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Experientialism Unidealized

Juan Comesaña's *Being Rational and Being Right* argues forcefully and systematically for the commonsense but surprisingly philosophically contentious conclusion that being rational can come apart – and indeed can come systematically apart – from being right. It weaves effortlessly between technical topics in formal epistemology and decision theory, work in traditional epistemology, and contemporary work on practical reason, deontic logic, and formal semantics, to tell a simple but unified story about the independent importance of rationality of both action and belief that is not tied to any prior or more fundamental explanation in terms of knowledge or truth. It's a *tour de force* defense of a simple truth that has become altogether too mysterious to philosophers, and it defends it without falling into any of the central traps into which its opponents so commonly associate this truth's defenders. So I find myself not only in agreement, but in forceful agreement, both with the book's overall thesis and with many of its central subsidiary claims and arguments. Nevertheless, in this brief contribution I am going to do my best to do my job to disagree with Comesaña.

Now, there are many places where I do find myself in disagreement with Comesaña, especially in the later chapters of the book. But I think that it will be most instructive, in this symposium, for me to focus on the nature of what I see to be our disagreement that touches most closely on our most important area of *agreement*. In the book's antepenultimate sentence, Comesaña cites me as a "fellow traveler" with the thesis that he calls *experientialism*. Experientialism is Comesaña's alternative to the theses of *factualism* and *psychologism* about evidence, making sense of how you can have evidence that is false but which entails conclusions about the world outside of your head. And like Comesaña, I think and have argued that it is not only true but crucially important that you can have evidence that is false but which entails conclusions about the world outside of your head. So I share with Comesaña the goal of occupying this middle space, escaping the horns of both factualism and psychologism. So experientialism is definitely, I think, *close* to the truth. And it is close to the truth for many of the reasons that Comesaña lays out so beautifully in the book. But I'm not quite comfortable endorsing the thesis of *experientialism* as stated. In what follows I'll try to explain why.

At stake for both Comesaña and me is the correct explanation of why, in at least paradigm cases, someone who can see that it is not raining is entitled to assume that it is not raining when formulating her decision tables about whether to carry an umbrella. Comesaña holds, stipulatively, that doing so is rational just in case it is part of her *evidence*. So given this stipulation, our question reduces to the question of why, in at least paradigm cases, someone who can see that it is not raining counts as having the proposition that it is not raining as part of her evidence.

Comesaña considers three natural answers to this question, which each have different implications about how our explanation generalizes to other cases. According to the *factualist*, you are entitled to assume that it is not raining if you *know* that it is not raining. But if you can see that it is not raining, then you know that it is not raining, and so that is why, in at least paradigm cases, someone who can see that it is not raining is entitled to assume that it is not raining when formulating her decision tables about whether to carry an umbrella. The factualist's explanation does not generalize to the case in which someone seems to be able to see that it is not raining but is Gettiered, or to the case in which it looks to her like it is raining but it is not. According to the factualist, making decisions on the basis of the assumption that it is not raining is not rational in such cases.

A competing answer, that given by the *psychologist*, does so generalize. According to psychologism, what you are entitled to assume in your deliberation are facts about your own psychology. The assumption that it is not raining is not, of course, a fact about your own psychology, and so it turns out that nothing, after all, explains why, in at least paradigm cases, someone who can see that it is not raining is entitled to assume that it is not raining when formulating her decision tables about whether to carry an umbrella. What is explained instead, on the psychologist's view, is why she can assume that it *seems* not to be raining when making her decision – which of course she can also safely assume even if she cannot see that it is not raining because, for example, it really is.

Comesaña argues persuasively that both of these answers yield the wrong results about what it is rational for people to assume when reasoning and when it is rational for them to assume it. His preferred answer, *experientialism*, is that when your experiences justify you in believing that *p*, you are entitled to assume that *p* in deliberating in this way. Someone who can see that it is not raining is justified in believing that it is not raining, and so it follows from experientialism that she is rational to exclude the possibility that it is raining from her decision table. But someone who cannot see that it is not raining because she is Gettiered or to whom things look like it is not raining even though it is can still be justified in believing that it is not raining, and so they, too, are rational to exclude the possibility that it is raining from their decision table.

So far, so good. I agree with Comesaña about the faults of both factualism and psychologism, and that the correct view should entitle them to rely on conclusions that are about the world outside of their minds, and that the trick to doing so without getting into the factualist's difficulties is to allow rational agents to reason from false premises. In all of that, we are, indeed, fellow travelers. Nevertheless, I do not think that experientialism is true. Indeed, I think that the question to which experientialism is an answer – the question of what it is rational to assume in reasoning – does not have any tidy answer along the lines of factualism, psychologism, *or* experientialism.

