

The Opacity of Self-Evidence

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Introduction

A self-evident truth is a proposition with a very friendly epistemic disposition. It is fully justifiable by just considering what it asserts. This disposition is manifested when a proposition is self-evident to someone. The person considers the proposition and gains the justification. Somewhat refined accounts of these notions are offered below. The preliminary versions are enough to show how enticing self-evidence is, especially to those of us who engage in armchair philosophy. Is this source of justification too good to be true? Well, there are credible candidates. Here are a few of them.

1. No two things are parts of one another.
2. If A and B differ, then A is not identical to B.
3. Enjoyment is intrinsically better than agony.
4. Refraining from harming is a prima facie duty.
5. Sourness is not a color.
6. Anything that is square is extended.
7. Reality is reality.
8. It is not so that something is alive and nothing is alive.
9. Deciding is a mental activity.
10. Two is more than one.

1-10 will be called “our data.” Cascades of similarly plausible candidates exist. Our data show something of the variations in content and syntactic structure of the phenomenon. The first two are broadly metaphysical, the next two are broadly ethical,¹ and the rest are miscellaneous.

Although nothing claimed below depends on anything peculiar to these examples, our data were not chosen entirely for their plausibility and variety. Some classes of good candidates for self-evidence were left out, such as cogito propositions. The reason for their exclusion will emerge soon.

When we consider a proposition like one of our data, the proposition seems somehow to show itself to be true. Seemingly, something in what it says gives us sufficient reason for believing to know it. This sort of reason appears to be available for some propositions in mathematics, logic, and philosophy, as well as for countless trivialities. If we try to articulate the reason though, we tend to get stymied. Sometimes we can identify something apparently verifying about the structure of the proposition, such as that it has a certain tautological form. But if we seek our reason for thinking that the form makes the proposition true, eventually we find something that is apparently self-evident for which we have no further explanation. We are inclined to say that it is “just

¹ Noncognitivists may resist the assumption that the sentences used for 4 and 5 state propositions. For present purposes though, “proposition” can be understood quite neutrally, something like “declarative sentential content.” (See also note 8 below.) In any event, the status of 4 and 5 as apparently self-evident is ripe for noncognitivist interpretation. The sentences can be said to have their primary use to express attitudes rather than assert propositions. Something that emerges when we think about what they express and make even a cursory consultation of our sensibilities can be said to incline us to affirm them.

obviously true.”² In other cases, including most of the propositions in our data, no structural explanation appeals to us in the first place. Neither does anything else. Yet these propositions do seem to furnish themselves with knowledge-giving justification. Perhaps finally this is an illusion. If so, it is a powerful illusion.

A First Question This raises a question of epistemological interest: What is the nature of this apparent reason? One goal of the present work is to answer this question.

Here is a programmatic answer. Considering a self-evident proposition provides us with justifying *evidence* of its truth. This answer is attractive in some ways. For one thing, a self-evident proposition would get the status of being evident on a familiar basis. It is common for propositions to become evidently true by our getting sufficient justifying evidence for them. For a second thing, supporting evidence would be a widely acceptable sort of explanation of why the proposition is justified by what emerges from considering it. Not nearly all epistemologists hold that justification is entirely a matter of evidence.³ But it is widely agreed that having evidence in favor of a proposition is one way to have justification for it. Lastly, providing justifying evidence may explain why self-evident propositions can play the role of regress stoppers. If a regressing sequence of justifiers arrives at a self-evident proposition, it is justified without needing some other justified proposition to support it. If the evidence furnished by considering the self-evident proposition is not something in need of justification, then it is suited to do the relevant justifying.

A Second Question Thus, it would be nice if some self-supplied evidence were the justification in self-evidence. But what evidence? It is elusive. Again, in many instances we are inclined to report that the proposition is “just obviously true.” That does not sound like a report of some evidence. There is evidence there though. A further goal of the present work is to identify what it is.

Two More Questions The “just obvious” answer to the question about our justification leads to a pair of further epistemic questions. What is it to be obviously true? And what does being obviously true have to do with being self-evident? A second goal here is to identify what it is to be obviously true and how it bears on being self-evident.

A Final Question Philosophers who doubt that any proposition really is self-evident can find interest in another project. Some propositions at least initially appear to us to qualify as data for investigating self-evidence. They give an impression of being self-evident. We can attempt to specify the source of this impression. What is it about propositions like our data that makes it appear to us that considering them justifies them? The present work aims also to answer this question.

Procedure We can conduct all of these inquiries nearly simultaneously. We can seek what the optimal examples present to us that inclines us to regard them as cases of self-evidence. This will turn out to be the apparently justifying reason that emerges in optimal

² Our use of this expression is a recurring topic here.

³ Richard Feldman and I defend the evidentialist perspective in *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, Oxford (2004).

cases of self-evidence. The reason is best understood to be some evidence. The bearing of obvious truth on self-evidence will become plain along the way.

Phenomenology Rather Than Theory

In pursuit of the goal of explaining what is plausible about our data, it does not work simply to apply some theory of justification. The theory may correctly classify the examples. But our theories do not explain the status of the examples as data.

In effect, we have already seen this about evidentialism. Maybe considering a self-evident proposition does furnish evidence and the evidence justifies. But the evidence is obscure. Making the evidentialist claim that the examples have a sort of justifying evidence in common does not enable us to understand why such examples have the status of data.

