Huemer’s Problem of Memory Knowledge

ABSTRACT: When S seems to remember that P, what kind of justification does S have for believing that P? In "The Problem of Memory Knowledge." Michael Huemer offers a two-part answer to this question: the justification of a memory belief is a product of both the justified acquisition of the belief and the justified retention of the belief. In what follows I argue that Huemer's account of memory knowledge is unacceptable. I will explicate Huemer’s dualistic account of memorial justification and argue that it runs counter his arguments against other theories of memory knowledge. I will also argue that if he gives up his dualistic account, in favor of phenomenal conservatism, his phenomenal conservatism faces its own problems.

I know that the Moon is about two and a half hundred thousand miles from the Earth. I know that the high school I graduated from was in Long Beach, California. It seems as if we know a great many things by way of memory. But how, one might ask, is one justified in their belief that P when one remembers that P? In "The Problem of Memory Knowledge." Michael Huemer offers a two-part answer to this question: the justification of a memory belief is a product of both the justified acquisition of the belief and the justified retention of the belief.

In what follows I will argue that Huemer's account of memory knowledge is unacceptable. First, I will present Huemer’s claimed refutation of the natural theories of memorial justification. Second, I will explicate and clarify Huemer’s account of memorial justification. Third, I will show that if his refutation of the natural theories of memorial justification is successful it counts against his own view and his more generic view of justification, phenomenal conservatism. Finally, I will argue that if he gives up his dualistic account, in light of his most recent work, his newly received view also faces problems.

1. The Natural Theories of Memorial Justification

The question to be asked is this: when S seems to remember that P, what kind of justification does S have for believing that P? The severity of the problem of memory knowledge is immediately apparent given Huemer’s claimed refutation of the natural answers to the problem: the Foundational Theory and the Preservation Theory.

The Foundational Theory attempts to locate the source of justification for memorial beliefs in present experience:

1- I have the experience of seeming to remember that P
2- Having the experience of seeming to remember that P makes one prima facie justified in believing that P.
3- Therefore, the belief that P is prima facie justified

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Huemer contends that the Foundational Theory faces counter-intuitive results that lead to its refutation:

Wishful Thinking Case: Imagine a subject S that adopted the belief that P on Monday due to wishful thinking. But, on Tuesday, the motivation for adopting the belief that P is forgotten. On Wednesday S seems to remember that P. Thus, on Wednesday the belief that P is justified for S, even though on Monday it was not.

Huemer argues that the lesson to learn from these kinds of cases is that there is an intuitive constraint on theories of memorial justification, “the justification for a belief cannot be increased by its passing into memory; it can only be lowered.” According to Huemer, “memory experience does not provide a new, foundational justification for a belief.”

Instead of locating the justification for a memorial belief in the subject’s present experience, the Preservation Theory focuses on the acquisition of the belief:

1- When I remember that P, my justification (assuming there are no changes in evidence) for believing that P is whatever it was to begin with
2- I remember that P
3- The belief that P was justified at time T₁ in virtue of evidence E
4- Therefore, the belief that P is justified

Huemer argues that like the Foundational Theory, the Preservation Theory faces counter-intuitive results:

Newly Created Person Case: A subject S is created, complete with false memories, five-minutes ago. The justification S has for believing what he had for breakfast (on the assumption that S remember what he had for breakfast) is exactly the same justification a normal person would have under normal conditions. And, it is assumed, the normal person under normal conditions is justified.

Huemer points out, “According to the present view, memory merely preserves one’s initial justification, if any, for a belief.” Since S’s memorial belief was created unjustified it gains no justification with the passage of time even though we can imagine that S’s belief is indistinguishable from my justified memorial belief. From this kind of case Huemer concludes that the lesson to learn is that, “the past history of belief is

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2 Ibid., 349.
3 Ibid., 346.
4 Ibid., 350.
irrelevant to its present justification.”\textsuperscript{5} Huemer contends that, “memory does not merely preserve the same justification a belief has when first adopted.”\textsuperscript{6}

2. Huemer's Dualistic Theory of Memorial Justification

2.1 The Dualistic Theory: A First Approximation

Huemer argues that his Dualistic Theory accommodates all of the intuitions that led to the refutation of the natural theories of memorial justification. In addition, the Dualistic Theory includes the positive aspects of the Foundational Theory and the Preservation Theory. The Dualistic Theory requires for justified memorial belief both the justified acquisition of that belief and the justified retention of that belief.

