

# SEEMINGS AS *SUI GENERIS*

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## ABSTRACT

The epistemic value of seemings is increasingly debated. Such debates are hindered, however, by a lack of consensus about the nature of seemings. There are four prominent conceptions in the literature, and the plausibility of principles such as phenomenal conservatism, which assign a prominent epistemic role to seemings, varies greatly from one conception to another. It is therefore crucial that we identify the correct conception of seemings. I argue that seemings are best understood as *sui generis* mental states with propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character. Rival conceptions are shown to succumb to numerous difficulties.

Talk of “seemings” abounds. When it seems to S that something is the case, S is said to possess a mental state called a “seeming” or an “appearance”. Such language is ubiquitous in contemporary epistemology, most notably in debates surrounding epistemic principles such as phenomenal conservatism—the most prominent formulation of which is:

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

Debates about phenomenal conservatism (and similar principles such as perceptual dogmatism) are debates about the epistemic value of seemings. Hindering these debates is a lack of consensus about the nature of seemings. The literature features at least four competing conceptions. Which conception turns out to be correct has tremendous bearing on the outcome of the aforementioned debates. There is a reason that every proponent of phenomenal conservatism (that has gone on record) endorses an experiential conception of seemings: it is the only conception on which phenomenal conservatism is plausible. Accordingly, it is critical that we determine what seemings are before we draw any firm conclusions on their epistemic significance.

I will argue that seemings are *sui generis* mental states with propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character. This conception will be supported by highlighting the numerous

problems that plague the relevant alternatives but which it escapes. I offer a series of novel arguments towards this end and shore up existing arguments in the face of new and unanswered challenges.

## **1 Setting Up the Argument**

To develop my argument, I will assume that we have a fairly accurate pre-theoretical understanding of when something seems true to us, what it is like when something seems true to us, and how something's seeming true functions in our mental economy. We can gain access to this pre-theoretical understanding by gauging our intuitions about certain cases, or by considering whether certain principles about seemings ring true, or even by examining the conversational propriety of seemings-statements. Reflection on these things may lead us to correct minor deficiencies in our pre-theoretical conception, but, given my starting assumption, our final theory should remain largely faithful to this pre-theoretical understanding and the intuitions and principles that arise from it.<sup>1</sup> This appears to be the strategy used in many of the most prominent discussions of seemings (such as Huemer 2007, Chudnoff 2011, and Cullison 2010). Our goal, then, is to discover which conception of seemings best fits with our pre-theoretical understanding.

I should also make explicit an assumption operative in nearly all of the recent discussions about seemings: that whenever something seems true there is a single kind of mental state—which we call “seemings” or “appearances”—that makes it so. This assumption is by no means trivial. It may turn out that there is no unified conception of seemings, no single kind of mental state that is present whenever something seems true to us. Perhaps there are only a variety of different mental

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that my strategy does not commit one to the position that intuitions are good evidence in general or that philosophy generally proceeds on the basis of intuition. I'm only making an assumption about the particular matter at hand.

states the presence of which, depending on the situation, makes it seem to one that something is true.<sup>2</sup>

The possibility that there be no unified conception of seemings is different from the view that “seems” or “appears” can be used in a variety of senses (Chisholm 1957). There is reason to doubt that there are multiple senses in which something can seem to be the case (Huemer 2013b); nevertheless, the existence of alternate usages is fully compatible with there being a single kind of mental state that is present whenever, in one particular sense, something seems true. For instance, “knows” is used in a variety of senses (“S know that *p*”; “S knows how to A”; “S<sub>1</sub> knows S<sub>2</sub>”), and yet there may be a single kind of mental state—e.g. a kind called “propositional knowledge”—that is present whenever someone is said to know in a particular sense. The possibility that concerns us here is that, even once we have isolated the relevant sense in which something seems true, there may still fail to be a single kind of mental state whose presence makes this the case.

This issue deserves a fuller treatment than I can give here. That being said, I think we should opt for a unified conception of seemings unless there is reason to think that no unified conception is adequate. It is generally good practice to prefer the simpler theory. Why appeal to a plurality of different states when a single kind can do all the same work? Consider someone who maintains that there is no single kind of mental state that we call a “propositional knowledge”; rather there are a variety of different kinds of mental states by virtue of which one can be said to know that something is true. It would be incumbent on this person to justify their departure from a unified conception of knowledge. The same holds true for seemings. Unless there are reasons for thinking that no unified conception is adequate, it is fair to assume, or at least prioritize the search for, a single kind of mental state in virtue of which something seems true. And as we will see throughout the discussion, there is at least one conception of seemings that appears well-

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<sup>2</sup> In such a case, we might say either that many different kinds of states can count as seemings or that there are no such things as seemings, only a variety of different states by virtue of which something seems true. The difference is, I think, merely terminological.

equipped to explain all the data. On a final note, the discussions I am engaging with are predicated on the assumption that there is a unified conception of seemings (or at least that there is hope of one), so I think it appropriate to proceed in the same fashion and leave a more extended defense of this assumption for elsewhere.

Chris Tucker (2013, pp. 3-7) divides the various conceptions of seemings into four main camps. On the *Belief View*, a seeming that  $p$  is a belief that  $p$ .<sup>3</sup> On the *Inclination View*, a seeming that  $p$  is a conscious inclination to believe  $p$ .<sup>4</sup> On the *Experience View*, a seeming that  $p$  is a special kind of experience or *sui generis* mental state with  $p$  as its content.<sup>5</sup> A fourth view has come onto the scene relatively recently due to Conee (2013) and Tooley (2013).<sup>6</sup> This view says that a seeming that  $p$  is a belief or inclination to believe that one either has evidence for  $p$  or a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ . Tucker calls this the *Taking-Evidence View*.

