descartes—provides a satisfactory response to radical skepticism. Here I have in mind the sort of skepticism that claims that no one ever has (or ever can have) any justified beliefs. I conclude, in accordance with phenomenal conservatism, that we simply cannot actually accept such skepticism. Instead, plausible constraints on our ordinary habits of reflection require that we accept undefeated seemings—mental states that I will describe shortly—as legitimate sources of justification.

I proceed as follows. First, in Section II, I provide an account of phenomenal conservatism, along with a characterization of seemings as *sui generis* representational mental states. In Section III, I review a handful of the primary objections to phenomenal conservatism that have appeared in the relevant philosophical literature, and I conclude that one radically skeptical objection in particular—namely, what I call the *No Grounds Objection*—does pose a serious problem for phenomenal conservatism and thus demands a careful and thorough response. To that end, I present in Section IV a proper defense of phenomenal conservatism by first appealing to a handful of the most relevant metaepistemological insights from Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* in order to then argue that any reflective rejection of phenomenal conservatism will inevitably lead to self-defeat. Lastly, in Section V, I conclude with a brief recap of my main points.

II. PHENOMENAL CONSERVATISM AND SEEMINGS

II.1 Phenomenal Conservatism

In his book *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (2001), Michael Huemer introduced phenomenal conservatism in the following form:

\[(PC_1) \text{ If it seems to } S \text{ as if } P \text{ [where the variables } S \text{ and } P \text{ represent any subject and any proposition, respectively], then } S \text{ thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that } P.\]

Several years later, in his paper “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” Huemer emended phenomenal conservatism as follows:

\[(PC_c) \text{ If it seems to } S \text{ that } p, \text{ then, in the absence of defeaters, } S \text{ thereby has at least some degree of justification for believing that } p.\]

I will refer to this revised formulation of phenomenal conservatism as the “canonical formulation,” or else as “PC_c” for short. On the whole, PC_c has received more attention in the philosophical literature than has any other formulation of phenomenal conservatism, and as far as I know, Huemer has not made any further “official” modifications to PC_c in his most recent work on the subject. However, in his latest book, *Approaching Infinity*, Huemer has described phenomenal conservatism in more general terms: “Phenomenal conservatism holds that undefeated appearances [i.e., what I will refer to below and throughout as “undefeated seemings”] are a source of justification (perhaps the *only* source of justification) for belief.” Although philosophers other than Huemer have adopted phenomenal conservatism and modified it in various ways, I will treat these statements of phenomenal conservatism as definitive. Thus, whenever I refer...
to “phenomenal conservatism” in what follows, I will have in mind one or more of these formulations: namely, PC₁, PC₉, or Huemer’s most recent general characterization.

Now before I proceed to clarify what Huemer means by “seems,” I want to emphasize a few subtle but possibly significant differences that distinguish the above statements of phenomenal conservatism from one another. Note first that the antecedent of PC₉ does away with the phrase “as if P” from PC₁ in favor of the phrase “that p,” thereby making explicit Huemer’s preferred characterization of seemings as instances of a particular sort of propositional attitude. As such, seemings can, in principle, “attach” to any proposition(s) whatsoever. Some propositions “make reference” to seemings. For example, the proposition it seems to me that the tomato is red “makes reference” to a particular seeming about a particular tomato. Because seemings can, in principle, “attach” to any proposition(s) whatsoever, a seeming can, in principle, “attach” to a proposition of the form it seems to me that p. Consequently, in principle, it might seem to me that it seems to me that, say, the tomato is red. I would then experience what we might call a second-order seeming. Note, however, that not all seemings are second-order seemings. Indeed, few ordinary seemings are second-order seemings.⁸ In any case, unlike PC₁, Huemer’s PC₉ leaves no doubt as to this propositional aspect of seemings.

Next, recall that whereas PC₁ includes in its consequent a reference to “prima facie justification,” the consequent of PC₉ refers to “some degree” of justification “in the absence of defeaters.” Some philosophers have made much of this particular difference in terminology,⁹ but I suspect that the revision here really just amounts to a simple

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⁸ Thanks to Lex Newman for pointing out the need to make this distinction explicit.
restatement. Given Huemer’s most recent characterization of defeaters as “positive grounds for doubting”¹⁰ the veridicality of some seeming(s), after all, I fail to see how one might draw any meaningful distinction between the original notion of prima facie justification—justification “at first pass,” as it were—and the notion of justification in the absence of defeaters.¹¹ Elsewhere,¹² Huemer has shown that phenomenal conservatism naturally lends itself to an internalist account of epistemic justification so long as we conceive of internalism as “hold[ing] that all of the conditions that confer justification [on some belief(s)] supervene on how things seem to the subject.”¹³ Against the backdrop of such a theory, we should interpret the “defeaters” of PCc as referring to relevant reasons—reasons broadly construed, that is—to which the subject in question has at least potential access in an internalist sense. Consequently, any subjectively inaccessible facts—facts of which some relevant subject(s) simply cannot become aware—do not count as defeaters. Instead, only mental states—specifically seemings of some sort—can function as defeaters. But then, on this account, prima facie justification and justification in the absence of defeaters amount to the same thing, for prima facie justification just is the sort of justification that one has on the basis of how things initially seem to one.