The same point applies to the view that justification comes from being epistemically responsible. This view has it that when believing a proposition on consideration is justified, the belief is an epistemically responsible response to considering it. This does not tell us why belief is a responsible response. It does not tell us what is plausible about our data

For a final illustration of the failure of theory to do what we seek, consider reliabilism. Maybe a process of a reliable relevant type operates when we believe self-evident propositions on consideration. This does not tell us how we are affected by considering the proposition so that we are apt for such reliable processing. What condition does the considering place us in, so that by being in that condition we are set up for some reliable capacity to have us believe it? Reliabilists have not said why our data are plausible until they have answered this question.

Theories of justification do not explain the appeal of our data. Something resembling a phenomenological description is more helpful. Before pursuing this, let's clarify the self-evidence that is at stake.

The Nature of Self-Evidence

Here are accounts of self-evidence - the disposition and its manifestation.⁴

SE. X is a self-evident proposition iff necessarily, anyone considering with full understanding whether X is true thereby has a justification for X that is strong enough, if undefeated, to know X.

SES X is self-evident to S iff S is considering with full understanding whether X is true and thereby has a justification for believing X that is strong enough, if undefeated, for S to know X.⁵

⁴ The following accounts share much with Robert Audi's explanation of a self-evident proposition, in "Self-Evidence," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), 206.

⁵ The topic of this account is best understood to be the event by which the self-evidence disposition is activated in a given case. It may be that SES is really an account of X "making itself evident" to S. It may be that once this has happened, X remains self-evident to S, at least as long as nothing changes that is relevant to X's justification to S.

A few clarifying comments are in order. First, being self-evident is explicitly about being evident. SE and SES use the notion of knowledge-level justification for the enhanced epistemic status that the considering generates. Nothing here depends on this. It is possible to avoid the language of justification and say instead that considering X with adequate understanding “makes X evident to the person” or “gives the person adequate grounds for knowledge of X.” What is important is that the considered proposition attains some highly elevated epistemic status by being considered, at least in the absence of countervailing information.

Second, the requirement in SE and SES of full understanding has work to do. Deficient understanding a proposition can prevent someone from gaining the justification that it provides. For example, the proposition - anyone who has arthritis has joint pain - is a good candidate for self-evidence. But someone who possesses only the much-discussed partial understanding of the concept of arthritis – someone who does not realize that it is a joint-specific disorder - will not receive justification for this proposition by considering it. SE and SES allow for self-evidence in such cases, by requiring only full understanding to yield the justification. On the other hand, the requirement of full understanding does not imply, concerning any particular contingent information about the proposition, that the person has that information. Otherwise more than is furnished by just grasping the proposition could contribute to justifying a proposition that would consequently count as self-evident. If the extra information is essential to the justification, then the result is not an intuitive instance of self-evidence. So full understanding must be possible without such information.

The need for the requirement in SE and SES that the proposition’s truth be considered arises as follows. However obviously true on its own a proposition is, its truth can be far from our concerns as we think about it. We can consider a proposition just to determine whether it would be amusing to assert, or to determine whether we ever considered it previously, or to figure out how to express it in another language, etc. On such occasions, any capacity the proposition has to furnish justification for itself is not operative.⁶ That does not prevent the proposition from being self-evident, as long as its truth becomes evident to us when that is our focus.

Finally, SE and SES do not imply that any self-evident proposition can be known.⁷ The accounts require only that a comprehending consideration of the proposition gives justification that is strong enough for knowledge if undefeated. SE and SES characterize lean notions of self-evidence. This could be an asset. A proposition such as the following appears to qualify as self-evident - this very proposition is not known. Yet it cannot be that the proposition is known. SE and SES allow for the self-evidence of such propositions.

Two Sorts of Set-Asides

Some propositions that are plausibly regarded as self-evident according to SE are importantly unlike our data. They differ in what does the apparent justifying. In the

⁶ Philosophers are concerned with truth more than most people. This professional preoccupation obscures the point that we can be oblivious to the credibility of even the most obviously true proposition.

⁷ Audi’s account implies that all are known if believed on the basis of the justification that they provide. (Ibid.)

interest of focusing on the problem about justification that is posed by the likes of our data, we should set aside these other sorts of cases. They fall into two natural classes.

Self-Verification. There are some conspicuously self-verifying propositions. Here are a couple of them.

14. A proposition exists.⁸

15. Some proposition is partly about being rectangular.

14 and 15 make themselves true by being instances of the existential claims that they assert. By bringing either one before our minds and understanding what it asserts, we can observe it to be an instance that verifies the generality that it asserts.

In contrast, our data are not justified to us by our observing them to instantiate what they claim to exist. None of our data is “self-verifying” in that sense. They assert things about enjoyment, harm, sourness, squares, and so forth. They exemplify none of those things. Consequently it is especially difficult to understand how merely considering what they assert justifies us in thinking that what they assert is true.

Observational Preconditions The other kind of case that is worth setting aside here also amounts to justification by observation. The observation is not an inspection of the proposition. Rather, it is plausible that understanding ingredients of the proposition requires a verifying observation. This is exemplified by familiar examples such as these.

