



# Gupta's Gambit

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## Gupta's Gambit

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### I. Introduction

Anil Gupta's *Empiricism and Experience*<sup>1</sup> is a tour de force: inspired by his work with Nuel Belnap on the revision theory of truth, Gupta presents a brilliant new approach to perceptual justification that aims to embrace the epistemic interdependence of our perceptual judgments and background beliefs without succumbing to skepticism. Gupta sees his project as a continuation of the empiricist tradition, and his overarching goal is to preserve the genuine insights that can be found in classical empiricism while avoiding the assumptions that force most classical empiricists to renounce (or at least radically reinterpret) our commonsense view of the world. There is much to be admired in Gupta's book: several elements in his theory are strikingly original, his use of technical machinery to achieve epistemological results is masterful, and his critical discussions of Quine, Sellars, Davidson, and others are sharp and incisive.

In these comments I focus on the two portions of Gupta's book that I find the most exciting: his claim that individual experiences yield only conditional entitlements to form beliefs, and his claim that nonetheless certain sequences of experiences can together give us absolute entitlements to form beliefs. In the next two sections, I lay out these parts of Gupta's view. Then, in the three sections that follow, I mention three reservations that I have about whether these two ideas of Gupta's can do all of the work that he wants them to do. Although, as is inevitable in a book symposium of this sort, I will be highlighting several features of Gupta's project that I find problematic or in need of further refinement, my primary goal in these comments is to convince you that Gupta's book is worth carefully studying. Even if Gupta's proposal does not—at least in its current form—succeed in its lofty ambitions, I think there is no denying that Gupta has put forward a significant new contribution to the epistemology of

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<sup>1</sup> Gupta 2006a. All page references in the text are to this book, unless otherwise noted. (For those seeking a shorter introduction to Gupta's main ideas, Gupta 2006b essentially serves as a précis of the full-length book.)

perception whose main components—taking perceptual justification to be conditional, using convergence in light of experience to get absolute entitlements, ruling out skeptical scenarios because of their dynamical properties—are deserving of further scrutiny.

## II. Gupta on the Given: Hypothetical Entitlements

When I open my eyes and look out on the room before me, I have a certain visual experience. I also form certain perceptual judgments on the basis of that experience. Let us assume that at least some of these perceptual beliefs are *rational*—or in other words, that I am *entitled* to believe at least some of them, that at least some of them are *justified*. (Following Gupta, I will be taking these three ways of talking about the normative status of beliefs as being roughly synonymous.) Which of my various perceptual judgments are rational, and in virtue of what are they rational? In particular, what is the specific contribution of my *experience* to the rationality of my perceptual beliefs? This is Gupta's guiding question.<sup>2</sup>

One perennially attractive answer is that my experience determines a certain class of propositions, and I am entitled to believe any proposition in that class. On this theory, which Gupta calls *the propositional given*, the nature of my perceptual experience *completely fixes* the propositions I am justified in believing on its basis; thus whatever background beliefs I might have (about the lighting conditions in the room, about the reliability of my perceptual faculties, about the nature of perceptual experience itself) are entirely irrelevant to the justification which my experience confers on the propositions in that privileged class. In particular, this means that anyone in any possible circumstances with the exact same experience that I am having would be justified in believing the exact same privileged class of propositions.<sup>3</sup> So according to the advocate of the propositional given, the following holds:

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<sup>2</sup> Actually, Gupta begins his book by asking a slightly different question, namely “What is the rational contribution of experience to knowledge?” He quickly slides into asking, “What is the contribution of experience to the rationality of belief?” and most of what he says in the book directly addresses this latter question. However, in light of the sorts of issues raised by the Gettier literature, it should be clear that an account of *experience's contribution to the rationality of belief* is not yet an account of *experience's contribution to knowledge*, since (if our intuitive judgments on the matter are to be trusted) rational true belief can fail to be knowledge. (Still, on the assumption that knowledge requires rational/justified/entitled belief, an account of the contribution of experience to rational belief is plausibly an important first step in an account of the contribution of experience to knowledge.)

<sup>3</sup> I am assuming here that if fact  $F_2$  obtains in virtue of fact  $F_1$  in one possible situation, then in every possible situation in which fact  $F_1$  obtains, fact  $F_2$  also obtains. Although this conditional is explicitly denied by moral particularists, it will be harmless to assume it in our present discussion.

*the propositional given*: If subject S has experience  $e$ , then S is entitled to believe a certain class of propositions,  $\Gamma_e$ .

Different versions of this theory will specify the class  $\Gamma_e$ , which Gupta calls “the given in experience,” in different ways. On one version (which we might call *the ordinary propositional given*), when I have an experience as of seeing a man wearing a green tie, I am entitled to believe the following: “That man is wearing a green tie.” On another version (which we might call *the sense-datum propositional given*), when I have the same experience, I am instead entitled to believe the following: “That man-shaped visual sense-datum bears such-and-such spatial relation to that tie-shaped green sense-datum.” And so on.

