

Evidence, Updating, and Justification

Comments on *Being Rational and Being Right*

1. A Lifeline for factualism?

One major thread of *Being Rational and Being Right* is a defense of an experientialist account of evidence:

Experientialism: Your evidence consists in those beliefs which are *ultima facie* justified by your experiences.

Why accept Experientialism? Because, Comesaña argues, it has major advantages over the leading alternatives, Factualism and Psychologism. Here I'll focus on Comesaña's discussion of Factualism:

Factualism: S's evidence consists in various facts.

The most well-known version of Factualism is E=K (Williamson 2000), but this isn't the only option. One could also hold that one's evidence consists in a privileged subset of one's knowledge – for example, one's observational knowledge (Maher 1996) or one's epistemic certainties (Beddor 2020).

1.1 An Argument for Factualism

A central function of evidence is to rule out possibilities:

Ruling Out: If S's evidence entails p , then S is entitled to ignore all not- p possibilities for the purposes of practical reasoning.

Q: Why does Ruling Out hold? Why does possessing p as evidence entitle you to ignore all not- p possibilities?

Factualist Answer: If your (factive) evidence entails p , not- p is guaranteed to be false, in which case there is no need to take not- p possibilities into account when deliberating about what to do.

Non-factualist Answer: According to many non-factualists (including experientialists), S only possesses p as evidence if S believes p . Perhaps this explains why Ruling Out holds: if you possess p as evidence, then you are committed to *believing* that not- p is false, which entitles you to ignore all not- p possibilities.

Worry for the Non-factualist: The Preface Paradox (Redux). You've just finished writing your book. It features 10,000 claims; you believe each of them, and each of them is directly justified by your experience. So they qualify as evidence by the experientialist's lights. But you worry that the conjunction of your claims (c) might be false, which is why you write the preface acknowledging the likely possibility of some errors. In this case, it seems not entitled to ignore all not- c possibilities.

This gives us the resources for an argument against experientialism. Given Ruling Out, one is entitled to disregard possibilities inconsistent with one's evidence. By contrast, one is not entitled to disregard possibilities inconsistent with one's experientially justified beliefs (as the preface paradox shows). So one's evidence cannot simply be one's experientially justified beliefs.

1.2 The Case Against Factualism

Comesaña argues that factualism implausible predictions about the following pair of cases:

GOOD LUCAS: Tomás would like to eat some candy. Lucas offers him some, and Tomás reaches for it and puts it in his mouth. Everything goes as planned and Tomás enjoys some candy.

BAD LUCAS: Tomás would like to eat some candy. Lucas offers him a marble that looks just like candy, and Tomás reaches for it and puts it in his mouth. Tomás is disappointed.

What's the Problem? Factualists are committed to saying that the proposition that <That candy-looking thing is candy> (call this proposition 'CANDY') is part of Tomás' evidence in GOOD LUCAS, but not in BAD LUCAS. In some passages, Comesaña suggests that factualists are committed to:

ASYMMETRY: Tomás' action is rational in GOOD LUCAS, but irrational in BAD LUCAS.

One way out: Here is something that Tomás knows:

LIKELY CANDY: The candy-looking thing that Lucas is offering is most likely to be candy.

Factualists could propose that LIKELY CANDY is part of Tomás' evidence in BAD LUCAS, and this is what makes his action rational.

But maybe the trouble is not so easily avoided... Suppose Tomás has to pay \$1 to get the candy-like thing. And suppose Tomás values eating an (actual) candy at \$1.01. In this modified pair of cases, the factualist is committed to saying:

RESIDUAL ASYMMETRY: It is rational for Tomás to buy the candy-looking thing in GOOD LUCAS, but not in BAD LUCAS.

But is RESIDUAL ASYMMETRY so bad?

Comesaña thinks so. He argues that it conflicts with an accessibility constraint:

Accessibility Constraint: If a condition *C* is such that its obtaining makes some attitude or action on the part of a subject irrational, then it must be the case that it is rational for the subject to believe that *C* obtains. (p.90)

Two worries:

- 1) Many epistemologists with externalist sympathies will be inclined to reject the Accessibility Constraint – not just Knowledge Firsters, but also old-school reliabilists
- 2) The Accessibility Constraint faces potential counterexamples
 - Cases where an agent does not have conceptual resources to understand condition *C* (e.g., small children)
 - Cases where parts of my mental life are not hidden from me.
 - E.g., I have a belief *q* which is not introspectively available to me; this belief is inconsistent with one of my explicit beliefs, *p*. Arguably, the fact that I believe *q* makes it irrational for me to believe *p*. But it does not follow that it is rational for me to believe that I believe *q*.