16. I exist.

17. I am here now.

It is plausible that we cannot understand a proposition that we express with a first-person pronoun unless we realize that we are referring to ourselves. Realizing this is enough for us to have justification for what 16 asserts in our context. It is plausible that our understanding a proposition that we express by sentence 17 requires our realizing, concerning the referents of “here” and “now” in our context, that we are located there and then. This requirement for understanding justifies what 17 asserts in our context. Given these plausible claims, propositions formulated by sentences 16 and 17 are self-evident to someone, according to SES. If there are no such requirements for understanding the likes of 16 and 17, then they are clearly not self-evident. We need reason that goes beyond what they claim to justify our belief in them. In these cases, we need reason to believe in our own existence and its spatiotemporal localization. We have such reason, but not from the contents of the claims that the propositions make.

Needless to say, it is of considerable epistemic interest to explain how we know these things. But whatever the details, the knowledge is “observational” in the broad sense that is being employed here. We somehow take note of our existence and its

⁸ “Proposition” is intended throughout to carry the lightest possible metaphysical baggage. No implication of abstractness, necessary existence, or even truth-value is intended. In fact, the intention is for a reading that is so metaphysically non-committal that it is compatible with a multiple-relation theory of cognitive acts. For instance, the intended reading of 14 is along the following lines: “Assertoric content is available for thought.” or perhaps “There is a way to represent how things are.”

spatiotemporal localization by some combination of introspective and perceptual observations. In contrast, any observation needed to understand or consider a proposition among our data gives us no reason to believe it. For instance, most of us have observed plenty of inductive support for 5, the proposition that sourness is not a color. But we seem neither to need the observed inductive support nor to use it when we consider 5 and are apparently thereby justified. This is true no matter how inclusively we construe observation. In order to focus on the more mysterious apparent justification in these cases, we should set aside any broadly observational justification like that which seems to be illustrated by 14-17.⁹

Easy Ways Out Ruled Out

We should note the inadequacy of two relatively easy answers to our questions.

The Literal Account A literal reading of “self-evidence” suggests that the proposition itself is the justifying evidence. The suggestion is that when we consider a proposition like 1, the proposition that no two things are parts of one another, our justification is no more nor less than that very proposition - that no two things are parts of one another.

This is not credible. If we consider the justification as reasoning, it becomes plain that the idea is hopeless. The premise of the reasoning would be the self-evident proposition and the conclusion would be the same proposition. Yet employing the conclusion of an argument as one of its premises is the patent rational failure that gives question-begging a bad name. It is only the more egregious when the conclusion is the only premise. Nothing is a reason for itself. Anyway, the one plain bearing that a proposition has on its own truth is that it entails itself. This logical connection to its own truth cannot be what apparently justifies a self-evident proposition by considering it. All propositions entail themselves. Most give no hint of being self-evident.

The conclusion that a self-evident proposition is its own justification might have been differently defended. In one view, the facts are identical to the true propositions. In this view, considering a self-evident truth implies being aware of the relevant fact. It sounds promising as a justification for, say, our datum 5, the proposition that sourness is not a color, that by considering this true proposition we are aware of the fact that sourness is not a color. So if the true proposition is indeed identical to the fact, then apparently a proposition could justify itself in this way.

⁹ On a sufficiently careful explanation of the nature of self-evidence, propositions like 14 – 17 may well not qualify. If the core idea in self-evidence is that something provided by a proposition’s sheer content justifies, then 14 – 17 are not examples of self-evident propositions. In each case, something else is doing some justifying work. 14 and 15 get justification partly from whatever justifies to us the existence of that assertive content. This is something other than what they assert. 16 and 17 get justification partly from whatever justifies to us, concerning the referent of a first person pronoun, that it exists in space and time. The need for some such justification beyond the content may not be clear. The justification of the proposition stated by a first-person existence sentence like sentence 16 may still seem not to run contrary to the core idea of self-evidence. 16 may still seem to be justified merely by what it says. A philosopher might be inclined to hold that this proposition is justified by our own existence, and that is no more nor less than what it asserts. But that is not quite right. The justification derives from however we find out that we exist, by introspective or sensory awareness of some sort. The claim made by the proposition does not evince to us our own existence, any more than the proposition that we are conscious evinces to us some conscious state or activity in which we are engaged. When we consider the latter proposition, we are so engaged. But noting that engagement is not being justified by something in the proposition’s content.

If every true proposition is a fact though, then this account counts every true proposition as self-evident. We would be aware of the relevant fact just by considering any proposition that happened to be true. But your typical true proposition lacks any semblance of self-evidence. So this account of the justification in self-evidence fails.

Instead, facts might be something distinct from true propositions. Facts might be the states of affairs that the true propositions accurately represent. If so, then awareness of a truth-making fact might justify the proposition that represents it. But if the facts are not the true propositions, then this sort of justification is not a version of the view that we are currently canvassing, the view that the proposition justifies itself.

The Obvious Account The final preliminary concerns the role of obvious truth. Again, when asked what is our justification for a proposition that is apparently self-evident to us, we are often inclined to reply that the proposition is “just obviously true.” This reply suggests that the obviousness is the justification. If so, then by understanding what this obviousness is, we would know what justified some self-evident propositions.