I defend the Experience View. On this view, seemings share a number of important features with other kinds of mental states but cannot be reduced in terms of these other states. For instance, seemings have propositional content and a mind-to-world direction of fit like beliefs. Part

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<sup>3</sup> Tucker cites early Lycan 1988 and Swinburne 2001 as proponents of the Belief View. It is also worth including in this camp those who think of intuitions as beliefs since intuitions are often taken to be one kind of seeming. These include Devitt 2006, Goldman and Pust 1998, Gopnik and Schwitzgebel 1998, Kornblith 1998, Lewis 1983, and Ludwig 2007 among others. Chudnoff notes that conceiving of intuitions as beliefs (or inclinations to believe) is especially prominent among those who focus on the experimental data concerning intuitions. See, for example, some of the essays in French and Wettstein 2007 and Knobe and Nichols 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Tucker points to Rogers and Matheson 2011, Sosa 1998, 2007, and once again Swinburne 2001 as proponents of this view. Taylor 2015 defends this view though may not endorse it. We should also include those, like Earlenbaugh and Molyneux 2009 and (perhaps) Williamson 2004, 2007 who think that intuitions are inclinations to believe.

<sup>5</sup> Tucker tags Bealer 2000, Chudnoff 2011, Cullison 2010, Huemer 2001, 2007, Lycan 2013, Pryor 2000, Skene 2013, and Tucker 2010 as proponents of this view. I would add Bedke 2008, Bengson 2010, Bergmann 2013a, 2013b, Koksvik 2011, Markie 2013, McGrath 2013, and Pust 2000. Bealer 2000, Bergmann 2013a, 2013b, Cullison 2010, 2013, Huemer 2001, 2007, 2013b, Pryor 2000, and Skene 2013 all specifically designate seemings as *propositional attitudes*. Other proponents of the experience view refer to seemings more generally, as experiences or representational mental states. Byerly 2012, 774-5, makes an interesting case that propositional attitudes are not experiences. If his argument works, I am prepared to deny that seemings are propositional attitudes. My main claim is just that seemings are *sui generis* mental states with propositional content and a distinct phenomenal character.

<sup>6</sup> The view in Conee 2013 seems to be present all the way back in Conee 2004, but it was not discussed in debates about seemings until recently.

of what sets seemings apart from beliefs and other representational mental states is their distinct phenomenal character. This phenomenal character is described by Tolhurst as “the feel of truth” or “felt veridicality”. He writes, “seemings have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are” (Tolhurst 1998, pp. 298-9). By virtue of this phenomenal character, seemings present their content as actually being the case. Tucker explains,

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. (Tucker 2010, p. 530)

This phenomenal character is called “forcefulness” (Huemer 2001). Tucker (2010) prefers “assertiveness”, but this leaves things open to confusion. Many philosophers use “assertiveness” in such a way that beliefs are considered assertive mental states,<sup>7</sup> but beliefs as such lack the relevant phenomenal character. No doubt much of what you believe will also feel true, given that something’s feeling true often causes you to believe that it is true, but something’s feeling true is not constitutive of believing it. You can believe something (perhaps based on rational calculation or testimony) that does not feel true or that even feels false. Summing up, the Experience View says that seemings are forceful mental states with propositional content and that this establishes them as *sui generis*.

In what follows, I will criticize each of the alternatives to the Experience View, showing how each of them conflicts with our pre-theoretical understanding of seemings. The Experience View, in contrast, appears to have no such difficulties. I end the paper with a slightly fuller description of seemings as conceived on the Experience View.

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Hanna 2011, Huemer 2001, Tooley 2013.

## 2 The Belief View

Let us start with the Belief View. The standard objection to this view is that there are cases in which it seems to S that  $p$  but S does not believe  $p$ .<sup>8</sup> The standard example is the Müller-Lyer illusion.<sup>9</sup> When first presented with the illusion, one line seems longer than the other. It seems possible for this appearance to persist even when one ceases to believe that one line is longer than the other (perhaps when informed of the illusion by a reliable friend).<sup>10</sup> In fact, it is not uncommon to know someone who describes their own experience this way. This possibility is also supported by the felicity of saying, “It certainly *seems* like the lines are the same length but I don’t in any way believe it.” Other examples are not hard to find. The conscientious student may withhold assent towards an intuitive principle until all of the evidence is considered: “What you’re saying seems right but I’m not ready to believe it quite yet.” If it can seem that  $p$  when one does not believe that  $p$ , then its seeming that  $p$  cannot be the same as believing that  $p$ .

I should quickly note that the Experience View has no trouble handling these cases. There is nothing impossible or even odd about having a particular kind of experience with  $p$  as its content while not believing  $p$ .

It is difficult to see what a proponent of the Belief View could say in response to the standard objection. One might try to argue that in these cases the subject *does* believe, for example, that one line is longer than the other; they just believe this *and* that one line is not longer than the other. In other words, they hold at the same time obviously inconsistent beliefs. This move does not help the proponent of the Belief View. It commits them to the untenable conclusion that anyone who looks at the Müller-Lyer illusion and knows that it is an illusion is being irrational.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Among those who raise this objection are Bealer 2000, Bergmann 2013b, Cullison 2010, Chudnoff 2011, Huemer 2001, 2007, Koksvik 2011, and Tucker 2013.