Experientialism, as Comesaña characterizes it, is a biconditional about the conditions under which it is rational to exclude a possibility from your decision table. But although I agree with Comesaña's criticisms of alternative accounts, I think this biconditional is false in both directions. Consider, then, your decision about whether to carry an umbrella today. On the cost side, it is something else to have to carry, but on the plus side, if it rains in the afternoon and you don't have it, then you will get wet, but if it rains in the afternoon and you have it, then you will stay dry. So far, so good. But of course if you die in the morning, then whether you have the umbrella makes no difference at all in the utility for you of rain in the afternoon. You weren't considering that possibility, right? According to the right-to-left direction of experientialism, you are entitled not to consider it, because you are justified in believing that you won't die this morning.

But now, since you are justified in believing that you won't die this morning, the left-to-right direction of experientialism tells us that you are entitled to exclude the possibility that you will die this morning from your decision table for whether to pay the premium to initiate your life insurance before lunchtime. So you may rationally conclude that the rationally optimal choice is not to pay to initiate your life insurance policy yet. But now something has gone wrong. By reasoning in this way you can rationally reason yourself, one half-day at a time, to never buying life insurance. I conclude that the possibilities that it is rational to exclude from your decision table with respect to whether to buy life insurance and the possibilities that it is rational to exclude from your decision table with respect to whether to carry an umbrella are not necessarily the same. More generally, I conclude, there is no single set of possibilities that it is rational for you to exclude from any decision table – the presupposition of Comesaña's question to which factualism, psychologism, and experientialism are all answers is false.

So we can't, I conclude, accept both directions of experientialism. But I think that we can draw a more specific conclusion from this case. You *are* justified in believing at least some very simple conclusions about the future such as that you will not die this morning. Since the problem in this case cannot be with the right-to-left direction of the conditional, I infer that the life insurance decision provides us with a counterexample to the left-to-right direction of experientialism.

So why, then, is the left-to-right direction of experientialism false? And why, nevertheless, does experientialism seem to be true? My diagnosis is simple. Belief is a state that disposes you by default to exclude a possibility from your decision table. This is what I call the *Default Reliance* account of belief – an account that is so close to the spirit of Comesaña's that it is motivated by precisely the same reasoning.[1] But now it follows immediately from the Default Reliance account of belief – simply by substituting – that you are rationally justified in having some belief just in case you are rationally justified in adopting a default strategy of excluding the alternative from your decision tables.

This truth is *very close* to Comesaña's thesis of experientialism, and that is what can make experientialism feel very close to the truth. But they come apart in two important ways. The first important difference is that it can be rational to adopt a default posture even though it is not rational to follow through on that default posture in every instance, and that is what happens in the case of the life insurance policy. In that case, it makes sense to have a default strategy of disregarding the possibility that you will die soon, but in the very specific circumstance where you are deciding when to initiate life insurance, it is rational to override this default. Similar points go for the surgeon who double-checks which knee requires the operation despite already knowing, and if you are offered a bet for a penny against your life that your legal name is not what you think it is.

But the truth also comes apart from experientialism in a second important way. And that is because it can be rational to do something even though it is not rational to adopt a default strategy of doing it. This happens whenever we *accept* that something is true for some purposes, without adopting the *fully general* default strategy of relying on it. Belief, on the Default Reliance account, is just *all-purpose* acceptance. But even when we do not accept something for all purposes, we can accept it for a narrower range of purposes. We can assume classical mechanics when building bridges. We can assume that we will do as we otherwise intend, even though we would not go so far as to believe that we will not change our mind. We assume that our theories are correct when designing our experiments, even though we do not believe it yet and hope our experiments will confirm it. In all of these cases we accept something that we do not believe. We may not be justified in committing to a general strategy of disregarding the alternative possibilities, but we are rationally justified in disregarding them for now, and for these purposes.

So I conclude not only that experientialism is false, but that there is a mistaken presupposition behind the question to which factualism, psychologism, and experientialism are supposed to be answers. In a way, this is too bad, really, because Comesaña's choice to frame what is at issue between these three camps in terms

[1] Schroeder [2021], chapter eight.

of the question of which possibilities you are entitled to exclude in your decision-making is otherwise actually a very elegant one. It substantially streamlines the relationship between the rationality of belief and the rationality of action in a way that lays bare the troubling consequences of views in the neighborhood of factualism and psychologism for the rationality of action. And it avoids taking on even more substantial and tendentious commitments about the nature of perceptual experience such as those that I take on in my own book when exploring similar issues. So it might, for all that I have argued here that it is false, still be an admissible idealization.

Comesaña himself argues, in one of the especially illuminating discussions in the book, that the consequences for Bayesian models of confidence for logical omniscience show that such models are false, but that for all of that they can still be excellent models for focusing on the significance of uncertainty about *non-logical* matters, and that they can provide such insight precisely by abstracting away from uncertainty about logic. Similarly, we might say, models on which there is a single set of possibilities that can be excluded from rational decision-making also idealize. They idealize away from the fact that all decision-makers can expect themselves to face a succession of further decisions in the future. But this idealization need not prevent them from shedding light on the significance of rationally justified belief for decision-making. Indeed, it might be just the sort of idealization that is required, in order to bring the right questions into focus.[2]

References

[2] Special thanks to Tom Blackson and Juan Comesaña.

Comesana, Juan [2020]. *Being Rational and Being Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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