In chapter 2 of *Empiricism and Experience*, Gupta argues that a commitment to the propositional given has untenable consequences. His basic argument has two parts: first (§2C) he argues that, given certain plausible constraints on any account of experience, an advocate of the propositional given must accept a *Cartesian conception of experience* according to which all of the propositions in  $\Gamma_e$  advert to sense-data (e.g. “A green sense-datum is before me”), or to adverbial appearance statements (e.g. “I am being appeared to greenly”), or in some other way to how things seem or appear to the subject; then (§2D) he argues that such Cartesian conceptions of experience inexorably lead to either skepticism or idealism. Although I think there are multiple places where a fan of the propositional given can resist Gupta’s argument—so that acceptance of the propositional given does not make a Cartesian conception of experience and its concomitant tendency toward skepticism or idealism “inevitable,” as Gupta sometimes puts it (pp. vii, 75, 161)—discussing the details of Gupta’s argument against the propositional given would take us too far adrift.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I think Gupta is undoubtably correct that those who embrace the

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<sup>4</sup> The first half of Gupta’s argument against the propositional given relies on the following three premises (among others):

*Propositional Equivalence*: For all possible experiences  $e$  and  $e'$ , if  $e$  and  $e'$  are subjectively identical, then  $\Gamma_e = \Gamma_{e'}$ .

*Propositional Reliability*: For any possible experience  $e$ , if  $e$  occurs and  $P \in \Gamma_e$ , then  $P$  is not false.

*Weak Existential Assumption*: For any possible experience  $e$ , there exists a possible experience  $e'$  such that (i)  $e$  and  $e'$  are subjectively identical, and (ii)  $e'$  is a dream experience, or a hallucination, or some other experience in which the subject is not in touch with an external world of mind-independent objects.

However, some propositional givenists (see, for example, McDowell 2008 and Williamson 2000, ch. 8) will deny Propositional Equivalence, other propositional givenists (see, for example, Audi 2003 and Pryor 2000) will deny Propositional Reliability, and still other propositional givenists (see, for example, Neta 2009) will deny the Weak Existential Assumption.

(Gupta claims [p. 32, n. 27] that one can run a variant of his argument which does not appeal to Propositional Reliability, but I find this version of the argument much less convincing, especially once one realizes that entitlements are permissions, not obligations: see the end of §VI below.)

propositional given face *significant pressure* toward embracing skepticism or idealism as well. This pressure, as well as the host of other problems that bedevil propositional accounts of the given,<sup>5</sup> make it well worth seeing, in my opinion, whether a viable non-propositional account of the given can be found.

According to the propositional givenist, experiences give rise to absolute, unqualified entitlements: if I have a certain experience, then I am entitled (full stop) to believe various propositions on the basis of that experience. Gupta's proposal, on the other hand, is that experiences give rise to merely conditional entitlements. Following Gupta, let us define a person's *view* to be the totality of that person's concepts, conceptions, and beliefs (p. 76). Consider the view that I currently hold: it includes certain concepts such as <tie> and <person>, certain conceptions such as that of a philosophy conference and that of a book symposium, and certain beliefs such as *that I live in an external world of mind-independent objects, that my eyes are functioning properly, that the lighting around me is normal*, and so on. Now suppose I have an experience as of seeing a man before me wearing a green tie. Then Gupta's claim is that *if I am entitled to hold my view, then I am entitled to believe that there is a man before me wearing a green tie* (ibid.). Contrast this with a slightly different case in which my view is basically the same as it is now, except that instead of believing *that my eyes are functioning properly*, I believe *that the epilepsy medicine I've been taking has tinged my eye lenses yellow so that things which look green to me are actually blue*.<sup>6</sup> If I have the same experience as of seeing a man before me wearing a green tie, Gupta thinks that now a slightly different conditional holds: *if I am entitled to hold my tinged-eye-lenses view, then I am entitled to believe that there is a man before me wearing a blue tie* (p. 77). Finally, consider a more fanciful case. Suppose I hold a *solipsist view* according to which all that exists is my mind and its sense-data, and everything else that exists is a logical construction out of those sense-data. If I have the same experience, Gupta thinks the following conditional holds: *if I am entitled to hold my solipsist view, then I am entitled to believe that I sense a man-shaped visual sense-datum and a tie-shaped green sense-datum which are spatially related to each other in such-and-such a manner* (pp. 77-78).

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<sup>5</sup> I am thinking here, in particular, of the bootstrapping worries that exist for most non-Cartesian versions of the propositional given: see Cohen 2002 and White 2006.