<sup>9</sup> The Naïve Comprehension axiom is another standard example that could be used here.

<sup>10</sup> Gage 2014, p. 30, suggests that what still seems true is only that one line *appears* longer, not that one line *is* longer. This may be true of some, but to others it remains true that one line seems longer than the other. At the very least, it certainly seems *possible* that there be intuitions for something we know to be false, in which case one could have a seeming that  $p$  whilst not believing that  $p$ .

<sup>11</sup> See Koksvik 2011, p. 44ff, for more discussion on these matters.

The proponent of the Belief View might turn to Lyons (2009, 2013) for help, who argues that “the standard argument for distinguishing percepts [i.e. perceptual seemings] from beliefs is actually quite unconvincing upon closer scrutiny” (2009, p. 70). Given functionalism, Lyons points out that “believing that *p* is a matter of standing in a certain functional relation to a representation, R, which has the content that *p*. ... When R has this causal role, it is a belief” (2009, p. 71). Similarly, a representation is a seeming when it plays a certain functional role in the mind. Even if the functional roles of a seeming and a belief are different, there is no reason to think that a single representation, R, cannot play both roles simultaneously, in which case R is both a seeming and a belief.<sup>12</sup> The Müller-Lyer illusion is a case in which R stands in the functional role of a seeming but not that of a belief. However, Lyons retorts, “the fact that what I believe and what percept I'm having are not *necessarily* the same does not show that individual percepts are not beliefs, in cases where the two agree.” In other words, the standard objection fails to show that seemings are *always* distinct from beliefs.

I grant that the standard objection fails to show this. What I must emphasize, however, is that this does nothing to undermine the standard objection to the Belief View. The Belief View maintains that what it is to be a seeming *just is* to be a belief—i.e. that all token representations that play the functional role of a seeming are, by virtue of playing that role, also beliefs. The standard objection does show the Belief View, so understood, to be false. Lyons’s insight that some token representations may play the functional role of both seeming and belief casts no doubt on this refutation.

Lyons seems well aware of this (though some of his statements can be misread to suggest otherwise). He agrees that the standard objection shows, “The kinds *belief* and *percept* are distinct; being a belief is a different thing from being a percept” (2009, p. 72), and he has no problem granting that a seeming can be distinct from any belief (2009, chapter 3, footnote 40). So, Lyons

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<sup>12</sup> Lyons 2009, chapter 3, section 2 offers a more detailed account of how this is possible.

does not appear to have any dispute with the standard objection's takedown of the Belief View, but this is a subtle point that is easily missed. We would do well to clearly distinguish two positions:

(i) The Belief View, which says that all seemings are beliefs (and that those token states are beliefs by virtue of that which makes them seemings).

(ii) The view that no token seeming is a belief.

The standard objection, at least as it is featured here and in the related literature, is an objection to (i). It is no surprise then that, when considered as an objection to (ii), the standard objection is "woefully inadequate" (Lyons 2013, p. 23). It is, however, perfectly adequate to refute the Belief View.<sup>13</sup>

Here is another problem for the Belief View. Believing  $p$  comes with certain norms that do not come with its seeming to one that  $p$ . If Peter believes  $p$ , then he can (at least sometimes) be criticized if he lacks sufficient evidence for  $p$  or if he fails to properly base his belief on that evidence. But we do not require evidence for  $p$  before  $p$  seems true.<sup>14</sup> Consider the difference between these two statements:

"The argument seems valid, but I don't have anything (other than my seeming) to support this."

"I believe the argument is valid, but I don't have anything (other than my belief) to support this."

No one would criticize someone because of the first statement, but many would criticize someone because of the second. The best explanation is that something's seeming to be true does not carry the same responsibilities as believing it to be true. Coming at it from a slightly different angle, a belief is unjustified if its content is not epistemically probable, but a seeming is not unjustified if its content is not epistemically probable (assuming we can make sense of an "unjustified

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<sup>13</sup> I should add, by way of parting, that Lyon's insight about the possibility of a token seeming being identical to belief is perfectly compatible with the Experience View, which says only that the kind *seemings* is *sui generis* and distinct from the kind *beliefs*.

<sup>14</sup> McCain 2012, p. 48 questions whether we can even have evidence for seemings like we can have evidence for beliefs.

appearance” in the first place).<sup>15</sup> Imagine you are passing the roulette table as the ball starts to roll. For some unknown reason, it seems that it is going to come up red, even though your evidence only assigns this a probability of .5. You would be foolish to bet on this seeming, but you are not violating any epistemic norms just by having it. For this reason, seemings cannot be the same kind of thing as beliefs.

All of this makes sense if seemings are experiences. Undergoing an experience is not subject to the same norms as believing. The content of your experiences does not need to be epistemically probable, for instance. In fact, you might think that experiences are not even the sort of thing that can be justified or unjustified. Of course, a *person* can be epistemically or morally vicious for putting herself into a position to have certain experiences. Suppose someone allows fear and insecurity to decay into prejudice and bigotry and, because of these biases, undergoes an experience with the content that a certain people group is unworthy of respect. The person is blameworthy for allowing himself to become the sort of person who has such experiences, but the experience itself is not unjustified, just delusive.

A third problem with the Belief View is that, intuitively, its seeming to us that *p* plays an important role in our coming to believe that *p*.<sup>16</sup> A seeming that *p* paradigmatically motivates belief in *p*. This is why, when asked to explain why we believe something, we often respond by saying that it seems that way. The following statements are all felicitous:

“I believe *p* because it seems that way.”