2. Ur-Prior Conditionalization

Another important contribution of *Being Rational and Being Right* is Comesaña's defense of a particular updating rule: Ur-Prior Conditionalization. According to this rule, your credence in *p* at some time *t* should equal the conditional probability that your ur-prior (Cr_u) assigns to *p*, given your total evidence at *t*:

Ur-Prior Conditionalization: $Cr_t(p) = Cr_u(p|e_t)$

One of the main arguments for Ur-Prior Conditionalization is that it avoids “stickiness” of extremal probabilities under other updating rules, such as (standard) conditionalization. In doing so, it provides a better model of defeat.

An Example: Red Wall. I know that the color of the wall (red or white) is going to be decided by the flip of a fair coin, and the color of the lights (also red or white) is also going to be decided by a second flip of the same fair coin... At time t_1 , I have an experience with the content that the wall is red (E); consequently, I have E as evidence. So, letting D be the proposition that the lighting is red, we have $Cr_1(E|D)=Cr_1(E)$. However, as soon as I learn that the lights are red at t_2 , I lose E as evidence. So $Cr_2(E)=Cr_u(E|D)<Cr_1(E|D)$ (adapted from p.145).

A dilemma? Suppose at t_1 I reflect as follows:

On one hand... If I learn D at t_2 , I will be rationally required to lower my credence in E (due to Ur-Prior Conditionalization)

On the other hand... If I lower my credence in E at t_2 , my credence in E will be less accurate than my current credence.

So what should I plan to do? I seem to be forced to choose between planning to commit an epistemic sin (flouting the updating rule) or consigning myself to an epistemic loss (a loss of accuracy). I could stick my head in the sand and try to avoid evidence, but this is no better!

Shifty evidence to the rescue? One way out would be to combine Ur-Prior Conditionalization with a “shifty” view of evidence, according to which an agent’s evidence shifts with features of their context (cf. Greco 2017). Now, Comesaña is already committed to some form of evidential shiftiness: on his view, my evidence at t_1 includes E , but not at t_2 . Perhaps we should go a step further, and hold that an agent’s evidence shifts depending on which possibilities they are taking seriously (cf. Lewis’ 1996 “rule of attention”). On this view, as soon as I begin to consider the possibility that I might learn D , this very act of contemplating this possibility affects my evidence: I now no longer have E as evidence. So now when I contemplate the prospect of lowering my credence in E , I no longer anticipate being condemned to a loss of accuracy.

3. Comesaña’s Account of Justification

Comesaña defends a view of justification that weaves together evidentialist and reliabilist elements:

Coarse-Grained Evidentialist Reliabilism: A belief that p by S is justified if and only if:

Either:

1. S ’s experiences provide him with p ; or
- 2a. S ’s experiences provide him with e ;
- 2b. the belief that p by S is based on e ;
- 2c. $Cr_u(p|e) \geq r$;
- 2d. There is no more inclusive body of evidence e' had by S such that $Cru(p|e') < r$.

As Comesaña notes, there is a straightforward way of extending this account to provide a theory of justified credences.

While there is much to like in this account, I want to raise a few concerns:

3.1 Renouncing Naturalism

One reason for being attracted to reliabilism is that it offers a fully naturalistic account of justification: we explain justificatory properties without recourse to any unreduced to epistemic notions.

Comesaña rejects this naturalistic aspiration. According to him, Cr_u is an *evidential* probability function. If we explained it in terms of objective probabilities (e.g., Tang 2016), then the view would be subject to counterexamples. But this raises the worry that the view avoids counterexample by abandoning one of the features that made traditional reliabilism appealing.

3.2 Circularity Worries

Even if we renounce our naturalistic hopes and dreams, we might still want a non-circular theory. Does Evidentialist Reliabilism deliver?

Worry: how should we understand the base clause – “S’s experiences provide him with p ”? The concern is that we can only spell this out in terms of *ultima facie* justification: S’s experiences make him *ultima facie* justified in believing p .

3.3 Is the Account Predictive?

Does the account generate predictions about whether an agent is justified in believing something in a particular situation?

If we understood the ur-prior in terms of objective probability, we could perhaps use our intuitions about objective probability to guide us. But, as we have seen, Comesaña understands the ur-prior in terms of evidential probability. Could we use our intuitions about evidential probability to guide us? Worry is whether our intuitions about evidential probability sufficiently distinct from our intuitions about justification.

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