At this point, though, we should take a moment to remind ourselves that, in spite of Huemer’s emphasis on the affinity between phenomenal conservatism and at least one version of internalism, phenomenal conservatism as such does not state a necessary

¹⁰ Here Huemer intends “positive grounds for doubting” to imply the relevant subject’s awareness of the grounds in question. Huemer thus assumes a particular epistemic conception of defeaters rather than a metaphysical conception of defeaters. Thanks to Lex Newman for raising this point.
¹¹ See Huemer, Approaching Infinity, 96.
¹³ Huemer, “Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition,” 148. Huemer refers to this account as the “Appearance Account” of internalism.
condition on justification. On the contrary, Huemer’s informal statement of phenomenal conservatism in *Approaching Infinity* clearly implies that phenomenal conservatism does not entail that “undefeated appearances are . . . the only source of justification,”\(^\text{14}\) as the combination of phenomenal conservatism and the sort of internalist view sketched above most definitely does. Consequently, one could consistently endorse a disjunctivist theory of justification that combines both phenomenal conservatism proper and the thesis that, for example, reliable belief-forming mechanisms tend to produce justified beliefs even in the absence of the relevant subject’s awareness of any such mechanisms.\(^\text{15}\) Of course, a careful reader of Huemer’s more formal definitions of phenomenal conservatism will have figured out that phenomenal conservatism does not exclude the possibility of paradigmatic externalist sources of justification, as both PC\(_1\) and PC\(_C\) state *sufficient* conditions on justification without stating any *necessary* conditions. Nonetheless, I think that Huemer’s parenthetical qualification in *Approaching Infinity* deserves a mention here given that I have personally encountered philosophers who mistakenly construe phenomenal conservatism as a thesis about what is *required* for justification.

II.2 Seemings

Phenomenal conservatism thus purports to ground justified beliefs of a particular sort in *subjectively accessible appearances*—or *seemings*, as I prefer to call them. Before proceeding with my defense of phenomenal conservatism, I will make some brief and rather general remarks about seemings. These remarks, sketchy as they are, should nonetheless help us to achieve an adequate grasp of what phenomenal conservatives have in mind when they talk about seemings. Huemer himself never attempts to define


\(^{15}\) Thanks to Lex Newman for prompting me to clarify this point.
“appearance,” “seeming,” or “seems,” because, as Matthew Skene has pointed out, “he [i.e., Huemer] expects us to recognize [seemings] introspectively, at least when prompted with examples.”16 By “examples,” Skene has in mind sentences like the following:

- “It seems to me that this coffee is hot.”
- “I seem to recall meeting my best friend in kindergarten.”
- “It seems to me that modus ponens is a valid form of argument.”
- “In this light, my jacket seems (or looks) purple.”

Having appealed to examples of this sort (which we may multiply to our hearts’ content), Huemer ultimately declines to “analyze the notion of its seeming or appearing to one that P” on the grounds that “philosophical analysis has never succeeded.”17 Other defenders of phenomenal conservatism, while perhaps less pessimistic on the whole about the prospects for “philosophical analysis,” nonetheless tend to side with Huemer in not attempting to define “seemings.” Andrew Cullison has, for instance, argued in multiple papers that “seemings are sui generis propositional attitudes and are not analyzable in terms of the other mental phenomena.”18 Like Huemer and Cullison, I too believe that I can recognize and “pick out” seemings, so to speak, without the assistance of any rigorous conceptual analysis. Nonetheless, I also believe that we can describe seemings in broad strokes so as to bring to the fore some of their salient features (at the very least).

16 Skene, “Seemings and the Possibility of Epistemic Justification,” 542.
Huemer himself takes care to distinguish seemings from beliefs for the very simple reason that it may \textit{seem} to me that, say, a certain stick becomes bent when I dip it into a pool of water \textit{even though} I don’t \textit{believe} that the stick has become bent. On the contrary, I continue to believe that the stick remains (roughly) straight. Indeed, not only do I believe this \textit{simpliciter}; presumably, I \textit{justifiably} believe that the stick remains (roughly) straight. And yet, my (justified) belief that a straight stick retains its straightness when I dip it in a pool of water does not change the fact that the stick seems bent (to me) when I dip it in the water. Nor, says Huemer, should we confuse seemings with \textit{dispositions} or \textit{inclinations} to believe because “one might be so convinced that an appearance [i.e., a seeming] was illusory that one was not even \textit{inclined} to believe its content.”\footnote{Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” 31.} Besides, Huemer adds, “the way things appear may provide non-trivial \textit{explanations} for what we are disposed to believe.”\footnote{Ibid.} Merely to assert otherwise, Huemer thinks, just begs the question.

For similar reasons, Chris Tucker insists that a “seeming that P is neither a belief that P nor an inclination to believe P . . . it is [rather] a certain kind of experience with propositional content.”\footnote{Tucker, “Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism,” 530.} Citing William Tolhurst’s seminal paper “Seemings”\footnote{American Philosophical Quarterly 35 (1998): 293-302. Tolhurst himself claims that seemings “have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (298-299). In other words, seemings possess “felt veridicality” (298).} as an inspiration, Tucker adds that 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.”\footnote{Tucker, “Why Open-Minded People Should Endorse Dogmatism,” 530.} Tucker thus refers to a seeming’s “peculiar phenomenal character” as
its “assertiveness.” In this manner, both Huemer and Tucker hope to “draw readers’ attention to these familiar mental states” by “citing examples, as well as discussing some of the features of these mental states and how they differ from similar mental states.”

For my part, I find no fault with such a procedure.

Consequently, I will assume, for now, the approximate correctness of the following rough characterization of seemings.

**Seemings:** Familiar *sui generis* mental states that (i) have propositional content, (ii) purport to represent actual states of affairs (i.e., facts), (iii) are not beliefs nor dispositions to believe, and (iv) normally lead the persons experiencing them to form corresponding beliefs with identical propositional contents.

In Section IV, I recommend the addition of at least one clause to this otherwise accurate description. Specifically, I suggest that we reconceive of seemings as **inducing assent** to their contents—*ceteris paribus*, at least. Put another way: I contend that seemings are **prima facie** assent-inducing. If I’m right about this, then while we should not **identify** seemings with **dispositions** or **inclinations** to believe, we should nonetheless think of seemings as **involving** such dispositions or inclinations. For now, however, I will proceed on the assumption that the above account of seemings is essentially correct.

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24 Ibid. Huemer himself refers to this phenomenological quality as “forcefulness” in *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 77-79.


26 To the inevitable chagrin of those skeptics who undoubtedly remain, I will simply register my agreement with the following comment of Fumerton’s: “Because the [concept] that the above account appeals to [is] *sui generis*, there is precious little one can say by way of trying to explain the concept to one who claims not to understand it.” See *Metaepistemology and Skepticism*, 76.