“When it seems that *p* it inclines me to believe *p*.”

“My belief in *p* is based on the fact that it seems that way.”

The Experience View has no difficulties here. If seemings are experiences of the right sort—say, with propositional content and a distinctive phenomenal character that inclines us to believe that

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<sup>15</sup> Huemer 2001, pp. 97-8, argues that seemings can be justified or unjustified. C.f. McGrath 2013 on quasi-inferential seemings. See Huemer 2013a for more differences between beliefs and seemings.

<sup>16</sup> This argument is usually given against identifying seemings with inclinations to believe, but it applies *mutatis mutandis* to beliefs. See Sect. 3.

content—then it makes perfect sense that they would cause (or otherwise explain) our beliefs.<sup>17</sup>

The Belief View, on the other hand, seems unable to accommodate the data. Seemings obviously cannot cause or explain our beliefs if to be a seeming just is to be a belief. (I will critique a possible response to this style of argument in Sect. 3 when the same line of reasoning is leveled against the Inclination View.)

The cumulative weight of these problems is too much for the Belief View to bear. It fails to line up with our pre-theoretical understanding of seemings.

### 3 The Inclination View

The inclination view says that seemings are not beliefs but rather conscious inclinations to believe. Ernest Sosa, a proponent of the Inclination View, characterizes a conscious inclination to believe *p* as the feeling of being pushed or compelled to believe *p*. He writes,

What *are* these seemings? It is helpful to compare deliberation on a choice or the pondering of a question, where we “weigh” reasons pro or con. Switching metaphors, we feel the “pull” of conflicting considerations. No matter the metaphor, the phenomenon itself is familiar to us all. There is something it is *like* to feel the pull of contrary attractions as we deliberate or ponder. Such intellectual seemings, such pulls, are distinct from sensory experiences. (Sosa 2007, pp. 47-8)

I’ll treat conscious inclinations to believe as felt attractions for the purposes of this discussion.

Many of the problems facing the Inclination View are the same as or similar to those confronting the Belief View. As before, the first objection to the Inclination View is that it can

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<sup>17</sup>Above, Lyons 2009, 2013 argues that a token representation, *R*, can simultaneously possess the properties of being a seeming and of being a belief, in which case the seeming and the belief are the same state. Would this prevent that seeming from even partially explaining why we have that belief? I don’t think so. To explain why we have this belief, we must explain how *R* came to possess the property of being a belief, and *R*’s property of being a seeming could play an explanatory role in how *R* came to possess the new property of being a belief. A quarterback’s pass can gain the property of being a touchdown pass partially by virtue of possessing other properties such as having a certain velocity, initial direction, flight pattern, etc. Similarly, *R* can gain the property of being a belief partially in virtue of possessing the property of being a seeming. (Furthermore, I do not think there is any problem with a seeming justifying or serving as a reason for belief in cases where the same token representation is both a seeming and a belief, contra Lyons 2013, p. 24. Just as an action’s having the property of, say, bringing about a lot of pleasure can, in conjunction with other things, bring it about that this action is morally justified, so *R*’s having the property of being a seeming can bring it about both that *R* has the property of being a belief and that *R* has the property of being a justified belief.)

seem to one that  $p$  without one being inclined to believe  $p$ . Let us return to the Müller-Lyer illusion. To someone who is familiar with the illusion, it may seem that one line is longer while lacking any inclination to believe this—i.e. without feeling pushed or compelled to believe it. Samuel Taylor (2015, p. 10) claims that it is infelicitous to state, “It seems (or appears) to me that  $P$  is true but I don’t feel *at all* compelled to actually believe  $P$ ,” but Taylor’s claim strikes me as false. That statement sounds perfectly felicitous to my ears. Consider also the statement, “One line seems longer than the other but, since I know better, I’m not at all inclined to believe it.”

Earlenbaugh and Molyneux (2009, p. 106ff) offer what I consider to be the strongest response to this objection.<sup>18</sup> Their first move is to distinguish between *competing* inclinations and *net* inclinations.<sup>19</sup> As Chudnoff (2011, p. 633) points out, this distinction is analogous to the distinction between component and resultant vectors. One may have multiple inclinations that counter or supplement one another resulting in a net inclination that is stronger or weaker than any particular inclination. In the case of competing inclinations, two inclinations oppose one another (i.e. incline in opposite directions), negating to some degree the effects of the other. The example Earlenbaugh and Molyneux (E&M) give is of having “a competitive inclination to eat the cake and a simultaneous competitive inclination to stay on one’s diet” (2009, p. 106). E&M argue that when looking at the Müller-Lyer illusion one has a *competing* inclination to believe that one line is longer but no *net* inclination to believe this. What people report, then, is that they have no *net* inclination to believe that one line is longer than the other, and this is compatible with the Inclination View.

This explanation is unacceptable. When I say, “I have no inclination to believe that one line is longer than the other,” I am saying that I have no inclination *whatsoever* to believe that one line is longer than the other. I have neither a competing inclination nor a net inclination to believe it. I think this is what many others are intending to report as well.<sup>20</sup> Regardless, as long as there is

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<sup>18</sup> I would classify Earlenbaugh and Molyneux as proponents of the Inclination View, though they only claim that *intuitions* (rather than seemings more generally) are inclinations to believe.

<sup>19</sup> See also Sosa 2007, pp. 49-50, on prima facie vs. resultant attractions.