Huemer contends that the Dualistic Theory can successfully handle the cases that were problematic for the Foundational Theory and the Preservation Theory. To see this consider the kind of case that led to the counter-intuitive result for the Foundational Theory. In the Wishful Thinking Case the belief that P was formed as a result of wishful thinking, and even though the belief that P was retained in memory, the subject forgets the source of the belief. Since the Dualistic Theory requires of justified memorial belief adequate justification when the belief was adopted, beliefs that are formed on the basis of wishful thinking do not count as being justified. Huemer argues that as a result irrational belief (like in the Wishful Thinking Case) cannot become rational by passing into memory, and the Dualistic Theory makes good on this constraint.

Similarly, Huemer argues that the Dualistic Theory is able to account for why the subject in the Newly Created Person Case has a justified belief. Huemer claims that, “coming to believe something by seeming to remember it is an epistemically rational way of acquiring belief.”\textsuperscript{7} As a result the subject has a justified belief as long as the belief is based on what the subject seems to remember. According to Huemer the newly created person acquires their belief in an appropriate way, and is justified in retaining it.

2.2 The Dualistic Theory: A Revised Account

The essential role that belief acquisition plays for Huemer’s Dualistic Theory is troubling given another very common intuition about memorial belief: a belief can be unjustified when introduced, but later, the very same belief can come to have justification. Imagine the following kind of case:

Championship Case: In early 2009 as the result of wishful thinking I form the belief that the Lakers won the 2010 NBA championship. Then, to my great delight, I am able to watch the Lakers beat the Celtics in seven games and win the 2010 NBA championship. As time passes I find myself

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid., 350.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 346.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 351. Huemer introduces this explanation as a “posit” and does not argue for its truth.
seeming to remember that the Lakers won the 2010 NBA championship.

The Dualistic Theory, it might be argued, rules out this kind of possibility. Once a belief is acquired in an unjustified way it might seem that belief fails to meet a necessary requirement for justification. The Dualistic Theory leaves no room for epistemic improvement for a belief that was acquired irrationally. Huemer could revise the Dualistic Theory so that it accommodates the intuition that led to the Championship Case:

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\text{Dualistic Theory*} \quad \text{First, the belief must satisfy the conditions on justification at some point (and not lose that justification), and second, the belief must be stored properly so it retains its positive epistemic quality.}
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The Dualistic Theory* may be exactly what Huemer had in mind. This revised interpretation of the Dualistic Theory makes sense of Huemer’s claim that, “a belief is justified full stop if and only if one had an adequate justification for adopting it at some point, and thenceforward one was justified in retaining it.”\(^8\) Once Huemer has been pushed to accept the Dualistic Theory* so that he can accommodate justified memorial beliefs that are unjustified when acquired it is my contention that his view faces unpalatable tension.

3. Huemer's Dualistic Theory Rejected

3.1 Reconsidering the Relevant Cases

Huemer motivates acceptance of the Dualistic Theory* by arguing that he has refuted the Foundational Theory and the Preservation Theory. The problem for Huemer results from his analysis of the problematic cases that threatened the Foundational Theory and the Preservation Theory. Consider Huemer’s treatment of the Newly-Created-Person Case. On Huemer’s view a person created 5 minutes ago with apparent memories who seems to remember having breakfast is justified in their belief that they had breakfast. The essential feature of Huemer’s response is that, “since [the newly-created-person] acquired his belief [about breakfast] this morning by \textit{seeming} to remember it, he is rational in accepting it.”\(^9\) The essence of Huemer’s response can be highlighted with the following Principle of Memorial Justification:

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\(^8\) Ibid., 351. Emphasis mine.
\(^9\) Ibid., 351. Emphasis mine.
PMJ: if a subject S acquires the belief that P from apparent memory [i.e. from seeming to remember], then in the absence of defeaters,\(^{10}\) S is justified in their belief that P.