<sup>6</sup> It has been speculated that Vincent Van Gogh's epilepsy medicine gave him the medical condition known as yellow vision, which would explain the preponderance of yellow shades in his paintings.

Thus Gupta holds that individual experiences only furnish us with hypothetical entitlements: *assuming* that one is entitled to bring a certain view to bear on a given experience, *then* one is entitled to believe certain propositions on the basis of that experience. As before, we can summarize this position by isolating a class of propositions that constitute the experiential given for a subject at a time. However, whereas according to the propositional givenist which propositions are in that class is only a function of the experience that one is currently having, according to Gupta the propositions in that class are a function of *both* one's experience *and* one's (entitlement to a) view.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Gupta holds:

*the hypothetical given:* If subject S has experience  $e$  and is entitled to hold view  $v$ , then S is entitled to believe a certain class of propositions,  $\Gamma_e(v)$ .

In the language of justification: if S has experience  $e$  and is justified in holding view  $v$ , then S is justified in believing each member of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ . In the language of rationality: if S has experience  $e$  and it is rational for S to hold view  $v$ , then it is rational for S to believe each member of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ .

The idea that the given is hypothetical in character is the heart of Gupta's account of perceptual justification. Before turning to the other crucial element in that account, I want to warn against a certain misinterpretation of Gupta that is tempting at this point. Gupta often summarizes his idea of the hypothetical given by saying things such as the following: "Once I *bring* this view to my experience, I am entitled to certain perceptual judgments"; "*Considered under* this view, the experience entitles me [to certain perceptual judgments]"; "When I *conjoin* my experience with the Cartesian view, I am entitled to [certain] perceptual judgments" (pp. 77-78, emphasis mine). These ways of speaking makes it natural to suppose that Gupta's account of the given is actually as follows:

*the hypothetical given (alternate version):* If subject S has experience  $e$  and holds view  $v$ , then S is entitled to believe a certain class of propositions,  $\Gamma_e(v)$ .

However, I believe that a careful reading of Gupta's text makes it clear that my first formulation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Gupta often insists that what is unique about his view is that he takes the given in experience to be a *function*, whereas the propositional givenist takes it to be a *class of propositions* (see p. 79). However, I think this way of characterizing the difference between Gupta and the propositional givenist is misleading. On *both* accounts the given is a function: for the propositional givenist it is a *one-argument* function from experiences to classes of propositions, whereas for Gupta it is a *two-argument* function from experiences and views to classes of propositions. Of course, once we fix on a particular experience, then according to the propositional givenist the given-for-that-experience is a class of propositions. But so too, once we fix on a particular experience and a particular view, then according to Gupta the given-for-that-experience-and-that-view is a class of propositions.

hypothetical given is in fact the one he intends.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, this alternate version of the hypothetical given is extremely implausible: it would imply, for example, that even if I hold a solipsist view for completely zany reasons, as long as I hold fast to that view, every experience I have entitles me to believe in the existence of sense-data. So it is important to bear in mind that Gupta's talk of, say, conjoining a view with an experience should be read as talk of conjoining a view-to-which-one-is-entitled with an experience. Similarly, Gupta often schematically represents his proposal as follows (p. 77; see also Gupta 2006b, p. 189):

View + Experience  $\Rightarrow$  Perceptual Judgments

However, I think this way of putting things is slightly misleading. A more faithful representation of Gupta's proposal would be as follows:

Entitlement to View + Experience  $\Rightarrow$  Entitlement to Perceptual Judgments

It is *entitlements to views* (not views by themselves) which together with experiences yield *entitlements to perceptual judgments* (not perceptual judgments by themselves). This issue will become important during my second set of critical comments, in §V below.

### III. Gupta on Convergence: From Hypothetical to Categorical Entitlements

Gupta's account of the given is weaker, and hence more defensible, than the account provided by the propositional givenist. Surely, Gupta insists, everyone will concede that *if* I am entitled to my commonsense view of the world, *then* my visual experience as of a man wearing a green tie entitles me to believe *that there is a man wearing a green tie before me*. However, Gupta's account of the given also raises a problem: what explains why I am entitled to my commonsense view of the world (if indeed I am)? Presumably my commonsense view is at least partially justified by other perceptual experiences that I have had in the past. But this leads to the following predicament (pp. 76-77, 162, 215):

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<sup>8</sup> Some choice quotations that tell in favor of my interpretation: "...assuming that I am justified in my view, I am justified in my perceptual judgments" (p. 76); "...given that I have the experience and given that I am entitled to my view, it follows that I am entitled to my perceptual judgments" (ibid.); "...provided that the view that we bring to bear on experience is rational, the resulting perceptual judgments are rational" (p. 163); "...[experience] delivers rational judgments only when it has the aid of a rational view" (p. 164); "...the rationality of our perceptual judgments depends in turn upon the rationality of our view" (p. 215). See also Gupta 2009, where Gupta explicitly rejects the second interpretation of the hypothetical given (p. 339-340) and then explicitly endorses what appears to be the first interpretation: "Experience does not, by itself, entitle us to affirm perceptual judgments; it only does so in conjunction with an antecedent rational view (or a specific rational part of a view)" (p. 340).