III. SOME COMMON OBJECTIONS TO PHENOMENAL CONSERVATISM

Philosophers have objected to phenomenal conservatism for a variety of reasons. In this section I briefly present and rebuff several of the most prevalent objections that have appeared in the philosophical literature. Ultimately, I conclude that one objection in particular—namely, what I call the *No Grounds Objection*—does pose a serious problem for phenomenal conservatism and thus deserves a sustained response. In Section IV below, I revamp one of Huemer’s recent arguments for phenomenal conservatism by drawing on elements of Descartes’s *Meditations*, thereby providing just such a response.

III.1 The Easy Knowledge Objection

Some philosophers have objected to phenomenal conservatism on the grounds that it allows for the acquisition of so-called “easy knowledge.” This objection rests upon a simple misunderstanding. Phenomenal conservatism tells us little about knowledge *per se*; instead, it states a sufficient condition on *justification*. Granted, justification may partly constitute knowledge, or it may stand in some other intimate relation to knowledge, but phenomenal conservatism does not, by itself, tell us how to bridge the gap between the acquisition of some *justified belief(s)* and the acquisition of *knowledge*. Consequently, the charge that phenomenal conservatism somehow renders knowledge too easy to come by just misses the point of phenomenal conservatism.

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29 Tim Williamson—among at least a few others—impressively disagrees. See his *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

30 In other words, a theory of justification like phenomenal conservatism does not, in itself, obviously suggest any additional fourth condition on the traditional justified true belief account of
Of course, we might construe this objection as an objection concerned with the acquisition of justification instead of an objection concerned with the acquisition of knowledge. To that end, Chris Tucker, impersonating an imagined interlocutor, makes a helpful suggestion: “Sure, maybe it’s the case that were phenomenal conservatism true, evidentialism wouldn’t impose a significant requirement on justified . . . beliefs. But who cares? Phenomenal conservatism makes it absurdly easy to acquire evidence!”31 Here Tucker has couched phenomenal conservatism in terms of evidence rather than in terms of justification, but the basic point remains: phenomenal conservatism—especially, one might think, in its canonical formulation—implies that we can acquire justification for our beliefs far too easily.

Recall, however, that both PC₁ and PC_C merely state that seemings confer “at least prima facie justification” and “at least some degree of justification [in the absence of defeaters],” respectively. Thus, PC₁ and PC_C allow for the possibility that seemings might confer “full” justification (or some such) on corresponding beliefs, but they do not claim that seemings will always, usually, often, or even ever actually do so. Indeed, as its name suggests, phenomenal conservatism is, in many ways, quite the modest principle. Consequently, given that justification comes in degrees (as it surely does), it does not seem objectionable to suppose that we can acquire justification “in small amounts,” as it were, quite easily. In any case, I see no intuitively plausible reason for thinking that we cannot do so. If the objector does see such a reason, he ought to point it out.

knowledge. Of course, most contemporary analytic epistemologists agree that we need such a condition. Thanks to Lex Newman for pressing me to clarify this point.

III.2 The No Seemings Objection

Some philosophers have attempted to discredit phenomenal conservatism by casting doubt on the reality of seemings of the relevant sort. As T. Ryan Byerly has put the point, “It seems to me that there aren’t any seemings [of the relevant sort].” Such smart-aleck remarks aside, Byerly nonetheless believes that he has undermined the “two primary motivations for positing sui generis seeming states,” namely: (i) the “abundance of linguistic data involving the seeming locution” and (ii) the prevalence of “cases where we appropriately give as our response to questions about why we believe or are inclined to believe p that it seems to us that p and where the only way for this to be appropriate is if there are indeed sui generis seemings.” Regardless of whether Byerly’s arguments succeed in the way that he thinks they do, it seems to me that Byerly has failed to cast any doubt whatsoever on the reality of “sui generis seemings” because he has failed to address the primary motivation for “positing sui generis seeming states” in the first place. Of course, as a phenomenal conservative myself, I have in mind what phenomenal conservatives regard as the seemingly obvious fact that we experience such seemings on a regular basis. Since Byerly does not address this major motivation for positing seemings, his arguments ultimately miss their intended mark.

Like Byerly, Michael Tooley believes that phenomenal conservatives—or at least Huemer and Tucker—have failed to provide an adequate account of seemings. After all, as Tooley has insistently pointed out:

Since mental states are not agents they cannot literally assert anything, or recommend anything, or assure us that anything is the case [i.e., as Tucker

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33 Ibid., 772, 778.
has suggested they do]. So such metaphorical talk needs to be jettisoned and replaced with characterizations that are literally true. Since Huemer and Tucker have not done this, they have not really provided us with a satisfactory account of what they take seemings to be.34

In the absence of such an account, Tooley thinks, the seemings skeptic has no reason to accept that there are any such mental states. Huemer has explicitly acknowledged Tooley’s objection in print, noting that “Tooley is noticeably frustrated by my failure to analyze the notion of its seeming or appearing to one that P,” but Huemer remains unmoved because, as I mentioned above, he thinks that “philosophical analysis has never succeeded.”35 Elaborating on this claim, Huemer writes: “I cannot name a single analysis of any philosophically interesting term that has not been refuted. . . . I think almost any philosopher will agree at least that . . . the overwhelming majority of attempts at analysis have failed.”36 This philosopher agrees, for one. But regardless of my own opinion of these specific claims, I think that phenomenal conservatives need not worry too much about Tooley’s objection. For consider: it seems undeniable that no philosopher has devised an analysis of the concept of belief that would satisfy Tooley’s rather stringent criteria, and yet not even Tooley would deny that we have beliefs—and in a rather robust sense, at that! Short of begging the question against the thesis that there are such mental states as seemings, then, I don’t see how Tooley can reasonably maintain that while we justifiably accept that we have beliefs on the basis of imprecise intuitions, we nonetheless cannot justifiably accept that we have seemings unless we come up with a successful

36 Ibid.
analysis of the concept of a *seeming* beforehand. Indeed, I suspect that it is impossible even to undertake such a project, let alone complete it, because in order to analyze a concept in the first place, we must accept that we have grasped the concept well enough to know which *explanandum* we intend the *explanans* to pick out or to subsume. Consequently, we can only hope to analyze the concept of a *seeming* if we can already recognize seemings to a moderately high degree of accuracy whenever we experience them.\(^{37}\) By Tooley’s own lights, then, we ought to know a seeming when we see one.

