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Being Rational and Being Right, By Juan Comesaña, OUP 2020.

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CANDY: Tomás wants a candy, and so grabs the candy-looking thing Lucas is offering him and puts it in his mouth. Tomás has no reason to think that there is anything amiss with Lucas's offer, he thinks that Lucas is genuinely being generous and sharing his Halloween bounty with him. However, what Lucas gave Tomás was no candy, but a marble. Lucas himself is unaware of the fact that there is a candy-looking marble among the candy.

Understandably, Tomás is disappointed—but was he irrational in acting as he did? Juan Comesaña's answer is: Obviously not. According to Comesaña, Tomás's action was rational because based on the rational belief that the candy-looking object Lucas was offering him was a candy. Tomás's belief was rational because based on evidence, which, in Comesaña's view, is constituted by those propositions that Tomás is basically justified in believing by his experiences.

The declared aim of Comesaña's book is to vindicate Tomás's rationality. In order to do that, he does two main things: first, he argues against some of the main theories of evidence on the market, which, he claims, entail that Tomás's action was irrational. Second, he develops a novel account of the nature of evidence.

Being Rational and Being Right is a fantastic book, very well argued, and extremely rich; it is hard to do it justice within the word limit restrictions of this article. What I would do next, then, is to focus on what I take to be the main two contributions of the book: (1) the critical contribution – arguing that competing accounts of evidence fail to account for the rationality of Tomás's action, and (2) the positive contribution – putting forth the novel view of evidence.

Comesaña takes the main competing views on evidence on the market to be two fairly extreme internalist and, respectively, externalist accounts. According to the internalist view – what he dubs

‘Psychologism’¹ – one’s evidence is constituted by one’s experience: the relevant piece of evidence that Tomás has is his experience with the content that Lucas is offering him candy. According to the externalist view under discussion – i.e. Factualism -, evidence is knowledge: a proposition *p* is part of one’s body of evidence just in case one knows that *p*. On this view, Comesaña argues, Tomás has little evidence that what Lucas is offering is candy: he doesn’t know it’s candy, since it’s not.

Comesaña’s charge against the competition is that they cannot accommodate the following highly plausible conjunction of claims:

Rational Action-Rational Belief Link (RARB): An action *phi* is rational only if based on a rationally held belief.

Rationality Intuition (RI): Tomás’s action in CANDY is rational.

According to Comesaña, Psychologism and Factualism fail to vindicate the conjunction of RARB and RI (henceforth RARB&RI). In turn, since the RARB and RI are highly plausible, it would seem that we don’t have a satisfactory account of evidence on the market.

In the next two sections I take issue with this claim.

1. Comesana Against Psychologism

Here is, in a nutshell, Comesaña’s take on Psychologism’s treatment of (cases like) CANDY: Recall that, according to Psychologism, one’s evidence is constituted by one’s experience. Crucially, what constitutes evidence is the experience itself, not its content: the relevant piece of evidence that Tomás has is his experience with the content that Lucas is offering him candy, not the content of said experience. If so, Tomás’s evidence is perfectly compatible with a bunch of sceptical scenarios, including that what Lucas is offering him is a marble, and including that Tomás himself is a brain in a vat. Why is this a problem? According to Comesaña,

[i]f your evidence is compatible with the truth of a proposition, then you should consider what would happen if that proposition were

¹ Comesana cites (Dancy 2000) for the term “Psychologism” (Dancy himself opposes it). Factualism, aka E=K, is most famously defended

true when deciding what to do. [...] So, in deciding what to do, Tomás should consider all of those hypotheses, according to Psychologism. But he doesn't. So, according to Psychologism, Tomás was irrational (2020, 2).

Comesaña takes it, then, that Psychologism about evidence is committed to claiming that Tomás is irrational for having acted without having considered possible scenarios that are compatible with his evidence.

Now, the question that readily arises is: what is the source of the 'should' in the above normative claim? Is it Psychologism itself, as a view of evidence? This cannot be: for all we are told of this view, it entails very little about how one should deal with evidence in one's actions. After all, the view is merely a view of the nature of evidence, not one of the normativity of action or of practical reasoning. Here is Comesaña's answer:

Of course, exactly what degree of confidence you should have in propositions that are not ruled out by your evidence will depend on the details of the case. Pieces of evidence can fail to rule out a proposition and yet make it highly unlikely, perhaps so unlikely as to not be worth bothering with it in the circumstances. But whether you should bother about the truth of a proposition depends not just on how confident you are of its truth-value, but also on what the consequences of acting would be if the proposition were true compared to what they would be if the proposition were false (2020, 2).