*the epistemic interdependence of views and perceptual judgments:* Our entitlement to our perceptual judgments depends on our entitlement to our views, and our entitlement to our views depends on our entitlement to our perceptual judgments.

How to break out of this chain of epistemic dependencies is not easy to see.<sup>9</sup>

It is here that Gupta's work with Belnap on the revision theory of truth comes to the fore.<sup>10</sup> The basic idea behind the revision theory of truth is that circularity/interdependence is a phenomenon that is to be exploited, not feared. The interdependence in question in that theory is *definitional interdependence*: in *The Revision Theory of Truth*, Gupta and Belnap first show how it is possible to extract from a set of circular definitions information about the extensions of the concepts defined in terms of those definitions, then argue that the concept of truth is in fact a circular concept of just that sort, and finally use the information that they extract about the extension of the concept <true> to propose a solution to the liar paradox and a host of other puzzles that plague most attempts to sketch a formal theory of truth. Now the interdependence that threatens Gupta's account of perceptual justification is *epistemic interdependence*, not *definitional interdependence*, so a straightforward application of his ideas from the revision theory of truth is not possible: what is worrisome for Gupta's account of perceptual justification is not that our *definition* of a view is intertwined with our *definition* of a perceptual judgment, but rather that our *justification* for our views is intertwined with our *justification* for our perceptual judgments. Nonetheless, Gupta's idea for how to break free from the epistemic interdependence of views and perceptual judgments is very much inspired by the formal machinery that he and Belnap developed when investigating interdependent definitions as part of their revision theory of truth.

Gupta proposes the following model for how hypothetical perceptual entitlements could yield categorical entitlements.<sup>11</sup> Imagine an ideally rational being who initially holds a view  $v_0$  and undergoes a

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<sup>9</sup> An approach to this problem that Gupta does not consider is to have our entitlement to our views partially depend on our entitlement to our perceptual judgments, but also partially depend on some other source of entitlements that is wholly categorical in nature. One proposal along these lines that is still vaguely empiricist in spirit would involve taking us to have a small pool of innate knowledge (and hence non-conditionally justified beliefs) about extremely general features of the world and our epistemic relationship to it, which together with the conditional justification we receive via experience might be enough to erect an edifice of knowledge that includes most of our commonsense beliefs.

<sup>10</sup> See Gupta 1988-89 and Gupta & Belnap 1993. A brief summary of the essentials of the revision theory of truth can be found in ch. 3 of *Empiricism and Experience*.

<sup>11</sup> This model is of course idealized in many ways. Gupta attempts to remove some of these idealizations in ch. 7.



sequence of experiences  $E = \langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots e_n \rangle$ .<sup>12</sup> At the first stage of this process, our rational being brings view  $v_0$  to bear on experience  $e_1$  and revises it in light of the perceptual judgments  $\Gamma_{e_1}(v_0)$  entailed by  $e_1$ . Sometimes this is achieved simply by adding the judgments in  $\Gamma_{e_1}(v_0)$  to  $v_0$ . But other times, Gupta tells us (p. 81), the pressure from  $\Gamma_{e_1}(v_0)$  necessitates a substantial revision of the original view  $v_0$ . In general, let

$\rho_e(v)$  = the result of rationally revising view  $v$  in light of the perceptual judgments  $\Gamma_e(v)$  entailed by experience  $e$ .<sup>13</sup>

(For now let us assume that there is always a unique way of rationally revising a given view in light of the perceptual judgments entailed by a given experience; near the end of §VI we shall revisit this assumption.) Then we can summarize the first stage as follows: our rational being starts out with view  $v_0$ , undergoes experience  $e_1$ , and as a result revises her view to view  $v_1 = \rho_{e_1}(v_0)$ .

At the second stage of our process, the rational being brings view  $v_1$  to bear on experience  $e_2$  and revises it in light of the perceptual judgments  $\Gamma_{e_2}(v_1)$  entailed by  $e_2$ . This results in a new view,  $v_2 = \rho_{e_2}(v_1) = \rho_{e_2}(\rho_{e_1}(v_0))$ . At the third stage, our rational being brings view  $v_2$  to bear on experience  $e_3$  and revises it in light of that experience to view  $v_3 = \rho_{e_3}(v_2) = \rho_{e_3}(\rho_{e_2}(v_1)) = \rho_{e_3}(\rho_{e_2}(\rho_{e_1}(v_0)))$ . And so on: at each successive stage in the process, the rational being revises her current view in light of the experience that she undergoes at that stage. Let  $V = \langle v_0, v_1, v_2, v_3, \dots \rangle = \langle v_0, \rho_{e_1}(v_0), \rho_{e_2}(\rho_{e_1}(v_0)), \rho_{e_3}(\rho_{e_2}(\rho_{e_1}(v_0))), \dots \rangle$  be the sequence of views that the rational being holds during this process. Gupta calls  $V$  *the revision sequence generated by E and  $v_0$* . In general, if  $E = \langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots e_n \rangle$  is a finite sequence of experiences, let