<sup>20</sup> Chudnoff 2011 is explicit about this.

one case where something seems true without the subject having any inclination to believe it, the Inclination View is false.

E&M could change their strategy. Perhaps they should maintain that those who report having no competing inclination to believe what seems true are simply mistaken.<sup>21</sup> When one of these people introspects, one sees that one has no net inclination to believe and mistakenly concludes that one has no competing inclination to believe. To help us analyze this new response, let us label two scenarios as follows ( $p$  is the proposition *that one line is longer than the other*):

*No Inclination* S has no competing inclination to believe  $p$  and, hence, no net inclination to believe  $p$ .

*Countered Inclination* S has a competing inclination to believe  $p$  and a greater or equal competing inclination to resist believing  $p$  (or to believe  $\sim p$ ) and, hence, no net inclination to believe  $p$ .

With respect to the Müller-Lyer illusion, people like myself and Chudnoff report that  $p$  seems true and that *No Inclination* obtains. This is impossible if seemings are inclinations to believe. The explanation I am proposing for E&M (which I will call “E&M’s explanation” for convenience) is that these people mistake *No Inclination* for *Countered Inclination*. For E&M’s explanation to work, it must be the case that the phenomenology of *No Inclination* and *Countered Inclination* are the same or at least similar enough that one can easily mistake being in *Countered Inclination* for being in *No Inclination*. Otherwise it is implausible that those who introspect are mistaking one for the other.

The problem (for E&M) is that the phenomenology of these two scenarios is very different. Let us take E&M’s own example: that of having a competing inclination to eat cake and a competing inclination to stay on one’s diet. Let’s say that one’s competing inclination to maintain one’s diet is slightly stronger than one’s inclination to eat the cake, resulting in a small net inclination not to eat the cake. If you have been in this situation (or one similar), recall how it felt.

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<sup>21</sup> Chudnoff 2011, pp. 632-4, also stresses that Earlenbaugh and Molyneux need an error theory for their response to be plausible.

In my own experience, I was *well* aware of my competing inclination to eat the cake, to say the least. It felt like a battle was raging between my various inclinations—each one tugging me in opposite directions. One inclination did not mute the other; I just had both inclinations at full strength. Compare this to the situation in which you see some cake and you have no inclination to eat it and a slight inclination not to do so. There is no battle raging in this case. You do not feel pulled in opposite directions. One scenario feels completely different from the other. Furthermore, if one is strongly inclined to eat the cake but barely manages to resist thanks to a stronger inclination to stay on one’s diet, this is often a difficult, draining event. In contrast, there is no distress in having no inclination to eat the cake and a slight inclination to not eat it. The upshot is that *No Inclination* and *Competing Inclination* feel completely different from one another.

This renders E&M’s potential response untenable. It is implausible to think that people like myself are mistaking *No Inclination* for *Competing Inclination*. Thus, we should take these people’s reports at face value and, accordingly, as evidence against the Inclination View.

A second popular argument against the Inclination View arises out of reflection on the functional role of seemings.<sup>22</sup> As we saw with beliefs, when asked *why* we are inclined to believe something it is common to cite the fact that it seems true. It is natural to say, for instance, “I am inclined to believe *p* because it seems that *p*.” In these cases, we appear to offer our seemings as explanations for why we are inclined to believe. On reflection, we find that seemings are standardly thought of as the causes of our inclinations—as those things that *incline* us to believe. But if a seeming that *p* explains one’s inclination to believe *p*, then what it is to be a seeming cannot be the same as what it is to be an inclination to believe. The upshot is that the Inclination View is at odds with our ordinary understanding of seemings and their functional role in bringing about inclinations to believe.

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<sup>22</sup> This basic argument is employed in Huemer 2007 and Cullison 2010.

Taylor (2015) provides one of the most promising responses to this charge.<sup>23</sup> He suggests that when we say, “I am inclined to believe  $p$  because it seems that  $p$ ,” we have slipped into using what Chisholm called the comparative use of “seems”.<sup>24</sup> What we are reporting is that our current sensations are of the sort that is typically present when  $p$  and that it is these sensations which incline us to believe. To use Taylor’s example, we come to associate certain sensations with there being a white cat on a couch. In this way, it *comparatively* seems that there is a white cat on a couch. When these sensations incline us to believe, we are prone to state, “I am inclined to believe that there is a white cat on a couch because it (comparatively) seems that there is.” Thus, Taylor finds that such statements do not threaten the view that seemings are inclinations to believe.

The most immediate problem with Taylor’s strategy is that it does not cover all the cases. In particular, it fails to account for intellectual seemings or certain memorial seemings (those associated with semantic memory) that do not have any accompanying sensations. For instance, say you find yourself inclined to believe that everything is identical to itself. When asked about the origin of this inclination, you report, “I’m inclined to believe that everything is identical to itself because it seems that this is true.” Taylor cannot say that you are using “seems” comparatively since there are no sensations associated with everything’s being identical to itself; much less can he appeal to these missing sensations as the cause of your inclination to believe. Thus, Taylor’s explanation fails to square the Inclination View with the all the data.

A third argument against the Inclination View is that seemings are representational—they have accuracy conditions.<sup>25</sup> The seeming that my dog is sleeping can be accurate or inaccurate. Mere inclinations, however, are not accurate or inaccurate. At most, they can incline you to form some other mental state that is accurate or inaccurate. Nor are inclinations derivatively accurate or

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<sup>23</sup> Notice that Taylor’s response applies *mutatis mutandis* to the parallel argument against the Belief View. The same is true of my response to Taylor.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor 2015, pp. 17-20. See Chisholm 1957 on the comparative use of “seems”. See also Huemer 2013b, section 1.3 for an argument that there is no need to distinguish multiple usages of “seems” or “appears” as Chisholm does.