It turns out, then, that it is not Psychologism itself that encounters this problem – i.e., the problem of rendering Tomás's action irrational; after all, Psychologism does predict that Tomás's belief that there's a candy on offer is rational. If so, there are no doxastic limitations, for all Psychologism tells us, to the rationality of Tomás's action. Rather, it is only Psychologism in combination with what Comesaña takes to be a plausible view about the normative import of error possibilities for the propriety of action that fails to deliver the datum we are after: according to the view suggested in this passage, it would seem, whether an error possibility is relevant to the rationality of one's actions depends on its epistemic probability, together with the utility (or disutility) associated with the consequences of its being false.

But of course, if that is so, for all Comesaña has argued, the plausibility of Psychologism as a theory of

evidence will seem to rest to some extent on the plausibility of this theory of rational action in an inversely proportional fashion: the more plausible the latter, the more difficulties Psychologism will face in accommodating the datum at stake (RARB&RI), and the other way around.

Furthermore, even if the theory of rational action in question does turn out to be true, it still need not follow that Psychologism is false: it's all going to hinge on the extensional adequacy of the conjunction of the two views. Note also that the extensional adequacy in question does not turn on RI, since: (1) stakes are not specified in CANDY, while (2) according to the theory of rational action under discussion, whether one error possibility or another should figure in one's practical reasoning varies with stakes: the higher the stakes, the more error possibilities are to enter deliberation. What would have to obtain in CANDY, then, for this conjunction of views to deliver the result that Tomás's action was irrational, would be a situation where Tomás ignores error possibilities compatible with his experiences and rendered relevant by the stakes stipulated. For instance, a case in which the stakes are very high – say what Lucas is offering is not a marble, but a nut, and Tomás has a horrible, deadly nut allergy – but Tomás just goes ahead and eats it without thinking twice about the possibility that what he's putting in his mouth is a candy-looking nut. Indeed, in a case like this, the conjunction of Comesaña's preferred theory of rational action, in conjunction with Psychologism, will predict Tomás's action was irrational. But is that so obviously mistaken? I think it's fair to say, at least, that it's less clear than Comesaña would need it to be for his argument for rejecting Psychologism to go through.

All that being said, I am convinced that Comesaña is right to think Psychologism is not the correct theory of evidence; not because it's too restrictive to allow for the rationality of Tomás's actions, however, but rather, to the contrary, because it is too *permissive* in this regard, in virtue of being too permissive with what counts as evidence. Notably, Psychologism renders Tomás's actions just as rational as actions based on e.g. wishful thinking, or sexist bias: just like Tomás, the sexist and the wishful thinker have the experiences required by Psychologism for rational belief – the wishful thinker experiences the world as they wish it to be, while the sexist experiences the world as one where women are inferior. As such, it should be little comfort for the champion of Psychologism that their view does have the resources to predict that Tomás believed and acted rationally, given that their account of rationality is much too inclusive to begin with:

it's not much of a compliment for Tomás, I would think, to be categorized as equally rational to a wishful thinker. Nor is it intuitive to think that he would have been just as well off had he just wished that Lucas was offering him a candy, formed the corresponding belief based on this, and acted accordingly.

2. Comesaña Against Factualism

According to Factualism, one's evidence is one's knowledge: a proposition p is part of one's body of evidence just in case one knows that p . Factualism predicts the proposition 'Lucas is offering me a candy' is not part of Tomás's body of evidence, since it's not known.

In turn, if it does turn out that, by Factualist lights, Tomás's action was not based on rational beliefs, due to insufficient evidence, it would seem as though Factualism had difficulties accounting for RI— i.e., the intuition that Tomás's action was rational. This, according to Comesaña, gives us reason to believe Factualism is not the correct account of evidence.

In what follows, I will push back against this claim, on behalf of the Factualist, at two junctures: first, I will argue, it's not clear that Factualism, as a theory of evidence, predicts that Tomás's belief that Lucas was offering him a candy was irrational. Second, I will argue that Factualism does have problems with satisfactorily accommodating RI, but in a different manner than Comesaña would have it.