$$\rho_E(v) = \rho_{e_n}(\rho_{e_{n-1}}(\rho_{e_{n-2}}(\dots \rho_{e_3}(\rho_{e_2}(\rho_{e_1}(v))\dots))).$$

Since  $\rho_E(v_0)$  is the final view in the revision sequence  $V$  generated by  $E$  and  $v_0$ , let us call  $\rho_E(v_0)$  *the outcome of the revision sequence generated by E and  $v_0$* . (This last piece of formalism is mine, not Gupta's.) Intuitively,  $\rho_E(v_0)$  is the view that results when a rational being starts with initial view  $v_0$  and revises it in light of each of the successive experiences in  $E$ .

<sup>12</sup> In *Empiricism and Experience*, Gupta starts by considering the case in which our rational being undergoes a denumerably infinite sequence of experiences (pp. 88-101), and then later extends his formalism to the finite case (pp. 101-102). Here I follow Gupta 2006b in considering the finite case from the beginning, since—as far as I can see—there is no need to take a detour through the infinite case in order to explain Gupta's basic account of categorical entitlements.

<sup>13</sup> In *Empiricism and Experience* Gupta calls this function  $R(v, e)$  (see p. 88), whereas in Gupta 2006b he calls it  $\rho_e(v)$  (see p. 195 of that article). Since I find the  $\rho_e(v)$  notation more perspicuous, especially when the function is embedded multiple times, I have chosen to adopt that notation here.

Notice that two rational beings who start with different views but undergo the same sequence of experiences can converge on essentially the same view when they update their views in light of those experiences. For example, consider the two views that I mentioned earlier:

$v^*$  = the commonsense view that I actually hold right now;

$v^{**}$  = a view just like  $v^*$ , except it contains the belief *that the epilepsy medicine I've been taking has tinged my eye lenses yellow so that things which look green to me are actually blue* (as well as whatever other changes are needed to make the view moderately coherent).

Consider a sequence of experiences in which I first undergo an experience as of seeing a man wearing a green tie, and then later undergo an experience as of having an optometrist test my vision with color charts, an experience as of that optometrist telling me that my color vision is completely normal, an experience as of someone else explaining to me that epilepsy medicine doesn't actually tinge one's eye lenses yellow, and so on. If I start by accepting  $v^{**}$ , then after the first experience in that sequence, it will be rational for me to believe *that sometime today there was a man before me wearing a blue tie*. However, after I undergo the entire sequence of experiences, it will be rational for me to revise my belief so that instead I believe *that sometime today there was a man before me wearing a green tie*. And of course I would have had that belief all along if I had started by holding view  $v^*$ . So regardless of whether I start with view  $v^*$  or view  $v^{**}$ , the rational pressure of experience will cause me to converge on the same belief. Gupta sees this mechanism of *converge in light of experience* as the secret to extracting absolute entitlements from merely conditional ones.

Let us say that a view is *admissible* if and only if it is an acceptable starting point for a process of revision. For a given finite sequence of experiences  $E$ , let us define a set of propositions as follows:

$$\Omega_E = \{P : (\forall \text{ admissible view } v)(P \in \rho_E(v))\}.$$

Thus  $\Omega_E$  is the set of all propositions that are contained in every outcome generated by  $E$  and an admissible view. For this reason, let us call  $\Omega_E$  *the common core of the admissible outcomes generated by  $E$* . (This is another piece of formalism that is mine, not Gupta's.) Then Gupta's proposal is as follows:

*the categorical given:* If subject  $S$  has had sequence of experiences  $E$ , then  $S$  is entitled to believe any proposition  $P$  such that  $P \in \Omega_E$ .