<sup>25</sup> Even proponents of the inclination view admit this (see Taylor 2015, p. 2).

inaccurate by virtue of inclining us to form mental states with accurate or inaccurate content. An inclination towards something inaccurate is *misleading*, not inaccurate. The problem seems to be that inclinations do not have propositional content. Inclinations incline us towards mental states with propositional content, but this content is not a component of the inclination itself. In contrast, on the Experience View seemings might very well have propositional content and, thereby, accuracy conditions. Thus, insofar as we think that seemings can be accurate or inaccurate, we have reason to endorse the Experience View over the Inclination View.

I will offer a final line of reasoning that displays the superiority of the Experience View over the Inclination View. A number of philosophers note that not all inclinations to believe are seemings.<sup>26</sup> For instance, I may desire *p* and so be inclined to believe *p*, but this inclination cannot plausibly be considered a seeming. Say I am an avid Chiefs fan and so strongly desire to see the Chiefs win the Super Bowl that I am inclined to believe this. It does not thereby seem true to me that the Chiefs will win the Super Bowl. It may even seem that the Chiefs will not win the Super Bowl, though I am still inclined to believe it by my desire to see it happen. The same reasoning will disqualify inclinations to believe caused by hopes, wishful thinking, emotions, or appetites.

In light of this, proponents of the Inclination View need to limit seemings to some particular kind of inclination to believe. The natural amendment, considered by Cullison (2010, pp. 266-9), is to restrict seemings to truth-directed inclinations to believe. Inclinations caused by desires are not aimed at the truth of the proposition but at the desirability of the proposition. Similarly, inclinations caused by positive emotions are not aimed at the truth of the proposition but at the goodness of the proposition. It is because that proposition *feels good* that we are inclined to believe it. Thus, by limiting seemings to truth-directed inclinations to believe we can weed out those inclinations caused by desires, emotions, or the like.

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<sup>26</sup> See Bergmann 2013, p. 156, Cullison 2010, pp. 264-5, Huemer 2007, p. 31, and Tolhurst 1998, pp. 297-98.

Obviously if one is to make this amendment one must be able to spell out what it is for an inclination to be truth-directed or aimed at truth. Cullison considers the following proper functionalist analysis.

It seems to S that P if, and only if,  
(i) S feels an inclination to believe P, and  
(ii) that inclination was caused by cognitive faculties designed to secure true beliefs. (Cullison 2010, p. 267)

This analysis, however, is untenable for multiple reasons. First, Cullison (2010) points out that in a brain-in-a-vat scenario, one's faculties may not be designed to secure true beliefs. According to this analysis, then, nothing could seem true to the brain in a vat. But, of course, things *would* seem true to the brain in a vat. The reason this is a common skeptical scenario is that, were you a brain in a vat, things could seem precisely the same to you as they do now. Second, say there is a benevolent demon watching over you. This demon implants a faculty in you that inclines you to believe *p* whenever you desire *p*, and then ensures that whatever you desire comes about. This faculty is designed to secure true beliefs in the sense that it is highly reliable and was intended to produce true beliefs by its designer.<sup>27</sup> But as we saw before, inclinations to believe produced by desires are not seemings. Thus, this analysis will not do.

Thankfully there is a more natural way to characterize truth-directed inclinations to believe. I said earlier that inclinations to believe caused by positive emotions are aimed at the goodness of the object rather than its truth. Perhaps, then, we should be looking at the causes of our inclinations.<sup>28</sup> We can then characterize truth directed inclinations as those inclinations that have the right sort of cause.

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<sup>27</sup> There may be other senses in which these faculties are not designed to secure true beliefs. If so, they are not obvious and require explanation. The result would be that we would not really have explained what it is for an inclination to be truth-directed. We just would have shifted the discussion to faculties designed to secure true belief. Without an answer to this new question, we have only moved the wrinkled, not removed it.

<sup>28</sup> Perhaps our mental states do not cause our inclinations but stand in some other explanatory relation to them: e.g. in the way that reasons are sometimes thought to non-causally explain choices. I'll talk about the "causes" of our inclinations rather than their "psychological explanations" for convenience.

At first, you might be tempted to characterize truth-directed inclinations as those that are caused by the truth of the proposition one is inclined to believe, but there can be truth-directed inclinations to believe things that are false—e.g. when one is inclined to believe by misleading evidence. You might try to characterize truth-directed inclinations as those that are caused by the truthmaker of the proposition one is inclined to believe, but this fails for the same reason as the first proposal. There can be truth-directed inclinations to believe false propositions, though these obviously lack truthmakers. Furthermore, it may be that some true propositions lack truthmakers (e.g. that there are no white ravens), and one can have truth-directed inclinations to believe these. The best characterization of truth-directed inclinations is that they are those caused by the *apparent truth* of the proposition one is inclined to believe.<sup>29</sup> That is, if an inclination is caused by a mental state in which the proposition is presented as true or feels true to the subject, then that inclination is aimed at truth.