To see why Factualism – as a theory of evidence and evidence alone – does not encounter the problem Comesaña thinks it does when it comes to accounting for the rationality of Tomás's beliefs and actions, note that Tomás's belief that p : 'Lucas is offering me a candy,' while not supported by the piece of evidence p : 'Lucas is offering me a candy' (since false, therefore not known), it can (and plausibly will) be supported by many other pieces of evidence in the vicinity of p : that what Lucas is offering looks like a candy, that it likely is a candy, that Lucas is a reliable friend, that Lucas is offering him something etc. For all Factualism – as a mere theory of evidence - predicts, this may well be enough to render Tomás's belief rational. Why then think Factualism runs into trouble here? Here is Comesaña's take on Tomás's evidentiary situation according to Factualism:

He doesn't know that what Lucas is offering is a candy, because it isn't. He doesn't know either that what Lucas is offering is not a

candy, because he doesn't believe this proposition. Maybe, if proponents of Factualism are lucky, Tomás knows that what Lucas is offering looks like candy. But if he knows that, he also knows that what Lucas is offering looks like a marble that looks like candy. In any case, Tomás doesn't know enough to rationalize doing what he did. So, according to Factualism, Tomás was irrational (2020: 3).

A few things about this: first, Comesaña is right to argue that it need not be that Tomás has any Factualist evidence to support his belief that p : after all, maybe he doesn't believe that what he's being offered looks like a candy – and thereby does not know it – nor other propositions in the vicinity. That being said, Factualism is free to argue that what drives RI – i.e. our intuition of rationality in this case – is the fact that the case, as described, leaves it open whether Tomás is hosting such beliefs or not, and since it's plausible that he is, we take him to be rational.

Second, it's not clear at all why we should think it plausible that if Factualism is right, and Tomás does know that q : 'What Lucas is offering me looks like a candy' and goes on to base his belief that p and corresponding action on this piece of evidence, it immediately follows that Lucas also knows that r : 'What Lucas is offering me looks like a marble that looks like a candy', which, in turn, he plugs into his practical reasoning, and thus his action of taking whatever Lucas is offering and putting it in his mouth becomes irrational. To see why all this need not follow, note that Lucas may well believe (and know) – and indeed, it's plausible that someone in his situation would – that what he's being offered looks like a candy, while not forming any belief about marbles whatsoever; again, plausibly, nobody would, in his situation. If he doesn't believe r , he doesn't know it, therefore, by Factualism, r is not part of his body of evidence, and thereby has no impact on the rationality of Tomás's belief that he's being offered a candy, nor on the rationality of his corresponding action.

What might go further in the direction of Comesaña's prediction here would be Factualism conceived not as a view about evidence alone ($E=K$), but also as a view about justified belief ($JB=K$). On a view like this, indeed, Tomás's belief that p : 'Lucas is offering me a candy' would not count as justified because not known, thereby his action, if based on this belief alone, would be irrational by RARB. Two issues with this, though: first the $E=K$ Factualist need not accept $JB=K$ Factualism: it is, in

principle, open to the E=K Factualist to have a milder view of justification, whereby, for instance, one's belief is justified just in case it's based on sufficient evidence – i.e. sufficient pieces of relevant knowledge. Of course, Comesaña is right that most Factualists defend both knowledge claims; crucially, though, they needn't, and E=K Factualism in isolation does not encounter the problem that Comesaña predicts, and thereby, it would seem, we have been given little reason to reject it. Second, even if one accepts JB=K, it is still open to one to argue that Tomás's action is rational because based on a knowledgeable belief in the vicinity of B_p , like, for instance, B_q : 'What Lucas is offering me looks like a candy'. Indeed, the JB=K Factualist can argue, this would explain the intuition of rational action in this case.

Last but not least: even if one is a full Factualist (holding both E=K and JB=K), and even all of the above turns out not to work for some independent reason, there is still one option left open for accounting for RI on Factualist terms: by employing the distinction between justified belief and rational action on one hand, and blameless belief/action on the other. After all, it is both plausible and empirically well established² that we are not good at distinguishing between intuitions of rationality/justification and intuitions of blamelessness: in both cases, we get something like a 'warm and fuzzy feeling'³ about the subject's beliefs/actions, but we are not good at discriminating; theory is needed to make the case that either rationality or blamelessness is at stake. If so, it is open to Factualism to claim that what is actually going on in Tomás's case is a blameless action, based on a blameless belief, which explains our positive intuition about the case. Like that, contra Comesaña, Factualism can account for RI.

This defense of Factualism has become known in the literature as the 'excuse maneuver'. Comesaña discusses this option at chapter-length, and dismisses it. The argument developed in this chapter is excellent and extremely thorough. That being said, I don't think it presents problems for Factualism's explanation of the RI datum in terms of rationality/blamelessness confusion; rather, if anything, it merely presents problems for a particular account of blamelessness – a dispositionalist account – which has been endorsed by some Factualists.⁴ According to this account, one can be in breach of a primary norm for *phi*-ing – say, 'Don't break your

² e.g. (Turri 2013).