The obviousness is not the justification, however. It’s being obvious to someone that a proposition is true amounts to something like this. The proposition is justified to the person by something that is both manifest to the person and manifestly sufficient for the proposition’s truth. Or perhaps what is manifest is not exactly a justification of the proposition, but rather some fact that manifestly suffices for the proposition to be true. Either way, the obviousness in obvious truth consists is a certain kind of availability – of either a justification or a truth-sufficing fact. The phrase “ground for truth” covers both possibilities. In those terms, the obviousness of something’s truth is a certain availability of a ground for its truth. Obviousness characterizes the accessibility of a ground. It is not itself the ground.

We add “just” to “obviously true” as an expression of an explanatory incapacity. We find a proposition to be “just obviously true” when we cannot further identify the manifest justifier or truth-maker, except to say that it is manifest.

Thus, we do not identify what justifies a self-evident proposition to someone by reporting that it is obvious to the person that it is true. We identify only the person’s access to the justification.

Why Our Are Data

Our first goal is to identify what it is about apparent examples of self-evident propositions like our data that makes them at least appear to us to be self-evident.

A point of phenomenology gets us started. When we notice something, we are in a mental state that has a certain conscious character. We are consciously detecting the thing that is noticed. There is something that it is like to be in this detective, receptive relation. It carries over to spurious cases. A mental occurrence can have the same conscious character as that of noticing something, when what we seem to notice is not actually noticed. We can seem to notice Smith, when it is actually Jones who we notice, we can seem to notice the slamming of a door, when it is actually some other sound, we can seem to notice that someone has become dubious, when it is actually that the person is in gastric distress, etc. The same phenomenology of seeming to notice occurs when we are detecting something and when it merely seems to us that we are doing so.

Each of our data appears to provide justification for itself when its truth is considered, because the person considering the proposition seems to notice something about it. The person is in conscious state that is phenomenally the same as noticing the presence of something truth-making about the proposition. In other words, when it is plausible to us that X is self-evident to S, we are finding that S has an impression of detecting something sufficient for X's truth in what X says. In still other words, we are finding that S has the impression of being aware of something about X's content that makes X the case.

A bit more carefully put: what appears to us to justify X for the person is the seeming detection of a factual proposition concerning some feature, F, of the proposition that the person is considering, a proposition to the effect that F makes true the considered proposition. This result of the consideration looks to us to be justifying in virtue of both its content and the manner of the considering person's relation to it: the person is related to the considered proposition in a way that is phenomenally as though detecting something in what it says that is sufficient for it to state a fact.

Some clarifications should be made immediately. First, the concept of truth is not usually employed by the considering person. Rather, the content of the attitude affirms the considered proposition itself, on the basis of the noted feature. For example, when datum 4 is considered, something is noted in the claim that refraining from harming is a prima facie duty, presumably something about how harming pertains to moral reasons. What is seemingly detected is that this aspect of what 4 says makes preventing harm be a prima facie duty. When we consider datum 2, the proposition that no two things are parts of one another, we note something about the parthood relation that we seemingly detect to ensure that no two things are parts of one another. The language of "truth-making" is used here just to express generally what the propositions that are the contents of the PAF attitude say about the considered proposition.

Second, the account implies that there is something about what the proposition asserts to which the considering person is responding with the impression that it is truth-making. The requirement for self-evidence of full understanding ensures that the person is picking up on something about the claim made by the proposition, whenever it is in a position to be self-evident to the person. It is not implied that the person is right about what the noted feature does. It need not actually make true the considered proposition. The person may, for instance, note a particular sort of relation of the proposition's subject to its predicate. The person may get the impression that this relation enough for the proposition to be true, when in fact there are false propositions of that form.

For example, suppose that the proposition at stake is this - anything having a shape that can illustrate rectangularity is rectangular. The broadly inclusive sort of relation of the subject to predicate here - a relation that the property of having a shape that can illustrate rectangularity bears to the property of being a rectangle - can be seemingly detected by someone to make true the proposition at stake. But it does not actually do this. A trapezoidal piece of wire, viewed from a perspective from which it looks rectangular, can illustrate rectangularity.

Here is further clarification. What strikes the considering person as making the proposition true can resist identification. Again, sometimes we consider the likes of our data and sincerely report, "It's just obviously true." When we do this, it seems to us that we are finding something about what the proposition says to be sufficient for its truth,

although we are unable to explain the truth-making aspect, or we are unable to explain why it is sufficient for truth. In fact, this often happens in the most compelling putative cases of self-evidence. The apparent justification is at once conspicuous and unidentifiable. The apparent justification is rationally opaque.

Sometimes what strikes us as making the proposition true is something that we can identify about its structure. The Kantian idea about some analytic judgments that the predicate is contained in the subject is one such structural claim. But when we turn our attention the claim that the structure is sufficient for truth, and we try to answer the question of what shows us that this is so, often we are inclined to report what we find with a “just obvious” answer. Or perhaps we can turn to some proposition about redundancy to defend the one about the truth-sufficiency of the inclusion. But eventually – and usually this happens sooner rather than later – we find nothing in what the proposition says that bears on the proposition’s truth in a way that we can explain. Unless we cite evidence that is outside the proposition’s content altogether - inductive support or something similar – we are driven to the conclusion that the truth of the proposition is “just obvious.” The apparent self-evidence of the likes of our data eventually involves rationally opaque grounds.¹⁰

We lack any more direct way to find truth in a considered proposition. Using “the mind’s eye” metaphor for whatever capacity enables us to be aware of a proposition, apparently self-evident propositions possess no quality of being true that is even metaphorically “seen” by the mind’s eye. It is not literally the truth of the proposition that we seemingly detect. Nor is it a Lockean “evident luster;” nor is it some phenomenal quality of being “true-looking.” Rather, something in what the proposition says strikes us as making it so.