### III.3 The Tainted Source Objection

According to what Huemer has called the *Tainted Source Objection*—which, under other names, has arguably sparked more debate than any other single challenge to phenomenal conservatism—not just *any* seeming can potentially confer (some) justification on a corresponding belief.\(^{38}\) On the contrary, only seemings *formed in an appropriate way* or *derived from an appropriate source* can possibly constitute any sort of justification for corresponding beliefs. Huemer describes the *Tainted Source Objection* as follows: “[the objection consists in] putative counterexamples to PC [i.e., PC\(_C\)] in which a person’s appearance [i.e., seeming] that P has unreliable or epistemically blameworthy causes—for example, the appearance [i.e., seeming] that P might be caused by a *desire* that P, or by an *unjustified belief* that P.”\(^{39}\) We can easily multiply relevant examples: think, for instance, of a case of wishful thinking according to which it seems to

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\(^{39}\) Ibid., 343.
Wendy, on the basis of her desire not to study for an upcoming exam, that she will in fact receive a good grade on the exam without studying at all. Our objector insists that such a seeming simply cannot confer any justification whatsoever on a belief formed by Wendy to the effect that she will receive a good grade even if she chooses not to study.

Because other phenomenal conservatives have, I believe, dealt quite effectively with purported counterexamples of this sort, I will not here provide much by way of response. Suffice it to say that if we take the Tainted Source Objection seriously, then we would, I suspect, have to commit ourselves to the unpalatable thesis that poor Roy G., a hapless brain-in-a-vat (or BIV), cannot possibly have any degree of justification for any of his beliefs about the external world. After all, Roy’s perceptual faculties—including whichever corresponding belief-forming mechanisms we might wish to specify, whether subject to cognitive penetration by desires and unjustified beliefs or not—cannot reliably produce true beliefs given the unfortunate epistemic position in which Roy finds himself. Consequently, all of Roy’s perceptual beliefs must derive from a tainted source par excellence. But surely—at least given the truth of some version(s) of internalism, which the objectors in this case grant for the sake of argument—Roy has roughly as many justified perceptual beliefs as anyone else! So the fact that his perceptual beliefs derive from a tainted source cannot undermine his justification for those beliefs. Sure, some of Roy’s beliefs may derive from seemings based upon his desires or seemings based upon

his unjustified beliefs, but if he remains utterly and non-culpably ignorant of the etiologies of seemings of either sort, I just don’t see how such seemings differ in principle from seemings based upon the simulated perceptual experiences that he undergoes without realizing it. On the other hand, if Roy were to become aware of the tainted etiologies of such seemings, then presumably his newfound awareness would constitute a defeater for the seemings in question.

III.4 The Absurd Consequences Objection

In spite of its name, phenomenal conservatism strikes some people as an overly liberal or permissive theory of justification. More specifically, several philosophers have expressed concerns to the effect that phenomenal conservatism allows for the justification of absurd beliefs. Clayton Littlejohn presses the objection that the “considerations that seem to support the view [i.e., phenomenal conservatism] commit the phenomenal conservatives to condoning morally abhorrent behavior.”41 As Littlejohn suggests, we may rightly doubt that, say, the religiously-motivated terrorist, in his zeal to kill an abortion doctor, justifiably believes, on the basis of a corresponding seeming, that God has personally instructed him to commit such an act. And yet it seems naïve to suppose that such a terrorist could not possibly have experienced the seeming that he claims to have experienced. Consequently, phenomenal conservatives appear to face a thorny dilemma: on the one hand, if they admit that the terrorist might very well have experienced the relevant seeming, then they may seem to commit themselves to the view that the terrorist formed a justified belief to the effect that he ought to kill the abortion doctor; on the other hand, if they deny that the terrorist could have experienced the

relevant seeming, then they seem to commit themselves, \textit{a priori}, to an unpalatably rigid conception of human psychology. At this point, phenomenal conservatism itself may look like the root of the problem.

Before we jettison phenomenal conservatism all too hastily, however, let us recall the inconspicuous qualification on \(PC_C\) that may seem almost smuggled in just prior to the consequent of the conditional. This qualification—namely, the “in the absence of 
defeat\textit{ers}” \textit{caveat}—serves to limit \(PC_C\)’s overall liberality. Thus, in response to the charge that \(PC_C\), if true, renders the terrorist’s belief in God’s personal blessing justified, the proponent of \(PC_C\) can point out, during the first pass, that “any actual person with anything like normal background knowledge and experience would in fact have 
defeat\textit{ers} for the beliefs mentioned in [such] examples,” defeat\textit{ers} such as the belief that “religious [sentiments] tend to be determined by one’s upbringing,”\footnote{Huemer, “Phenomenal Conservatism,” 4a.} or the belief that God, in his perfect love, would not command such a killing. Plus, phenomenal conservatives will just bite the bullet and say that, in cases absent such defeat\textit{ers}, the seeming in question does confer at least some justification on the corresponding belief. Such cases, though, do not seem likely to occur frequently enough to cause serious and sustained moral hazards, as an objector like Littlejohn apparently fears they might.