³ Clayton Littlejohn (pc).

⁴ Most notably in (Lasonen-Aarnio Forthcoming) and (Williamson Forthcoming).

promises!’ – while, at the same time, complying with derivative, dispositionalist norms for *phi*-ing – such as ‘Be the kind of person who keeps their promises!’ When this happens – when one has the right dispositions, but still fails to meet the primary norm at stake – , one is in blameless breach of the primary norm.

Comesaña argues extensively that this account of blamelessness doesn’t give the right results for the cases of interest. I agree: furthermore, I think that is because the view is generally problematic as a view of blameless norm violation to begin with. After all, one can have reliable normative dispositions and still breach norms knowingly and on purpose on occasion; conversely, one can also have horribly unreliable normative dispositions, and, on occasion, be in normative breach in spite of doing everything right.⁵ In such cases, bad/good dispositions and blameworthiness/blamelessness will come apart. Since Comesana and I are in agreement here, I will not go further into the arguments against dispositionalism developed in this chapter.

Rather, I would like to take a step back and have a look at the dialectics at stake. Recall what we have so far: (1) the datum to be explained – the positive intuition concerning the status of Tomás’s belief and action. (2) the empirical data suggesting that we can’t discriminate between norm-compliance-triggered positive intuitions, and blameless-norm-violation-triggered positive intuitions. If this is so, however, it would seem it is not on the shoulders of the Factualist – who takes it it’s blamelessness that explains the datum rather than rationality – to bring evidence that they are right; after all, their theory is extensionally adequate, in that it’s compatible with the datum. Rather, if one wants to develop an objection to Factualism, it is on the shoulder of the objector to adduce evidence that Factualism is extensionally inadequate – i.e., that they cannot explain the datum after all.

Doesn’t Comesaña’s argument against the dispositionalist account of blamelessness count as evidence in this regard? No, it does not. To see this, note that the distinction between blameless norm violation and norm compliance is a well-established, extremely plausible, and indeed uncontroversial distinction:⁶ on pain of lack of prior plausibility, any account of any phenomenon whatsoever needs to be compatible with this distinction. Factualism is, and it deploys this distinction to account for RI and to show that more work needs to be done if one objects to Factualism. It is, therefore, not on

⁵ See (Brown 2018) for excellent arguments along these lines.

⁶ See (Talbert 2019) for an overview.

the shoulders of the Factualist to develop a plausible account of blamelessness: indeed, many accounts are put forth in the literature on moral responsibility, and, unsurprisingly, some are better than others, but none are without flaw. Whatever the correct account of blameless norm violation, however, one thing is clear: there is a distinction between blameless norm violation and norm compliance, and our intuitions are bad at distinguishing between the two. As such, an explanation of the RI datum in terms of blameless norm compliance is perfectly extensionally adequate, and remains unaffected by arguments against particular views of blameless norm violation.

All this being said, just as with Psychologism, I agree with Comesaña that Factualism is not the correct view of evidence. That is, interestingly enough, for similar reasons why I think Psychologism is wrong: E=K Factualism, just like Psychologism, predicts that the evidentiary status of Tomás's perceptual experience-based belief that Lucas is offering him a candy is the same as that of the corresponding wishful thinker's wish-based belief that Lucas is offering him a candy⁷ (on the assumption that they both are blameless, which wishful thinkers often plausibly are): none of these beliefs have any evidential strength, nor is there any epistemically normative difference between them. I think this is the wrong prediction, indeed, just as taking them both to be epistemically significant (as Psychologism would have it) is the wrong prediction. Psychologism is too permissive, and Factualism is too restrictive, to find a normative difference between wish-based and perception-based experiences. We need something in-between, it would seem.

3. Comesaña's Experientialism

Evidence matters in epistemology, as well as for our everyday epistemic endeavors. One need not be an evidentialist to believe this: indeed, any epistemological account that fails to vindicate the eminently plausible thought that evidence is epistemically significant is highly problematic. That being so, however, it is surprising to see just how very few fully fledged accounts of the nature of evidence are available in the literature. Comesaña's excellent book supplies this lack. The view developed falls

⁷ See (Simion et al 2016) for a more sophisticated version of this argument against JB=K Factualism.

squarely in-between the main camps on the market when it comes to the study of evidence: it is less demanding than factive views of evidence, in that one can have evidence that is false. It is, however, more demanding than traditional, experience-based views, in that experiences will only provide their content as a reason for belief when belief in the content is *ultima facie* justified. Comesaña's view agrees with Factualism in claiming that experience provides us with reasons but is not identical to the reasons provided but agrees with Psychologism in claiming that even bad experiences can rationalize belief: evidence can be false. In this, Comesaña's account promises to rip the benefits of both the main competitors and avoid all of their downsides.