Having this sort of impression of detecting something truth-making about a proposition is not a doxastic evaluation. It is neither believing that the proposition has something truth-making about it nor believing the proposition itself. Usually the latter belief is an immediate consequence of the impression. But the impression is what prompts the belief rather than the belief itself. It is also not being inclined to believe, though again such an inclination is a usual result.

It is to be hoped that these descriptive remarks yield recognition of a familiar conscious condition that frequently occurs when we consider the likes of our data. We can call it, grandly, “phenomenal auto-factuality” - PAF for short.¹¹

PAF is not factive. We are sometimes related in this way to a falsehood. Considering each premise of the Liar Paradox tends to give rise to an episode of PAF, and those premises are not all true. The full understanding requirement on self-evidence ensures that the feature seemingly noted to be truth-making is a feature that the proposition actually has. But nothing ensures that the feature actually makes the proposition true. This allows the same sort of apparent justification that we can have for

¹⁰ This is not true in the cases of apparent self-evidence involving self-verification or observational preconditions that we have set aside. In such cases we can cite some sort of observation in defense of their truth.

¹¹ Noncognitivists will think that what is seemingly detected in ethical data like 4 and 5 is not a truth-maker, but rather some ground for affirmation. By their lights, a more suitable label for this conscious response would be “phenomenal auto-felicity.” “PAF” can be read accordingly.

truths to support falsehoods. That makes room for our patent fallibility about the apparently self-evident.

To summarize, the status of our data as data is explained as follows. What makes a proposition appear to us to be self-evident is our more or less inchoate recognition that the proposition induces a PAF response when it is considered with full understanding. We are inclined to regard this as the justifying basis for believing the proposition that results from considering it with full understanding.¹²

The Evidence in Self-Evidence

Concerning the evidence in apparent cases of self-evidence, there are two main claims to be made. First, when we are related by PAF to a proposition, X, we have evidence for X. Why is this sort of relation sufficient for our having evidence for X? The reason is that evidence about a proposition is furnished to us by our relating to a reason to believe the proposition in a phenomenally receptive way - the aspect that is phenomenally like detecting or receiving something. In this respect, PAF is just like perceptual experience. For example, it is our having an impression of receiving the visual appearance that a table is before us - rather than our having an impression that we are imagining the appearance, or recalling it, etc. - that makes the visual appearance in the former case qualify as a reason for thinking that the table is before us. Likewise, undergoing PAF is receiving evidence.¹³

The second claim about evidence concerns its identity. Our ultimate evidence for a proposition, X, that is apparently self-evident to us, is our seeming detection of a proposition that attributes truth-making to whatever it is about X to which we are responding as though finding a truth-maker. This in turn gives us evidence for the content proposition, the one that we seemingly detect to be factual. Its assertion about a truth-maker supports X itself, the proposition that is apparently self-evident. Again, sometimes while receiving this evidence we cannot even identify the feature of a proposition to which we are responding, much less explain why it is sufficient for truth. And when we do have a belief about what the responsible property is, we can get it wrong. But in any case, by undergoing the PAF episode we get as evidence a proposition attributing sufficiency for X's truth to the feature of X to which we are responding.

Why is this evidence that we have for the proposition? In general, the evidence that we have for some proposition consists in whatever indicates to us that the proposition is true. The phenomenology here is that we "pick up on" something truth-making about the proposition. A person's being thus struck by a certain PAF episode makes it indicative to the person that the content of the attitude is true. And this indicated truth bears directly on the considered proposition.

The PAF response is easy to miss. It is not glaringly different from consciously accepting the considered proposition. It is no wonder that this evidence in self-evidence

¹² The Appendix below uses PAF to interpret George Bealer's "rational intuitions" and the source of justification in Lawrence Bonjour's "rational insights."

¹³ Also as with a perceptual experience, the receptive nature of the attitude makes us have evidence that does not itself require justification. Apparently detecting cannot be unjustified. Thus, structurally the evidence qualifies as a justification regress stopper. But see below, where it is argued that the evidence is not sufficient to justify.

is elusive. The difference from acceptance emerges most clearly when we ask ourselves exactly what it is about the considered proposition that inclines us to affirm it.

The Justification

The justification is the evidence. That is, the justification for some apparently self-evident proposition, X, that we gain by considering whether X is true is the evidence that the considering gives to us. The justification that bears directly on X that we get in this way is an apparently factual proposition to the effect that something in what X says is a truth-maker for X. We have this apparent fact available to support X because it seems to us that we notice it to be a fact. Our ultimate justification from considering X is this seeming detection of the apparent fact about a truth-maker for X. The justification is ultimate in that the seeming detection is the final correct answer to questions about justification of the support for X that we get by considering X. Considering X gives us the seeming detection as justification for believing the apparently factual proposition that directly supports X to us. We need no epistemic support for the seeming detection. Having an impression of noticing something to be a fact cannot be unjustified, and it supports what is seemingly noticed.