III.5 The No Grounds Objection

Lastly—and most interestingly, I believe—someone might object to phenomenal conservatism on radically skeptical grounds. A venerable philosophical tradition dating at least as far back as the writings of Sextus Empiricus (c. 160 – 210 CE), radical skepticism challenges the very possibility of justified belief. Indeed, radical skepticism claims, in
short, that no one ever has (or ever can have) any justified beliefs at all.\textsuperscript{43} For the past two thousand years or so, skeptics and non-skeptics alike have crafted a variety of ingenious radically skeptical arguments. One (in)famous radically skeptical argument, known in some philosophical circles as “Agrippa’s Trilemma,” encapsulates what I will also call the No Grounds Objection. We may schematize the argument as follows:

**Agrippa’s Trilemma**\textsuperscript{44}

1. In order to justifiably believe something, I must have a good reason for believing it.
2. Any chain of reasons must have one of the following structures:
   - either
     - (a) it is an infinite series,
     - (b) it is circular, or
     - (c) it begins with a belief for which there are no further reasons.
   But,
3. I cannot have an infinitely long chain of reasoning for any of my beliefs.
4. Circular reasoning cannot produce justified beliefs.
5. Nor can I gain justified beliefs by positing foundational beliefs, since
   - I would not justifiably believe my starting beliefs to be true
   and
   - I cannot gain justified beliefs by deriving them from assumptions that I do not justifiably believe to be true.
6. So I can’t justifiably believe anything.

\textsuperscript{43} By “justified belief(s),” I mean (here and below) roughly “belief(s) justified to some extent.”
\textsuperscript{44} For a very similar argument, see Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, 9-10.
This conclusion clearly entails the falsity of phenomenal conservatism: after all, according to phenomenal conservatism, we can justifiably believe, in the absence of defeaters, that whatever seems to be the case really is the case. Ultimately, then, phenomenal conservatives must deny at least one of the argument’s premises—or else challenge the skeptic’s reasoning—if they wish to maintain their consistency.

During the past century, epistemologists have made valiant attempts to expose the alleged falsity of premises (3) and (4) and to establish, in turn, the truth of infinitism or coherentism, respectively. While the infinitist affirms the justificatory efficacy of at least some infinitely long chains of reasoning, the coherentist claims that reasoning in a circle can, given the right conditions, result in the formation of justified beliefs. I want to emphasize that none of my reasons for thinking that we must accept phenomenal conservatism depend on the falsity of either infinitism or coherentism. For all I know, some version(s) of either of these views may securely withstand the skeptic’s onslaught. In this paper, I simply wish to defend phenomenal conservatism; I do not thereby deny the truth of all versions of infinitism or all versions of coherentism. Nonetheless, given my purposes here, I will grant (3) and (4) to the skeptic for the sake of argument.

As a phenomenal conservative, I specifically reject that portion of (5) that states “I would not justifiably believe my starting points to be true [i.e., if I were to posit foundational beliefs].” According to the radical skeptic, this statement follows from (1), but in reality, given the ambiguity of (1), it merely may follow. On the one hand, we could disambiguate (1) so as to introduce the following alternative:

(1’) In order to justifiably believe that \( p \), my belief that \( p \) must have as its basis a further justified belief that \( q \).
If (1') is true, then, in a sense, the skeptic wins. Dialectically, though, (1') looks pretty weak because it disadvantageously begs the question against foundationalists—those who posit (potentially) justified beliefs that do not rest on further beliefs—and thus against phenomenal conservatives. See for yourself: (1’) just amounts to a denial of foundationalism. So as a phenomenal conservative—and thus as someone who embraces foundational beliefs—I may reasonably reject (1’). At the same time, though, I can recoup the kernel of truth in (1) by proposing a principle like the following:

(1*) In order to justifiably believe that $p$, my belief that $p$ must have as its basis: (i) some distinct representational mental state that relates to my belief that $p$ in a non-arbitrary way; or (ii) some mental mechanism that relates to my belief that $p$ in some non-arbitrary way.

This principle doesn’t tell us much, but it’s only meant to provide a minimally necessary condition on justified belief—the very sort of necessary condition that the staunchly radical skeptic despairs of satisfying, in fact.

At this point, the radical skeptic might willingly accept (1*) but claim that we still have no good reason to believe that the theory of phenomenal conservatism is true. After all, we cannot appeal to the fact that phenomenal conservatism seems true in order to ground its truth, since to do so would amount to no more than assuming what we phenomenal conservatives wish to prove: namely, that seemings do confer justification! What’s more, we have no other way of non-arbitrarily distinguishing between good reasons for accepting phenomenal conservatism and bad reasons for accepting phenomenal conservatism. So we should not accept phenomenal conservatism.

45 Given the falsity of infinitism and coherentism, of course!
46 Both PC$_1$ and PC$_c$ entail foundationalism, as I trust my readers can see for themselves.
IV. RESPONDING TO THE RADICAL SKEPTICAL CHALLENGE

In responding to the *No Grounds Objection*, I believe that phenomenal conservatives can—and should—appropriate some of the most relevantly helpful metaepistemological insights found in Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy*.47 According to Descartes’s meditator,48 after all, we dedicated seekers of truth may individually, upon completing our own processes of sufficient reflection, “lay it down as a general rule that whatever I perceive very clearly and distinctly is true” (CSM 2:24), and this general rule—an epistemic principle that Lex Newman has labeled the “C&D Rule,”49 for short—has straightforward affinities with phenomenal conservatism. When Descartes writes of “perceive[ing] [something] very clearly and distinctly,” for example, he surely has in mind the experience of a particular kind of seeming: namely, a seeming “both clear and distinct,” where “clarity contrasts with obscurity, and distinctness contrasts with confusion.”50 To those who would deny that we can think of clear and distinct perception as a special type of seeming without committing any egregious errors of philosophical interpretation, I simply suggest that I have no idea what else Descartes might mean. For consider: Descartes surely intends “perception” in a sense much broader than “sensory perception,” as I take it we all agree, and to my mind Newman

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48 I do not assume that Descartes intends his meditator to represent him—at least not in any sort of autobiographical sense.