According to Comesaña's Experientialism, our evidence consists in those beliefs that are *ultima facie* justified by our experiences. According to Experientialism, then, an experience provides its content as a reason when the subject is justified in believing its content. The justification in question in the account, importantly, (1) is non-factive, and (2) must be *ultima facie*: if an experience of the subject S provides them with *prima facie* justification for believing its content but this justification is defeated by something else S is justified in believing, then S does not have the content of the experience as evidence (2020: 119).

This raises the obvious question: when are we *ultima facie* justified in believing the contents of our experience? The answer to this question will tell us how Comesaña's account fares on extensional adequacy: after all, according to Experientialism, evidence consists of propositions that a subject is justified in believing. We don't know, then, whether the account predicts evidence is present or absent in a case under consideration or another unless we are told what account of justification we should plug into the account of evidence on offer. For instance, if we plug in a JB=K account of justification, Experientialism becomes Factualism.

Comesaña favours a non-factive, broadly reliabilist account of justification. When coupled with Experientialism, this will, indeed, render the latter stronger than Psychologism – in that not just any old experience will count as providing evidence, but only those contents of experience that are believed based on a reliable process. The view will, at the same time, be less restrictive than Factualism, in allowing for false evidence. The view accounts for the intuition of rationality in CANDY: Tomás's belief that Lucas is offering him candy will come out as justified, and thereby proper part of his body of evidence. Furthermore, Comesaña's Experientialism nicely accounts for the normative

difference that we want our view of evidence to predict between Tomás and the wishful thinker: after all, wishful thinking is not a reliable process, therefore the contents of wishes-generated experiences will not constitute evidence.

One interesting detail about Comesaña's view is that he favours a probabilistic understanding of reliability, and that he takes the notion of *evidential* probability to lie at the centre of his theory of justification. Now, one worry that arises at this stage pertains to the internal structure of the view. Recall: on Comesaña's account, the evidence a subject has is constituted by the propositions the subject has basic justification for believing. In turn, he unpacks justification as reliability, and reliability as high likelihood on one's evidence. The natural question that arises is: The picture is clearly non-reductive; that's fine. But is it not problematically circular as well?

Assuming that this worry can be dismissed, however, it is noteworthy that the account promises to deliver exceptionally well on extensional adequacy. Comesaña employs an epistemic notion of probability in an effort to avoid classical counterexamples to the reliabilist sufficiency claim, from beliefs based on strange and fleeting processes – like Bonjour's famous case of Norman the Clairvoyant. According to Comesaña,

[b]ehind these specific counterexamples lies a more fundamental problem with appealing to [...] objective probability, and that is that it is a contingent kind of probability. The value of a particular conditional probability of this kind depends on the contingent regularities that obtain in the world. As such, it will only be rational to match one's credences to those probabilities after one learns about the correlations. But this kind of learning is itself an epistemic achievement, and it arguably involves rational belief. Therefore, the rationality of the doxastic attitudes cannot be explained in terms of that kind of probability (2020: 207).

According to Comesaña, his evidential-probability-based view, in virtue of unpacking reliabilism epistemically, avoids this problem: evidential probability does not permit accidental reliability: Norman the clairvoyant is not justified to believe that the President is in New York.

Similarly, to go back to the wishful thinker we've been concerned with throughout this article: even if we

stipulate that, in the particular case under consideration, wishful thinking is, unbeknownst to the subject, reliable in the traditional sense, Comesaña's view will still predict lack of justification, in virtue of appealing to an epistemic rather than an objective notion of probability. In this, the account promises exceptional extensional adequacy.

4. Conclusion

Despite my few qualms, I would very strongly recommend *Being Rational and Being Right* to anyone interested in evidence and justification. This is not only because of the high interest of the various ideas Comesaña discusses under the umbrella of Experientialism, but also because of the high quality of the arguments put forth throughout. *Being Rational and Being Right* is a beautiful exercise in philosophical argumentation, and, at the same time, a great and much needed non-extremist contribution to the literature on evidence.

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