Taking this position, however, requires one to posit the existence of forceful mental states with propositional content. Once you admit that there are mental states of this sort, it becomes clear that they are the better candidates for seemings than the inclinations they cause. For example, all of the problems mentioned previously go away if one understands seemings as the experiences that cause truth-directed inclinations rather than the truth-directed inclinations themselves. Furthermore, one of the primary motivations for the Inclination View is to avoid positing (supposedly) mysterious experiences like forceful mental states. But if the Inclination View is forced to posit these kinds of experiences as well, then there is little reason left to endorse the view.

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<sup>29</sup> Or, perhaps, the apparent truth of propositions that apparently support the proposition one is inclined to believe.

## 4 The Taking-Evidence View

The last view we will discuss, the Taking-Evidence view, has come onto the scene relatively recently thanks to Conee (2013) and Tooley (2013).<sup>30</sup> The view comes in at least four varieties.

*Option 1: Belief/Mental State*

It seems to S that  $p$  iff S believes that S has a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ .

*Option 2: Inclination/Mental State*

It seems to S that  $p$  iff S is inclined to believe that S has a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ .

*Option 3: Belief/Evidence*

It seems to S that  $p$  iff S believes that S has evidence for  $p$ .

*Option 4: Inclination/Evidence*

It seems to S that  $p$  iff S is inclined to believe that S has evidence for  $p$ .

Nothing in our discussion will hinge on whether we adopt a belief or an inclination formulation. To bypass this, I will just talk about S “taking herself” to have evidence for  $p$  or a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ . This is intended to be neutral between belief and inclination formulations.

A major problem with evidence formulations (Options 3 and 4) is that there are many cases in which one takes oneself to have evidence for  $p$  but has no seeming that  $p$ . Consider the case of a counterintuitive conclusion. For instance, if you fill a balloon with helium, suspend it in the middle of a non-moving vehicle, and then step on the gas, the balloon will move towards the front of the vehicle. This is extremely counterintuitive to many ordinary people. It does not seem like the balloon will move forward to them; in fact, it seems like it will *not* move forward. In some cases, I could give such individuals evidence that the balloon will move forward by explaining why, according to unassailable physical theory, the balloon will move forward. They would

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<sup>30</sup> Though the view is hinted at in Conee’s earlier work. See Conee 2004, p. 15. To be clear, Conee (2013, p. 54) suggests but stops short of endorsing this conception of seemings. Nonetheless, the Taking-Evidence View is being treated as a major theory about the nature of seemings and so deserves our attention here.

thereby have strong evidence that the balloon will move forward and they might take themselves to have evidence for this conclusion. Nonetheless, it still might not *seem* to them that the balloon will move forward. The point is that taking oneself to have evidence for *p* is not sufficient for *p* to seem true.

The mental state formulations of the Taking-Evidence View (Options 1 and 2) aren't refuted by such cases. This gives us reason to prefer mental state formulations over evidence formulations. For this reason, I will frame the rest of the discussion around mental state formulations, although each of the remaining objections will apply *mutatis mutandis* to evidence formulations.

The first objection is that the Taking-Evidence View has the implausible implication that nothing seems true unless one is engaging in second-order reflection about one's own mental states.<sup>31</sup> Clearly, though, something can seem true to S without S taking anything to be true about her mental states. This happens constantly. The wood seems rough to the carpenter as she runs her hand along the board though she neither engages nor is inclined to engage in any higher-order reflection. Examples are endless. This alone may be enough to dismiss the Taking-Evidence View.

To voice my second critique, we need to look at the origins of the position. Conee comes up with the Taking-Evidence View by examining the conditions under which it is correct for S to report, "it seems to S that *p*." He writes,

The topic of interpretation here is some correct uses of the terms *seems* and *appears* and their variants. This "correct" means nothing technical. It means that the terms are employed with semantic and conversational propriety to communicate something. The interpretation offers a description of the conditions that occasion this proper use. No more specific interpretive claim is intended. (Conee 2013, p. 53)

Conee eventually concludes that it is appropriate for S to report, "it seems to S that *p*," when S takes oneself to have a mental state displaying the truth of *p*. This leads Conee to suggest (but not

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<sup>31</sup> See Huemer 2013b, pp. 335-6, for more discussion on this point.

endorse) that for  $p$  to seem true to  $S$  is just for  $S$  to take herself to have a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ .

Ironically, the Taking-Evidence view is refuted by the same considerations that led Conee to suggest it. Let us grant that  $S$  can appropriately report, “it seems to  $S$  that  $p$ ,” when  $S$  takes herself to have a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ . Now take a step back and notice that being in a mental state  $M$  does not, by itself, make it appropriate to report, “I am in  $M$ .” I also need to *take myself* to be in  $M$  before I can properly assert this.<sup>32</sup> If I didn’t take myself to be in  $M$ , then I would be asserting something that I didn’t believe or wasn’t even inclined to believe. Now the Taking-Evidence View says that a seeming is the second-order mental state of taking some first-order mental state to display the truth of  $p$ . Let’s call this second-order mental state “ $A$ ”. Given what we said moments ago, it is only appropriate for  $S$  to assert, “I am in  $A$ ” when  $S$  takes herself to be in  $A$ . So on the Taking-Evidence View,  $S$  can appropriately assert “it seems to  $S$  that  $p$ ,” only if  $S$  takes herself to take herself to have some first-order mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ . That is,  $S$  needs a *third-order* mental state—she needs to believe that she believes something about her first-order mental states—just in order to appropriately assert, “it seems to me that  $p$ .” This severely overcomplicates matters. As Conee himself argues, it is appropriate for  $S$  to assert, “it seems to me that  $p$ ,” when  $S$  takes herself to have a mental state displaying the truth of  $p$ ; she needn’t take herself to take herself to have such a mental state. Thus, the Taking-Evidence View is falsified rather than confirmed by Conee’s conclusions about seeming reports.