50 Ibid., 1.3.
persuasively dissociates clear and distinct perception from *assent* (or *belief*).\(^{51}\) Furthermore, both Newman and Alan Nelson have helpfully stated—for the record, so to speak—that “Descartes uses ‘perceive’/‘perception’ (*percipio*/*perceptio*) with much wider scope than is the current practice in philosophy.”\(^{52}\) They suggest that, for Descartes, “to perceive *X* is, roughly, to be aware of *X*.”\(^{53}\) Here I wish to add only that, on Descartes’s view, perception—or clear and distinct perception, at any rate—must surely involve more than *mere* awareness. If to clearly and distinctly perceive that, say, two and two make four means nothing more to Descartes than to have a clear and distinct *awareness* of this fact, then the peculiar *epistemic forcefulness* of such obvious facts remains rather unsatisfyingly unexplained. Consequently, clear and distinct perception must, on Descartes’s view, also involve a phenomenological quality akin to what Tucker has called “assertiveness.” As such, particular instances of clear and distinct perception appear to differ very little—if at all—from correspondingly robust seemings. Not surprisingly, then, Descartes may have more to offer phenomenal conservatives.

For one thing, Descartes consistently distinguishes between two very different yet closely related aspects of non-arbitrary belief formation. As Newman and Nelson put the point, “both an epistemic component and a psychological component play an integral role in Decartes’ project.”\(^{54}\) On the one hand, the “indubitability [i.e., of clear and distinct perception] of interest to Descartes is psychological in character” in that it concerns the

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\(^{52}\) Newman and Nelson, “Circumventing Cartesian Circles,” 397.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.

\(^{54}\) Newman and Nelson, “Circumventing Cartesian Circles,” 400.
psychological constitution of the subject(s) in question. On the other hand, this same "indubitability . . . is . . . not merely psychological—not simply an inexplicable feeling. It has also a distinctively epistemic character, involving a kind of rational insight." Such "indubitability" may perhaps characterize some seemings—like the seeming that two and two make four, for example—though no doubt many other seemings fall short of this high Cartesian standard. Even so, as I intimated back in Section II, the phenomenal conservative can readily incorporate an aspect of Descartes’s basic insight: in short, the phenomenal conservative can reconceive of seemings as involving both an inclination or a disposition to believe—the “psychological component,” as it were—as well as the peculiar representational assertiveness—the “epistemic component,” so to speak—that phenomenal conservatives have always considered an essential feature of seemings. I myself have no problem with diversifying seemings in this manner, for when I introspect and consider my own seemings, I don’t “find” any seemings unaccompanied by what I would describe as inclinations—defeasible inclinations, to be sure, but real inclinations nonetheless—to believe their contents. Of course, most phenomenal conservatives have rejected the suggestion that seemings just are inclinations (or dispositions) to believe, and I wholeheartedly agree with them on that score. Here I simply suggest that we think of seemings as involving such inclinations. By revising our working notion of a seeming, we can better allow for the possibility that the psychological and the epistemic aspects of seemings may each contribute in its own way to the kind of non-arbitrary belief formation of which the radical skeptic demands an account. Consequently, I will proceed on the assumption that seemings tend to incline their subjects to believe their contents.

Indeed, given that the skeptic challenges the phenomenal conservative to provide just such non-arbitrary grounds for accepting phenomenal conservatism, we might wonder how the phenomenal conservative should proceed at this point. Well, having considered what Descartes has to offer, we now know that we can distinguish between at least two different senses of “non-arbitrary,” as follows:

- **Normative**: Non-arbitrariness as adherence to some standard of justification (or perhaps to “good reasoning” more broadly).

- **Non-Normative**: Non-arbitrariness as involving some other sort of (non-normative) constraint, such as (psychological) necessity.

As I have already suggested, the skeptic cannot press the phenomenal conservative to provide any normative non-arbitrary grounds for accepting phenomenal conservatism without lapsing into obvious partisanship—namely, by assuming the falsity of foundationalism—and thereby abandoning her skepticism. Consequently, it would seem that the phenomenal conservative need only come up with some adequate non-normative non-arbitrary grounds for accepting phenomenal conservatism. In other words, the phenomenal conservative must produce some plausible metaepistemological constraints on her theory of normative justification.

One such constraint—which Descartes highlights in the *Meditations*—might appeal to the induced nature of at least some of our beliefs. At an early juncture in the *Meditations*, Descartes famously declares:

> [W]hen I turn to the things themselves which I think I perceive very clearly, I am so convinced by them that I spontaneously declare: let whoever can do so deceive me, he will never bring it about that I am
nothing, so long as I continue to think I am something . . . or bring it about that two and three added together are more or less than five, or anything of this kind in which I see a manifest contradiction. (CSM 2:25)

As Newman reads this passage, Descartes here appeals to the distinct but related notions of “Assent-inducing perceptions,” or “perceptions that determine the will’s assent,” and “Assent-compelling perceptions,” or “perceptions that determine the will’s assent . . . even when the intellect is attending also to contrary or undermining reasons.” Such perceptions as these—constrained as they are by psychological factors beyond the subject’s control—plausibly count as appropriately non-arbitrary grounds for belief.

Perhaps phenomenal conservatives, like Descartes, can rebuff the radical skeptical challenge by appealing to the *prima facie* assent-inducing character of seemings. Consider, for example, the following sort of argument:

**The Inducement Argument**

1. **If, prima facie,** (a seeming that) PC_c induces S’s assent, and if, *ultima facie,*(this seeming that) PC_c would fail to induce S’s assent only if S were to assent to some seeming with content entailing ~PC_c, then S must accept PC_c.
2. **Prima facie, PC_c does induce** S’s assent, and *ultima facie,* PC_c would fail to induce S’s assent only if S were to assent to some seeming with content entailing ~PC_c.
3. **So S must accept** PC_c.

This argument strikes me as quite promising on the whole. The presumably less controversial (2) will, of course, vary in its plausibility from person to person. For now,  

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suffice it to say that, *prima facie*, $P_C$ does induce *my* assent—as well as the assent, I suspect, of at least some other phenomenal conservatives—and as far as I know, $P_C$ would fail to induce my assent only if I were to assent to some seeming with content entailing $\neg P_C$. In other words, I consider the second premise of the Inducement Argument to apply at least to myself—and probably to some other phenomenal conservatives, as well. Whether it applies to others remains to be seen.