The Transfer Problem

This proposal about justification is subject to an objection. The objection is of a sort that applies to any account that cites some attitude in order to identify the justification for a proposition. Applied to PAF, the objection goes as follows. It seem possible for PAF to have been induced by considering a preposterous proposition, e. g.,

18. Scarlet red is a texture.

An evil demon, or a fluke of brain misconnection, might have made us relate to 18 in a way that was phenomenally just like noting something truth-making about 18. The objection continues by claiming that 18 could not have been self-evident to anyone. 18 is too clearly untrue. So relating to a proposition by this attitude is insufficient for gaining the sort of justification that self-evident propositions provide.

This objection is not conclusive. For one thing, it derives from an argument by Alvin Plantinga for a proper function requirement on a priori knowledge.¹⁴ Plantinga's argument concerns an allegedly justifying phenomenology that is presented to someone by certain truths that are otherwise good candidates for being known a priori. Plantinga supposes that the person is induced to have that same phenomenology in response to many falsehoods. As a result, the person's true beliefs on the phenomenological basis seem to be Gettier cases at best, and hence not knowledge. This denial of knowledge accomplishes Plantinga's critical purpose. But denying knowledge of the likes of 18 does no damage to the proposal about justification. An objection to the effect that a response of PAF to 18 could not give knowledge is clearly correct. 18 could not be true. This leaves it open that a proposition like 18 would get justification for someone who was induced to respond to it with PAF.

Furthermore, the constituents of 18 are asserted by 18 to be related n a way that renders 18 barely credible. 18 does not present any plausible candidate for truth-making.

¹⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press (1993), 108.

Anyone considering 18 with a full understanding is in a position to notice the huge difference between the shade of scarlet and a texture. If someone with full understanding were nonetheless induced seemingly to detect something truth-making about 18, the person would also have available good reason to deny 18. That reason would defeat the justification. So we can be misled to think that no justification is there, in light of the overwhelming overall unreasonableness of 18 under the circumstances.

This last point is an accident resulting from the use of a preposterous proposition. Consider

19. The next quarter to be flipped will land heads up.

19 too could not be self-evident to anyone. Yet 19 is not so wild that any comprehending person would have to have defeaters for any justification of it.

We should not try to exclude 19 by imposing some restriction on what can be found truth-making about the proposition. Our data display no manifest unity of structure that a restriction could exploit. The phenomenon resists narrowing all the more, in light of the fact that we aim to include as cases of the same sort of justification falsehoods that have been plausibly regarded as self-evident. They lack any truth-making structure. So whatever is seemingly justifying about their consideration, it is not that.

The best approach to solving the Transfer Problem is to accept the implication about the hypothetical cases of PAF. If someone were to respond to considering a proposition with the phenomenology that arises in us as we consider propositions like our data, the person would have a reason to think the proposition to be true. It would seem to the person just as though the person had detected something about proposition that makes it true. That is an epistemic reason, come what may.

The Transfer Problem can serve to draw our attention to the limited strength of the reason. We could have had as good a reason in support of the likes of 18. A sense of the rational modesty of PAF would be appropriate. There is more of that to come.

The Strength of This Evidence

How much justification can this evidence provide to a considered proposition such as our data?

Some, not much. This can be seen by considering the best sort of case for supplying fully justifying evidence. In such a case, the episode of PAF is veridical. We detect something about the considered proposition that is in fact truth-making. Even noticing a true truth-maker does not give us a full justification for the proposition. If we are to have a fully justifying reason to regard the proposition as true, we also need some reason think that what we detect is enough for the truth of the proposition. Without some such reason, the link of the detected feature to the truth of the proposition is opaque to us. We lack any understanding of why such a proposition is true. So detecting something that is actually truth-making about the considered proposition does not render reasonable our acceptance of it. But how could merely considering some proposition also give us an understanding of this link to its truth? Let us look into this.

Simple logical truths offer the best hope of having some feature that can be found to be truth-making by considering the proposition. Our datum 8 is one optimal case:

8. It is not so that something is alive and nothing is alive.

It is relatively straightforward that considering proposition 8 enables us to know

F. 8 has the form: $\sim(A \ \& \ \sim A)$.

Considering 8 enables us know that F is right about 8's form by observing it to have that form. Doubts could be raised about this, but let's us take it from granted and see where it gets us.

What does knowing F do for us with regard to 8? Once we consider this, a troubling answer becomes clear. Knowing F by itself does not even seem to place us in a position to take the form of 8 to be truth-making. We also need information about what that form has to do with truth. We need something like the following:

T. The form $\sim(A \ \& \ \sim A)$ is tautological.

Perhaps F and T together are conceptually close enough to fact that the form of 8 is truth-making to suppose that F and T constitute a justifying reason for this claim. The trouble is that the reason for 8 that is provided by considering it looks inadequate. Reasonably regarding the form of 8 as truth-making requires having as a reason something like T. Yet nothing like T is even apparently detected by just considering 8. T cannot be just read off of an inspection of 8, as F might be.

Again, the impression in an episode of PAF that the feature detected is sufficient for the truth a certain proposition, X, can be veridical, as it is in cases like 8. But even when veridical, X is not justified to us by our having that impression. We also need some understanding of how the feature makes for the truth of X. That takes information that we do not get from X itself.