In fact, what Conee’s analysis suggests is that the mental state displaying the truth of  $p$  is the seeming. For it is appropriate for  $S$  to assert, “it seems to  $S$  that  $p$ ,” precisely when she becomes aware that she is in a mental state displaying  $p$ ’s truth. The best explanation is that the mental state displaying  $p$ ’s truth is the seeming and it becomes appropriate for  $S$  to report this fact when she

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<sup>32</sup> I do not intend to enter into controversies surrounding norms of assertion. Most will agree with this statement or something comparable (e.g. I also need to *know* that I am in  $M$  before appropriately asserting “I am in  $M$ ”).

becomes aware of it. Ironically, Conee's analysis of seeming reports ends up confirming the Experience View rather than challenging it.

There are other problems that might be raised,<sup>33</sup> but our current discussion is sufficient to show that the Taking-Evidence View has severe problems.

## 5 The Experience View

The previous discussion has shown that all of the alternatives to the Experience View are fraught with difficulties. In contrast, the Experience View has explained all of the data easily. It both accommodates and elucidates our pre-theoretical understanding of seemings. If there are serious discrepancies between the Experience View and our pre-theoretical conception of seemings, then I have yet to find them. Until such problems are raised (and found to be more serious than the problems facing the alternative views), I conclude that the Experience View is the best theory on offer and likely to be true.

The question now becomes, if seemings are experiences, then what kind of experiences are they? We can conclude that they have propositional content based on the way we commonly say, "it seems *that* such-and-such," as well as the fact that propositions, like the Naïve Comprehension axiom, clearly seem true to us.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, seemings can be accurate or inaccurate, which suggests that they have propositional content that can be true or false.<sup>35</sup> This last consideration also suggests that seemings have a mind-to-world direct of fit since their aim seems to be to accurately represent the world. We can also conclude that the propositional content of these experiences has a forceful phenomenal character. At multiple times in the previous discussion we were led back to this understanding. Conee's conclusions about seeming reports were shown to support the view that seemings are experiences that display or make manifest the truth of *p*. To characterize a truth-directed inclination to believe we were forced to posit experiences whose content feels true.

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Huemer's plausible counterexample in 2013b, p. 335.

<sup>34</sup> Cullison 2013, pp. 34-5.

<sup>35</sup> Cullison 2013, pp. 35-6, discusses this point in more detail.

Furthermore, having a forceful phenomenal character explains why seemings incline us to believe in the first place. Add in that there are no other candidates on offer and we've got a formidable case that seemings, as we ordinarily understand them, are experiences with propositional content and a forceful phenomenal character.

In case there is any remaining confusion about what forceful mental states are, allow me to briefly fill out their description. Forcefulness is a familiar feeling,<sup>36</sup> but it can be tough to describe. It is the key difference between imagining *p* and its seeming that *p*. Imaginings represent something's being the case but do not feel as though they are disclosing anything about the way things actually are. There are no pretensions to the truth of what is represented. For instance, I may imagine that I am in Middle Earth during the events of *The Lord of the Rings*, but the content of this mental state (unfortunately) does not feel true to me. Seemings, on the other hand, present their content as though it is descriptive of the way things actually are. They present their content as true. Because of this, seemings feel revelatory in a way that imaginings do not. It is because of this phenomenal difference that seemings, but not imaginings, incline one to believe their content.

A slightly fuller example will be helpful. Say you open up a fictional children's book and read the words, "Long ago there lived a man named Alexander." As a result, you enter into a mental state with the propositional content *that long ago there lived a man named Alexander*. This mental state does not, however, incline you to believe its content. You entertain this proposition in a purely descriptive mode: a state of affairs is described or represented but not presented as actual. Now consider whether the proposition *that long ago there lived a man named Alexander* is true. Dwell on this proposition for a moment. It may seem to you that a man named Alexander lived long ago. You may be thinking about the same proposition as before but there is a

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<sup>36</sup> At least, it is familiar to a great many of us. Those who mention forcefulness (or something comparable to it) and, thus, indicate some introspective familiarity with it, include Audi 2013, Bealer 2000, Bedke 2008, Bengson 2010, Bergmann 2013b, Chudnoff 2011, Heck 2000, Huemer 2001, Koksvik 2011, Markie 2013, McCain 2014, McGrath 2013, Plantinga 1993, Pryor 2000, Pust 2000, Skene 2013, Tolhurst 1998, and Tucker 2010. Arguably, Augustine, Descartes, Locke, and a great many others could be in this list as well.

phenomenological difference—the proposition now feels true. In the second case you are entertaining the proposition in the assertive mode: a state of affairs is not only described but presented as actually being the case. This is a seeming.

## **6 Conclusion**

I have argued that our pre-theoretical understanding of seemings best fits with the Experience View of seemings and, in particular, the view that seemings are *sui generis* mental states with propositional content and a forceful phenomenal character. All of the rival conceptions succumbed to serious difficulties. Adopting this experiential conception of seemings has important implications for debates about the epistemic value of seemings—implications that must be explored elsewhere. My conclusion also reveals the importance of further investigation into the unique phenomenal character we have been calling “forcefulness”. A greater understanding of forcefulness may shed light on why seemings provide immediate evidence for their content or, at least, why they are so frequently thought to do so.

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