On the other hand—notwithstanding the perhaps formidable verbiage—the first premise of the argument seems intuitively plausible in general given the revised conception of seemings that I have recommended phenomenal conservatives adopt. On this conception, seemings *tend* to induce assent to their contents. Put another way: *prima facie*, seemings induce assent to their contents. Roughly, this feature of seemings implies that, other things equal, one will assent to the contents of her seemings in the absence of any contravening psychological or epistemic factors. Thus, it seems quite plausible to suppose that one *must*—practically *by definition*—accept the contents of seemings that, *prima facie*, induce one’s assent and that encounter no “resistance,” so to speak, from any independent psychological or epistemic factors (including other seemings, of course). Furthermore, when one experiences seemings with contents approximating $P_C$ and $P_C$, any “resistance” posed to these seemings by some additional seeming(s) strikes me as patently self-defeating. Consequently, when the *only* such “resistance” to any seemings that *prima facie* vindicate phenomenal conservatism takes the form of *further seemings*, I simply doubt that the subject(s) of these seemings can actually fail to accept the justificatory efficacy of seemings in general—and thus to accept something very much like phenomenal conservatism, if not phenomenal conservatism itself.
Unfortunately, in spite of its basic appeal, the Inducement Argument has some severe flaws. The variability of (2)'s plausibility alone will likely impede the argument’s widespread acceptance. Moreover, because the Inducement Argument invokes a paradigmatically psychological mechanism—namely, the assent-inducing mechanism, whatever that ends up looking like, exactly—I suspect that many philosophers—not to mention psychologists—will frown upon the argument’s a priori speculations about how the inducement of assent works, even though I need not (as far as I can tell) commit myself to any particularly controversial metaphysical, physical, or psychological theses in order to find support for the argument’s premises. In any case, I have no desire to rest my case for phenomenal conservatism on the Inducement Argument.

Nonetheless, in spite of its flaws, the Inducement Argument naturally suggests stronger defenses of phenomenal conservatism. Huemer himself has provided one such line of defense, which he describes broadly and at some length in Approaching Infinity:

All beliefs that are initially plausible candidates for being justified are based on [seemings]. This includes philosophical beliefs about when beliefs are justified or not. Those who disagree with phenomenal conservatism are just those to whom phenomenal conservatism does not seem correct. But when one holds a belief, one is rationally committed to holding the source of one’s belief to be an adequate source of justification; one is in a self-defeating position if one thinks that one’s belief is based on something that in no way justifies it. Therefore . . . one must endorse appearances as a source of justification.58

In other work, Huemer has schematized this “self-defeat” argument in a variety of ways.

58 Huemer, Approaching Infinity, 96.
I reproduce one of his most perspicuous reconstructions below:

**The Self-Defeat Argument**

(1') All our beliefs (in relevant cases) are based upon appearances.

(2') A belief is justified only if what it is based upon constitutes an adequate source of justification.

(3') Therefore, if appearances are not a source of justification, then all our beliefs are unjustified, including the belief (if one has it) that appearances are not a source of justification.

I will note immediately that I find Huemer’s argument quite plausible—more plausible, in most respects, than the Inducement Argument. It does seem to me that most of my beliefs, anyway—at least those beliefs that I have ever entertained—have their basis in corresponding seemings. Furthermore, (2’) just seems self-evidently true: the relevant concept of epistemic justification more or less implies the truth of this premise. Given the argument’s validity—which I do not dispute—the conclusion seamlessly follows.

Even so, some philosophers do not share my intuitions as to the eminent plausibility of the Self-Defeat Argument. Michael DePaul has, for instance, objected to Huemer’s argument on the grounds that a “crucial premise of the argument is empirical, [and] Huemer defends this premise with no more than armchair speculation.” Indeed, though DePaul considers himself “a fan of armchair philosophy,” he “chide[s] Huemer” for evidently not having “learned to be dubious about armchair empirical inquiry, and in

60 I say “more or less” here because the relevant concept of epistemic justification may instead imply something very *similar to*—but not *identical to*—premise (2’).
particular, armchair psychology. Fair enough, I say. Admittedly, I fail to see why the empirical character, in particular, of Huemer’s first premise worries DePaul, since we can presumably conduct all sorts of empirical inquiries from the comfort of our armchairs. Via pure introspection—without appealing to any experiments or even to any sensory data more broadly—I can, for example, reasonably conclude that I feel hungry at the moment—and I couldn’t ask for a better empirical investigation than that! So I will suppose that DePaul’s true reasons for rejecting Huemer’s first premise have to do with the premise’s strength. On this score, I concur with DePaul: Huemer’s first premise does look quite strong. In fact, it looks so strong that a perfectly reasonable skeptic might reject it in the absence of some further defense.

Fortunately for phenomenal conservatives everywhere, however, we need not commit ourselves to the truth of Huemer’s first premise. Instead, we can limit the scope of the Self-Defeat Argument so as to produce the following even stronger third argument:

**The Trip Wire Argument**

1. If, in offering reasons for denying that one should accept $p$, S must appeal to $p$ (either explicitly or implicitly), then S must accept $p$.

2. In offering reasons for denying that one should accept phenomenal conservatism, S must appeal to phenomenal conservatism (either explicitly or implicitly).

3. So S must accept phenomenal conservatism!

All told, I have no better argument for phenomenal conservatism than this. Nonetheless, this argument strikes me as quite powerful, and I suggest that my readers simply take a

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62 Ibid., 207.
63 For those who think that the “must” qualifier may overstate the case, substitute some comparable but weaker qualifier, such as “inevitably do.” The argument will still work.
moment to consider whether they do not already accept similar chains of reasoning as a matter of course whenever they find themselves in ordinary reflective contexts. At the very least, I predict that the Trip Wire Argument will eventually enjoy a much broader appeal than the Self-Defeat Argument.