Here is an analogy. An investigator may detect something in a statement by someone accused of wrongdoing that strikes the investigator as thoroughly incriminating. Perhaps she is struck in this way by the answer that the suspect gives to a question about his whereabouts at the time of the crime. She has the impression that it is an answer that only a guilty party would give. Suppose that the investigator is unable to explain what makes the answer strike her as being so incriminating. Still, her being thus struck gives her an indication that the accused is guilty. The content of her impression entails the guilt. Still, she does not thereby have enough justification to know that the suspect is guilty. If the investigator also has the right supplemental information, then this indication can conclude the case. That is most clearly so when the rest of her evidence explains what is incriminating in the answer. Perhaps the other evidence shows that the answer contains information about the crime that only the perpetrator could have had. The investigator with all of this evidence is thereby fully justified in thinking that that the suspect is guilty. The justification is not just the indication from the impression of something incriminating. The justification is the indication in combination with the rest of the relevant information.

The same goes for seemingly detecting something truth-making in what a proposition asserts. What we get from this is an indication of the proposition's truth, and not a full justification.

It does not help to replace 8 with T as a candidate for self-evidence. If we ask why we think T is true, we do have reasons. But our reasons for T come from some sort of argument, not from just consideration of T. We have good arguments for T, relying on a truth-table or the like. But any such argument does not get us closer to a defense of PAF as a source of strong support on its own for the considered proposition.

To repeat, what we get from a PAF response to a considered proposition is just an indication of truth. We get an impression to the effect that something is truth-making. This is some support. It is not fully justifying on its own. Better reason to think the considered proposition true requires that we also have reason to regard that detected something as in fact sufficient for the proposition's truth. We do not get that from a proposition by considering it.

The insufficiency of our justification from considering propositions like the ethical examples in our data is yet clearer. Structure is not what we seemingly detect to make for truth in such cases. Whatever it is, its capacity to suffice for truth is not presented by the proposition itself. We get whatever we know about its bearing on truth from somewhere else. This belies any initial impression that we get all we need to be justified by just considering the proposition. Other evidence that we have might combine with the indication provided by PAF to give us enough justification to know the considered proposition. In any event, we need something more in order to be justified well enough to know.¹⁵

We do have other sources that frequently supplement the justification we get by considering propositions like our data. For instance, we try to find a disconfirming instance of the generality that the proposition asserts and we fail to do so. We do this by consulting memory, perception, introspection, or imagination. We seek and find any number of confirming instances in these same ways. The nature of this supplemental justification could use explanation. But it is reasonable to think that such sources supply support for the propositions.¹⁶ When our justification comes from these other sources, often it comes tacitly or from sidelong glances. Often when we have the rest of the justification, its work is not prominent to us. Nor is our need for it. We tend to get the mistaken sense that the content of the proposition is doing all of the justifying. But it furnishes only an indication of its truth.

If this is right, then none of our data is actually self-evident to us. The reason we get from considering them is the content of the relevant episode of PAF. That is not strong enough justification to know them, as SE and SES require.

¹⁵It does not improve the situation to appeal to some non-evidentialist theory of justification at this point. A reliabilist view, for instance, needs no conscious justifying reason to emerge on considering a proposition in order for the resulting belief to be fully justified. This does not address the problem. The problem is that it is looking as though the consideration on its own does not deliver a justification. So by SE, the propositions are not in fact self-evident. In the absence of some other basis for thinking that they are, we should conclude that they are not. If a theory of justification, reliabilist or otherwise, classifies them as justified nonetheless, then the theory is in trouble here.

¹⁶ It is notable that these supplements are all very broadly observational bases of support. (Imagination is least like observation. The results of imagination also tend to be least strongly supportive.) In consequence, conjoining together everything we have that makes a justifying case for the considered proposition would include conjuncts with more or less straightforwardly observational justification that goes beyond anything required for full understanding of the proposition. The conjunction is thus not a good candidate for being self-evident.

Prospects for Salvaging Self-Evidence

How bad is it that our data are not self-evident according to SE and SES? Best case: SE and SES need a mild revision. The result of considering the proposition does only part of the justifying. Those who have full understanding always have the rest of the justification ready in the background, waiting for considering the proposition to finish the job. So if we drop “thereby” from SE and SES, then our data are back in business.

SE’ X is a self-evident proposition iff necessarily, anyone considering with full understanding whether X is true has a justification for X that is strong enough, if undefeated, to know X.

SES’ X is self-evident to S iff S is considering with full understanding whether X is true and has a justification for believing X that is strong enough, if undefeated, for S to know X.

This change works, if fully understanding propositions like our data gives us the rest of a strong enough justification for them. For instance, in the case of datum 8, the idea might be that the tautological nature of a form of the proposition must be at least justified for us, in order for us to understand fully what 8 asserts. Considering 8 would provide the final element for a full justification. It would show us that 8 has a certain structure that we are already justified in regarding as tautological.

This best case outcome is unlikely though, even for 8. Most philosophers are so familiar with the simple tautological forms that they seem to us to wear their sufficiency for truth on their sleeves. But form is just form. Its semantic impact is very important to us, but not therefore essential to knowing what form it is. Consequently, it is doubtful that knowing the tautological status of a form of 8 would be required to know full well what 8 says, including that it is of the relevant form.