When the rational development, in light of experience, of every acceptable starting view agrees on a given proposition, one is absolutely (not just conditionally) justified in believing that proposition. Or so, at least, Gupta claims.<sup>14</sup>

Why the restriction to admissible views? Why not instead allow any arbitrary initial starting view when defining  $\Omega_E$ ? The problem, according to Gupta, is that doing so would block the possibility of our ever having absolute justification to believe ordinary claims about the world such as *that there is a man before me wearing a green tie*. Gupta insists that if  $v_s$  is a solipsist view, then there is no finite sequence of experiences  $E$  such that  $\rho_E(v_s)$  is a commonsense view according to which we live in an ordinary world of mind-independent objects. So if solipsist views are allowed as acceptable starting points for revision, it follows that for any finite sequence of experiences  $E$ , there is always at least one admissible outcome generated by  $E$  that is not a commonsense view. And this in turn means that  $\Omega_E$ , the intersection of all the admissible outcomes generated by  $E$ , can never contain commonsense propositions such as *that there is a man before me wearing a green tie*. Gupta concludes that if we want to hold out hope that we are absolutely entitled to believe such propositions, we need to rule out solipsist views from being acceptable starting points for the process of revision.

Following Gupta, let us say that view  $v$  is *fundamentally equivalent* to view  $v'$  if and only if  $v$  and  $v'$  offer the same basic account of the self and the world (p. 91). Let us also say that view  $v$  is *rigid* if and only if, for any possible finite sequence of experiences  $E$ ,  $\rho_E(v)$  is fundamentally equivalent to  $v$  (p. 154, n. 57). Then Gupta proposes the following restriction on admissible views (pp. 154-155):

*Gupta's criterion:* A view is admissible only if it is not rigid.

Rigid views are barred by Gupta from being acceptable starting points for revision because their basic picture of the world and the self is completely impervious to experience: no matter what experiences we might have, the essential details of that picture do not shift as we revise our beliefs in light of experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Gupta's official presentation of the categorical given involves defining a number of notions (*virtual identity, convergent revision processes, surviving views*, etc.) that I have not mentioned here. However, there is no need to introduce these concepts in order to present Gupta's main proposal about what makes a rational being categorically justified in believing a given proposition, as the following quotation makes clear: "...at any stage  $n$ , the [rational being] has an absolute obligation to accept all that is common to the views ... that survive at stage  $n$ " (p. 98). See also Gupta 2006b, p. 198, n. 26.

It is this restriction that allows Gupta to solve the problem presented by solipsist views, for Gupta insists that solipsist views are rigid and hence inadmissible. Moreover, the familiar skeptical hypotheses are disarmed in a similar way: according to Gupta, brain-in-a-vat views and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views are also rigid and for this reason unacceptable starting points for revision (p. 175; see also Gupta 2006b, p. 202). This provides Gupta with a novel way of avoiding the epistemic threat presented by skeptical hypotheses: skeptical hypotheses are deemed unacceptable, at least as initial starting points, because of the very property that makes them so epistemologically terrifying, namely their immunity to refutation through experience (p. 157). For Gupta, it is the *dynamical behavior* of skeptical hypotheses under possible streams of experience that renders them inadmissible (p. 159).

This concludes my summary of Gupta's account of perceptual justification. To recap, the essential details of his account are these:

- i. *Individual experiences* give rise to merely *conditional entitlements* to believe: if one is entitled to hold view  $v$ , then experience  $e$  entitles one to believe a certain class of propositions,  $\Gamma_e(v)$ .
- ii. *Sequences of experiences* can give rise to *absolute entitlements* to believe if the following holds: every way of starting with an admissible view and then successively revising it in light of the propositions entailed by the experiences in that sequence results in a view that agrees on a given proposition.
- iii. *Solipsist views, brain-in-a-vat views, deceived-by-an-evil-demon views*, and the like are deemed inadmissible because they have the dynamical property of *being rigid*: no course of experience could ever rationally mandate a change in the fundamental details of those views.

Such is Gupta's gambit. In the three sections that follow, I want to raise some worries about whether Gupta has adequately defended these elements of his view, and about whether these elements are enough to achieve his more general aims.

#### **IV. First Worry: Is This Empiricism?**

As I said at the outset of these comments, one of Gupta's overarching goals is to vindicate empiricism: he

wants to provide an account of epistemic justification according to which “experience is our principal epistemic authority and guide” and “we need heed only one epistemic master: experience” (pp. 3, 180). Has he succeeded in that goal? In fact, it is far from clear that he has. Gupta has certainly provided an account of categorical justification in which experience plays an important role. However, in order to vindicate empiricism we don’t just need experience to play *some* role in the justification of our beliefs; it is difficult to see how any plausible account of justification, whether rationalist or empiricist, could deny *that*. Rather, what we need is for experience to play an *exclusive* or *primary* role in the justification of our beliefs. And it remains to be seen whether experience bears the brunt of the normative work in Gupta’s proposal. In particular, we need to ask whether there are places in Gupta’s account where reason (rather than experience on its own) makes a substantial contribution to the justification that we have for our beliefs.