Indeed, because I hope to do my part to bring about this broader appeal, I will attempt to forestall some potential objections to the Trip Wire Argument by making a handful of clarificatory remarks. First—and most fundamentally—the argument simply claims that, as reflective individuals, we must (or inevitably do) accept phenomenal conservatism. I have not, therefore, argued for any conclusion to the effect that we can evaluate our initial acceptance of phenomenal conservatism in normative terms. I have not, for example, demonstrated that we should accept phenomenal conservatism or that we are justified in accepting phenomenal conservatism. Likewise, I have not demonstrated that we must (or inevitably do) believe phenomenal conservatism. Instead, I say that we must (or inevitably do) accept or commit ourselves to phenomenal conservatism (usually tacitly). Moreover, for present purposes, I do not claim, as Huemer does, that all of our (justified) beliefs have their ultimate bases in seemings. Recall that phenomenal conservatism states a sufficient condition on justification, not a necessary condition. As such, I only claim that when we reflect on or offer reasons for denying the truth of phenomenal conservatism, we must in fact accept phenomenal conservatism.

From such a starting point, however, it does indeed appear to follow—namely, from the truth of phenomenal conservatism itself—that at least some beliefs based on seemings are justified to some extent. Given that we must (or inevitably do) accept phenomenal conservatism, after all, it follows—at least for those of us to whom
phenomenal conservatism does seem true—that we have at least some degree of justification for believing that phenomenal conservatism *really is* true. Hence, we may accurately describe phenomenal conservatism as in some sense *self-justifying*: we must (or inevitably do) accept it, and given that we must (or inevitably do) accept it, if it seems true to us, then, in the absence of defeaters—several of which I have defused above—we are at least to some extent justified in accepting it. In arguing for this conclusion, I wish to emphasize that I *do not* set out to *convince* or to *persuade* the skeptic; instead, I merely set out to *rebuff* the skeptic. Thus, I do not deny that some persons *may* have accepted radical skepticism by default, so to speak, nor do I deny that some persons might never engage in the sort of reflection that leads to the inevitable acceptance of phenomenal conservatism—though I frankly doubt that such people actually exist!64

I would now like to bring this section to a close by making a rather general case in favor of phenomenal conservatism—a case that conveys, more or less, the thrust of the Trip Wire Argument, but in plainer language. To that end, I will take two parting shots.65 First, in order to *plausibly* deny phenomenal conservatism—so as to persuade other *rational individuals*, say—the rational dissenter needs to produce evidence of the falsehood of phenomenal conservatism. Successfully producing such evidence, however, will eventually involve an inevitable appeal to seemings for the purpose of persuading the phenomenal conservative to accept some claim that implies the falsity of phenomenal conservatism. Indeed, as a matter of empirical fact, we make judgments “based upon how things seem” to us, and while we “need not believe *everything* that seems true,” we

64 *Pace* the vociferous protestations of Peter Unger, of course!
65 These two “parting shots” first appeared in roughly this form in my “Moorean Foundational Propositions and Phenomenal Conservatism.”
nonetheless ought to believe “only what seems” true.\textsuperscript{66} For surely we should not accept the “propositions that seem \textit{false} instead.”\textsuperscript{67} Thus, any plausible denial of phenomenal conservatism will in fact presuppose the truth of phenomenal conservatism.

Second (and similarly), intellectual inquiry itself presupposes phenomenal conservatism \textit{in principle}, and rational arguments function by their very nature so as to “change the way things seem to one’s audience.”\textsuperscript{68} Intellectual inquiry presupposes phenomenal conservatism in the sense that the \textit{rational knowledge-seeker} begins by holding fixed what seems true to her. Over time, assuming that she accepts only those propositions for which she has sufficient justification, the rational knowledge-seeker builds her edifice of beliefs upon the foundational beliefs that she has accepted on the basis of appearances. Likewise, rational arguments function to change the way things seem to the auditor(s) by presenting premises that seem true and seem to support the argument’s conclusion. Even radical skeptical arguments presuppose the skeptic’s own sense of what seems true. Consequently, to deny phenomenal conservatism is to adopt a self-defeating position. We must, therefore, accept phenomenal conservatism.

\textbf{VI. Conclusion}

By now, I hope to have covered roughly the following ground. First, I have provided an account of phenomenal conservatism, along with a general characterization of seemings as \textit{sui generis} representational mental states. Second, I have considered and addressed some common objections to phenomenal conservatism, and I have suggested that the \textit{No Grounds Objection} in particular poses the most serious threat to phenomenal conservatism.

\textsuperscript{66} See Huemer, \textit{Ethical Intuitionism}, 101.
\textsuperscript{67} Huemer, \textit{Skepticism and the Veil of Perception}, 105.
\textsuperscript{68} Huemer, \textit{Ethical Intuitionism}, 101.
conservatism. As such, it deserves a sustained response. To that end, I have crafted a novel defense of phenomenal conservatism by incorporating a handful of the most relevant metaepistemological insights from Descartes’s *Meditations* in order to argue, in turn, that reflective rejections of phenomenal conservatism inevitably lead to self-defeat. I conclude that we have no choice but to embrace phenomenal conservatism.⁶⁹

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⁶⁹ For his invaluable assistance in overseeing the production of this paper, as well as for the many stimulating conversations that we’ve had over coffee, I extend many thanks to my thesis advisor, Lex Newman. For helpful discussion of many of the ideas that I’ve attempted to articulate in this paper, as well as (especially) my arguments for phenomenal conservatism, I would also like to express my gratitude to Brandon Nemelka, Kris Phillips, Bill Lycan, Trent Kraczek, Warren Jensen, and Alex Brittain.
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Name of Candidate: Ross Jensen

Birth Date: October 22, 1991

Birth Place: Long Beach, California

Address: 1615 Dawn Drive
Cottonwood Heights, UT 84121