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### *Discussion of Anil Gupta's "Outline of an Account of Experience"*

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## Comments on Gupta

Alex Byrne

### 1. Transitions

Fundamental to Gupta's picture is the idea of a "rational transition". The role of experience, he thinks, "is not to provide the subject knowledge of anything or to bestow a rational or justificatory status on...beliefs or judgments", but to "render rational certain transitions, including transitions from views to judgments".

His central non-perceptual example of a rational transition involves modus-ponens reasoning from the two premises,  $B$  and *if B then C*, to the conclusion  $C$ . And that does indeed seem to be rational or reasonable, in some sense of these elastic terms. *Something* is going right if someone reasons in this way—at least it's better than affirming the consequent. Since valid reasoning, as Gupta emphasizes, implies nothing about whether the premises are true, or justifiably believed, or known, this example might seem to suggest that the rationality of *transitions* and the rationality of *beliefs* are quite different matters.

However, I think the suggestion should be resisted. What is a rational belief? The usual answer to this question involves some variation on Hume: it is a belief that the subject "proportions to the evidence". Whatever this comes to, exactly, a *knowledgeable* belief is a rational belief *par excellence*. But now we can apparently derive the rationality of the modus-ponens transition: since knowledge is closed under entailment, if  $B$  and *if B then C* are known, the transition will produce knowledge of  $C$ . That is the sense in which the transition is rational: given rational (specifically, knowledgeable) beliefs as input, it will produce a rational belief as output. On this view, if we contrast two cases of modus ponens transitions, one in which the subject knows the premises, and one in which the subject has no relevant evidence at all, there is a whopping difference in rationality, with only the first subject getting full marks. The second subject is doing better than someone who affirms the consequent, but falls conspicuously short of full rationality.

If transitions only have this sort of "derived" rationality, then there is no obvious reason to agree with Gupta, and deny that role of experience is to "provide knowledge". When a hapless brain-in-a-vat undergoes an experience as of a yellow bird, and comes to believe that a yellow bird is before him, we may commend the transition as one that in normal unvattd circumstances

yields knowledge, and in that derived way grant it the honorific “rational”, but that is all. The modus-ponens reasoner who knows her premises and the brain-in-a-vat’s unvatted counterpart are the only ones who are fully rational.

Gupta may well object to this by pressing an “internalist” conception of rationality, which brings me to my next comment.

## 2. The Equivalence Principle

Imagine three “subjectively identical” experiences:  $e_1$  is of tomato-1,  $e_2$  is of tomato-2 ( $\neq$  tomato-1), and  $e_3$  is a tomato-hallucination. In *Empiricism and Experience*, Gupta takes the hardline internalist position: “Subjectively identical experiences make identical epistemic contributions” (2006: 22). In the paper, responding to the worry that this ignores the role of “external elements in transitions”, Gupta opts for a more concessive formulation. He now holds, not that the contributions of the  $e_i$  are identical, but that they are equivalent, in the sense that  $e_1$  makes the transition to the belief that ...tomato-1... rational iff  $e_2$  makes the transition to the belief that ...tomato-2... rational iff  $e_3$  makes the transition to the belief that ...\_\_\_\_... rational.<sup>1</sup>

However, this concession to externalism threatens to undermine Gupta’s internalism. As he explains in the book, “We want to understand the enrichment that a particular experience entails (or should entail) in the cognitive life of the experiencing subject—not in the cognitive life of an external observer prying into the subject. And we want to understand this enrichment from the internal viewpoint of the subject” (22).

Over an interval  $t$ , I undergo  $e_1$ ,  $e_2$ , and  $e_3$  in sequence, unaware of the dramatic changes in my environment. (Tomato-1 is replaced with tomato-2, which is then replaced with empty space.) From my “internal viewpoint” I am simply contemplating a single tomato throughout  $t$ . My first transition is to the belief that tomato-1 is before me, which we may suppose is rational. However, when  $e_2$  and  $e_3$  come along, imagine I somehow continue to believe that tomato-1 is before me; I do not acquire the belief that tomato-2 is before me, or (a little later) that \_\_\_\_ is before me. (All this ought to be possible, at least on Gupta’s view of the relationship between experience and belief.) From my internal viewpoint, I am completely coherent: in harmony with

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<sup>1</sup> The three groups of six dots should be filled in uniformly; filling the dots around the “\_\_\_\_” is supposed (by Gupta) to result in a sentence that expresses a “schematized proposition” (2006: 25-6)—a *gappy proposition*, in perhaps more familiar terminology.

how things seem, I believe that there is a unique tomato before me throughout  $t$  and, indeed, there is a unique tomato (tomato-1) of which I believe, throughout  $t$ , that it is before me. How could I fail to meet the standards of internalist rationality? Yet, I think, Gupta holds that I am irrational—in particular, when  $e_2$  came along, I should have acquired the belief that tomato-2 is before me, and not believed (as I did) that tomato-1 is before me. This looks like a clear externalist verdict, taking the perspective of an external observer unconcerned that the dictates of rationality are completely beyond my ken. So haven't we given up on the project of understanding rationality from the internal viewpoint of the subject? The challenge for Gupta is to explain why this verdict doesn't destroy the appeal of internalism completely.

## References

Gupta, A. 2006. *Empiricism and Experience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.