Gupta does concede that reason has a substantial role to play in at least one part of his proposal: he admits that “reason demarcates the views that are acceptable starting points of revision from those that are not” (p. 192). As Gupta sees it, it is an *a priori* truth, discernible through reason alone, that rigid views are unacceptable initial views. Presumably it is also an *a priori* truth, discernible through reason alone, that solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views are rigid. These concessions grant a role for reason in Gupta’s account, though he seems to think that this role is rather negligible compared to the role played by experience. Moreover, Gupta regularly talks as if separating the admissible views from the inadmissible ones is the *only* role that reason plays on his account (see pp. 159, 175, 192).

However, I think that this is not entirely correct. As I will now argue, reason has at least two other substantial roles to play in Gupta’s account: reason demarcates the contours of the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function, and reason demarcates the contours of the  $\rho_e(v)$  function. If I am right, then reason plays a much greater part in Gupta’s proposal than he admits.

I put forward that, for Gupta, statements about the proper extension of the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function are synthetic, *a priori* truths, discoverable through reason alone. Here are three ways of seeing that this must be so:

- a. Without some constraints on the extension of the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function, we can embed any account of the propositional given within Gupta's formalism. For example, let  $G_e$  be the one-argument function from experiences to classes of propositions put forward by the sense-datum theorist who thinks there is a propositional given. Once we have that function, we can construct a sense-datum version of Gupta's two-argument function from experiences and views to classes of propositions by setting  $\Gamma_e(v) = G_e$  for all values of  $e$  and  $v$ . (The output of this function does not, of course, depend on the specific value of  $v$  that serves as input, but this function is just as much a function that takes both experiences and views as inputs as the arithmetical function  $f(x, y) = x^2 + y^0$  is a function that takes values of both  $x$  and  $y$  as input.) Thus Gupta needs to rule out the possibility that the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function has such an extension, or else it could turn out that his theory is a mere notational variant of the theory put forward by the sense-datum propositional givenist. How does he rule out such a possibility? Through an appeal to reason, presumably. (Convergence in light of experience is no help here, since the notion of convergence is undefined without specific values for the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function.)
- b. Gupta proposes various constraints of his own on the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ . For example, in the course of his argument against the propositional given, he commits himself to the following restriction on the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ :
- Equivalence:* If experiences  $e$  and  $e'$  are subjectively identical, then  $\Gamma_e(v) = \Gamma_{e'}(v)$ .
- How do we determine whether a constraint such as Equivalence holds? Through an appeal to reason, presumably. (Again, convergence in light of experience is no help.)
- c. Since it is possible for someone to hold a view which explicitly denies some of the constraints that Gupta proposes on the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ , we can't just read off the output of  $\Gamma_e(v)$  from the nature of the view  $v$  that serves as input to that function. For example, there are a number of philosophers (such as Timothy Williamson, John McDowell, and other so-called "epistemological disjunctivists") who hold positions in the epistemology of perception that directly contradict

Gupta's Equivalence constraint.<sup>15</sup> Suppose  $v^*$  is a view held by one of these philosophers who explicitly denies Equivalence; for example, maybe according to this view hallucinatory or illusory experiences have less epistemic “oomph” than subjectively identical veridical experiences. Even then, Gupta is committed to the claim that if  $e$  is a veridical experience and  $e'$  is a subjectively identical hallucinatory experience,  $\Gamma_e(v^*) = \Gamma_{e'}(v^*)$ . So it is no trivial matter how to determine the value of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ , given a particular experience  $e$  and particular view  $v$ : the content of  $v$  on its own doesn't give us a recipe for determining that value. Only through an appeal to reason can we fix how the output of  $\Gamma_e(v)$  depends on its inputs.

Thus I think it is clear that reason plays a substantial role in Gupta's account delineating the contours of the function  $\Gamma_e(v)$ . Moreover, I claim that even once the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$  is fixed, this doesn't fix the extension of  $\rho_e(v)$ , so reason must *also* play a substantial role delineating the contours of the function  $\rho_e(v)$ . Suppose that a rational being with view  $v$  undergoes experience  $e$ , and suppose that  $Q \in \Gamma_e(v)$ . Gupta writes that this fact “forces the rational being to adjust its view  $v$  *in light of*  $Q$  (and the other judgments in  $\Gamma_e(v)$ ). Most often this is achieved simply by adding  $Q$  to  $v$ . But sometimes it requires a substantial revision of the original view  $v$  to a new view  $v'$ ...” (p. 81). How do we determine whether a substantial revision of the original view is mandated? Through an appeal to reason.

To see the degree to which determining the extension of  $\rho_e(v)$  is a substantive matter over and above that of determining the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ , notice the following: Gupta can't hold that any old revision of  $v$  in light of experience  $e$  which respects the constraints imposed by the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  function is rationally permissible. For example, suppose I start with commonsense view  $v_c$  and undergo experience  $e_1$ . If any old revision of  $v_c$  in light of experience  $e_1$  which respects the constraints imposed by the  $\Gamma_{e_1}(v)$  function were rationally permissible, then it would be rationally permissible for me to revise  $v_c$  to the following view:  $v_s \cup \Gamma_{e_1}(v_s)$ , where  $v_s$  is an arbitrary solipsist view.<sup>16</sup> However, this result would be disastrous for Gupta, for now it would always be possible *after a single experience* to revise one's view to

<sup>15</sup> See Williamson 2000, ch. 8; McDowell 2008; and Byrne & Logue 2008, esp. §4.