Anyway, nothing formal shows promise of making true most of our data. Possibly, we have to know certain non-formal facts about the concepts involved in them in order to understand them fully, and this knowledge provides the rest of a complete justification when the propositions are considered. But if anything along those lines is right, it needs explaining. The problem can be illustrated with datum 9, the proposition that deciding is a mental activity. It is doubtful that full understanding of the concept of deciding requires knowing where it falls in the mental/non-mental classification, and it is doubtful that full understanding of the concept of the mental requires knowing that deciding is an example of it. Perhaps knowledge that is required to have these concepts somehow assembles itself to complete a justification for 9, whenever 9 is considered. But that remains to be shown.

Suppose that dropping the “thereby’s” in SE and SES does not work. Propositions like our data are not self-evident, even on the modified accounts, because justification sufficient to know them is not assured by their comprehending consideration. This is not a skeptical result. We can still know them, just not on their own. They still do something epistemic for us on their own. They give us an indication of their truth. That’s pretty good.

Appendix: Two Interpretive Applications of Phenomenal Auto-Factuality

Intellectual Seemings George Bealer identifies intuitions in general with seemings.¹⁷ We intuit that X when it seems to us that X. Rational intuitions are intellectual seemings. What is an intellectual seeming? Bealer denies that it is belief or a hunch. He counts it as a primitive propositional attitude.

Undergoing an episode of PAF is neither believing nor having a hunch. It is not primitive either, though, if that implies that it has no constituent structure. It is a kind of apparent noticing. PAF has this in common with perceptual and introspective responses. If intellectual seeming has no such common element, then it is something else.

But perhaps Bealer means “primitive” to imply only that that intellectual seeming is not identical to any of various familiar doxastic attitudes, such as believing, considering, assuming, suspecting, and guessing. His description of an example that he uses to illustrate the phenomenology of intellectual seeming can be well understood as an instance of PAF. He says that on first considering one of de Morgan’s laws, often the proposition seems neither to be true nor to be untrue. Upon reflection, suddenly it does just seem true. Suppose that this conscious change consists in gaining an impression that one is detecting something that is truth-making in a de Morgan law. If so, then the sort of conscious response that Bealer is discussing is PAF. The “just” in the “just seems true” can be an expression of our incapacity to identify the reason that we get, as was discussed concerning “just obviously true.”

If “intellectual seeming” is not PAF, then it is a difficult phenomenon to introspect. Careful attempts by philosophers to do so have given rise to skeptical suspicions that what is called “intellectual seeming” is just a conscious inclination to believe.¹⁸ An elaboration of the nature of the attitude along the lines of PAF would allay this suspicion. It would also nearly bear out the inclination interpretation. PAF does strongly dispose us to believe. Whether it is itself an inclination, or it is the basis for an inclination, is a relative subtlety. Either way, the skeptical suspicion is understandable. This adds some support to the thought that intellectual seeming is PAF.

Rational Insights Lawrence BonJour’s view of the source of a priori justification is highly relevant here too.¹⁹ BonJour contends that non-inferential a priori knowledge is acquired by rational insight. We have a rational insight concerning a proposition when we apprehend in a seemingly direct way that the proposition must be true. BonJour does not regard the source of justification in a rational insight as infallible. He describes as “apparent rational insight” the source of justification in cases where someone is justified in believing a proposition by considering it, although the proposition turns out to be untrue.²⁰ BonJour does not say what apparent rational insights have in common with genuine ones that makes both justifying.

¹⁷ George Bealer, “A Theory of the A Priori,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999), 30 – 31.

¹⁸ This has been reported in private communications, personal introspective efforts included.

¹⁹ Lawrence BonJour, *A Defense of Pure Reason*, Cambridge (1998), 101 and ff. It is notable that BonJour also uses “rationally self-evident” for the epistemic status achieved by rational insight.(102)

²⁰ *Ibid*, 113.

The idea that what they share is PAF seems promising. A slight modification is needed to accommodate the modal status the Bonjour attributes to the contents of both apparent and genuine rational insights. He says that the *necessity* of the grasped proposition is apprehended, or apparently apprehended. PAF is about truth, not necessary truth.

In any event, there is something that needs accommodating in the vicinity of what Bonjour says about necessity. We are strongly inclined to attribute necessary truth in the clearest apparent cases of self-evidence. This thought about necessity can be accommodated as an inference. Inference seems in any event to be the best way to understand our sense that self-evident propositions “have to be true.” An episode of PAF gives us reason to believe that a considered proposition is true. Since something about what the proposition asserts is what we seemingly detect to make it true, we strongly tend to infer from what we seemingly detect that the proposition is essentially true –we infer that it has to be true, given what it has to assert. This inference relies on the further modest assumption that a proposition’s content is essential to it. But such reliance seems ineliminable in our attribution of necessity. Thus PAF, accompanied by some such quick and easy inference to necessity, seems apt for being what Bonjour’s apparent rational insights share with genuine ones.

Appendicular Conclusion PAF provides for a conceptual unity between these two superficially divergent accounts of non-inferential a priori justification. This is some confirmation that PAF is central to such justification as we can get by just considering a proposition.