The proposed problem surfaces when we consider Huemer’s treatment of the case that threatened the Foundational Theory.

In the Wishful Thinking case by forgetting how your belief was acquired, the belief has gone from being irrational to being rational. Huemer argues that there is something wrong with this case. However, Huemer’s presentation of the case seems uncharitable to the view he is attempting to critique. Recall the structure of the Foundational Theory:

1- I have the experience of seeming to remember that P
2- Having the experience of seeming to remember that P makes one prima facie justified in believing that P.
3- Therefore, the belief that P is prima facie justified

Huemer argues that one cannot have a belief that is made rational (or more rational) by its passing into memory. However, this diagnosis is uncharitable to the Foundational Theory. The point of the Foundational Theory was that a memorial belief gets its justification from the experience of seeming to remember.

Huemer is treating what seems to be analogous cases in an inconsistent manner. He treats the belief that results in the Wishful Thinking Case as unjustified while the belief that results in the Newly Created Person case is justified even though in both cases the relevant issue should be whether the subject seems to remember. In the Newly Created Person case it was the seeming to remember that justified the subject’s belief, so why does the seeming to remember not justify the subject’s belief in the Wishful Thinking Case?

Huemer would likely claim that there is a crucial difference between the two cases. Only the Newly Created Person Case represents an instance of a belief being acquired on the basis of apparent memory. The Wishful Thinking Case illustrates an instance of belief that a subject had already acquired (in an irrational way) and then remembered. Thus, Huemer might try to argue that a belief being acquired in a rational way is a necessary requirement for that belief’s justification. However, this requirement, while compatible with the Dualistic Theory, is incompatible with the Dualistic Theory*.

On the Dualistic Theory* a belief must satisfy the conditions on justification at some point (which leaves room for a belief was acquired irrationally but later comes to be justified) in order to be justified. As a result, even though the belief in the Wishful Thinking Case was acquired irrationally that very same belief when remembered is justified according to the Foundational Theory and the Dualistic Theory*. However, if this result is right then Huemer is put into a precarious position.

\(^{10}\) I take Huemer to be introducing a no-defeaters clause when he says, “The normal functioning of memory, in the absence of specific reasons for revising a belief, constitutes an epistemically acceptable manner of retaining belief.” Ibid., 351.
If Huemer continues to maintain that The Wishful Thinking Case is problematic then his own view, the Dualistic Theory*, is threatened by the same problem. Thus, if he thought he had refuted the Foundation Theory he should think that the Dualistic Theory* has also been refuted. Alternatively, if Huemer contends that the Wishful Thinking Case is not problematic for the Dualistic Theory*, then his claimed refutation of the Foundational Theory is also premature. After all both Theories, as I have argued, offer the same essential response to the case. Finally, Huemer might backtrack and argue that the two cases are importantly different: a necessary feature of memorial justification is that the belief must be acquired rationally (which does not happen in the Wishful Thinking Case but does happen in the Newly Created Person Case). Sadly, such a response would fail to account for the Championship Case, which seemed to show that an irrationally acquired belief could come to be justified.

3.2 The Dualistic Theory and Huemer’s Phenomenal Conservatism

Recently\(^\text{11}\) Huemer has advocated the following principle of phenomenal conservatism:\(^\text{12}\)

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\text{Phenomenal Conservatism} \quad \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.
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According to Huemer the principle of phenomenal conservatism acts as a foundational source of justification. Thus, for example, if I seem to hear my daughter yelling then, (on the assumption that I have no defeaters) I have some degree of justification for the belief that my daughter is yelling. Huemer argues that “it seems to S that p” or “it appears to S that p” are examples of the mental state called \textit{appearance}. As examples of species of appearance Huemer lists sensory experience, apparent memory, intuition, and introspection.\(^\text{13}\)

Huemer’s current preference for broad-mindedness when it comes to justification might conflict with his rejection of the Foundational Theory of memorial justification. Again, as I have argued, the Foundational Theory can be developed in the following way: having the experience of seeming to remember that P gives one prima facie justification for the belief that P. However, this sounds importantly similar to Huemer’s presentation of phenomenal conservatism. The only difference is that the Foundational Theory would be a kind of \textit{local} phenomenal conservatism: phenomenal conservatism with respect to a


\(^{13}\) Ibid., 30.
certain class of appearances.\textsuperscript{14} It is not clear why Huemer, who treats all species of appearance as equally valid,\textsuperscript{15} would argue that the Foundational Theory is false.

Perhaps, the most charitable interpretation of Huemer would be that he has simply changed his mind. If this is the case and Huemer is best described as having come to accept a different view (the Foundational Theory, by way of his recent endorsements of phenomenal conservatism). Of course, this realization would lead one to wonder about the status of Huemer’s own proposed refutation of the Foundational Theory.

4. The Foundational Theory Reconsidered

Huemer’s refutation of the Foundational Theory turned on his intuition that the justification of a belief cannot be increased by its passing into memory; this was the lesson to be learned from the Wishful Thinking Case. However, it should be clear now that this intuition must be given up if Huemer is to retain his phenomenal conservatism. In a case of forgotten evidence,\textsuperscript{16} like the wishful thinking case, once the subject forgets forming the belief on the basis of wishful thinking all the subject has left is the seeming to remember that belief. If this is the case, the subject could be described as lacking any defeaters, and as a result would have some degree of justification for the belief that they seem to remember (given PC).\textsuperscript{17}

There is though a specific problem that I wish to explore in regards to Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism as it applies to memory. Imagine one more case:

The Alzheimer’s Patient Case: A subject S seems to remember that P. S also seems to remember having Alzheimer’s disease.\textsuperscript{18} S also seems to remember that a result of his Alzheimer’s disease is that many of the things he seems to remember (things like P, for instance) are false.

I take it that Huemer would admit that the subject in the Alzheimer Patient Case has a defeater for his belief that P. It would seem like such a person has very good reason to

\textsuperscript{14} It might be argued that Huemer’s account of phenomenal conservatism is still slightly different than my presentation of the Foundational Theory since phenomenal conservatism entails “some degree of justification” while my presentation of the Foundational Theory turns on “prima facie justification.” However, it seems easy enough to adjust the Foundational Theory in such a way that it avoids this difference, without affecting its thesis.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{16} There are two kinds of cases that I would consider ‘forgotten evidence cases’ those that involve rationally formed belief where the evidence is forgotten and those that involve irrationally formed belief where the evidence (if one is willing to call it that) is forgotten.
\textsuperscript{17} Of course, we could describe cases where the subject still does have a relevant defeater, but those are not the problematic cases.
\textsuperscript{18} My worry is not whether Alzheimer’s Disease really works like this, this kind of condition seems possible, and that is all my project requires.
doubt the efficacy of their memorial belief. However, the possibility of this kind of case seems to cause trouble for Huemer’s phenomenal conservatism.

As I increase in age I am increasingly more aware of my faulty memory. While I would not put myself on par with the subject in the Alzheimer’s Patient Case, I would consider myself to be in the same kind of state. If this line of reasoning is correct, and Huemer does not want to grant that I have a defeater for my memorial belief, he would need to offer a principled reason for why I have no defeater for my belief even though the Alzheimer’s Patient does.

Huemer might argue that I am in a much better epistemic position than the Alzheimer’s patient because my poor memory is still much better than that of the Alzheimer’s Patient. Unfortunately, this type of response seems especially problematic given the topic at hand. From my perspective, how can I without begging the question establish that my memory is better than that of an Alzheimer’s Patient.

Huemer should contend that the possibility of having a faulty memory does not count as a defeater, it is the seeming that one has a faulty memory that causes trouble. Sadly, it is not at all clear to me how strong this seeming must be before I have a defeater.

5. Conclusion

Huemer seems to have put himself in a difficult position. If he stands by his refutation of the Foundational Theory then his Dualistic Theory and his more general account of justification, Phenomenal Conservatism, is threatened. If, on the other hand, he gives up his criticism of the Foundational Theory then his Dualistic Theory is unmotivated, and as I have argued, his Phenomenal Conservatism seems to face its own challenges when it comes to the justification of memorial belief.