<sup>16</sup> If  $v$  is a view and  $C$  is a class of propositions, let  $v \cup C$  be the view that results when the propositions in  $C$  are added to  $v$ .

a solipsist view. So even if we prohibit solipsist views from being acceptable starting points for revision, this restriction would be rendered irrelevant, and we would be assured of never achieving convergence on any ordinary external-world propositions. For this reason it is absolutely essential to Gupta's project that reason restricts which sorts of revisions in light of experience are rationally acceptable, even once we fix the extension of  $\Gamma_e(v)$ .

Indeed, since  $\rho_e(v)$  is defined as "the result of *rationally* revising view  $v$  in light of the perceptual judgments  $\Gamma_e(v)$  entailed by experience  $e$ ," there is so much built into  $\rho_e(v)$  that a deeper worry remains. It might not just be the case that *we* (as theorists) need to make a substantial appeal to reason when discerning the appropriate output  $\rho_e(v)$  for a given input  $e$  and  $v$ ; it might also be the case that *our rational being* needs to make a substantial appeal to reason when moving from  $v$  to  $\rho_e(v)$  in response to experience  $e$ . For example, suppose Descartes was right and there exists a sound *a priori* argument that God exists and is not a deceiver. Then every output of the  $\rho_e(v)$  function would include the proposition *that a non-deceiving God exists*, regardless of which values of  $e$  and  $v$  serve as input, for the ideally rational way of revising any view  $v$  in light of any experience  $e$  would always include one's discerning, and accepting the conclusion of, Descartes' *a priori* argument for the existence of a non-deceiving God. In that case it would follow that, for any finite sequence of experiences  $E$  (even a sequence of length 1),  $\Omega_E$  always contains the proposition *that a non-deceiving God exists*, so we are always categorically entitled to believe that a non-deceiving God exists, but it would be extremely misleading (to say the least) to insist that *experience* is the sole epistemic master guiding us to this belief. In other words, since  $\rho_e(v)$  smuggles in changes in view that are attributable to reason as well as changes in view that are attributable to experience, Gupta's formal machinery by itself has no way of adjudicating whether it is reason or experience that does the brunt of the work in getting one to revise one's view from  $v$  to  $\rho_e(v)$  when one has experience  $e$ . Thus even a fairly substantial commitment to rationalism is compatible with Gupta's account of non-conditional justification.

Perhaps an analogy will help at this point. In his oft-discussed article "Internal and External Reasons," Bernard Williams argued (in effect) that one has a reason to  $\phi$  only if one could, after a process



of sound deliberation from one's existing motivations while availed of all the relevant non-normative facts, reach a state in which one is motivated to  $\phi$  (Williams 1980). Williams took this claim to vindicate a sort of Humean anti-rationalism about reasons for action. In her response to Williams, Christine Korsgaard argued (in effect) that if Kant's arguments for the Categorical Imperative are sound, then anyone, regardless of his or her present motivations, could reach through sound deliberation a state in which he or she is motivated to act in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, so Williams' account of reasons is compatible with the most thoroughgoing sort of rationalism about reasons for action that is possible (Korsgaard 1986). I mean to be making the same sort of point about Gupta's account of categorical entitlements. Just as, if there is such a thing as pure practical reason, then it is compatible with Williams' proposal that pure reason on its own could secure substantive truths about what we have reason to do, so too, I claim, if there is such a thing as pure theoretical reason, then it is compatible with Gupta's proposal that pure reason on its own could secure substantive truths about what we have (non-conditional) reason to believe.

Now Williams' reply to Korsgaard was to concede her point, but then to insist that it comes to naught since Kant's arguments for the Categorical Imperative are unsound.<sup>17</sup> So too, I imagine, Gupta might concede the point I am making here, but then insist that it comes to naught since Descartes' arguments for the existence of a non-deceiving God—as well as all other rationalist arguments for substantive truths about the nature of the self or the world—are unsound (see pp. 10, 162-163, 216). However, the more general point I want to make would still hold, for it would then be these negative arguments against the soundness of the rationalist arguments that would be doing the work in vindicating empiricism, not Gupta's positive arguments for his general framework. *That* general framework is entirely compatible with reason carrying more of the normative load than experience in getting one's views to converge on a given proposition, since the  $\rho_e(v)$  function encompasses *both* rational revisions of one's view that are grounded in reason *and* rational revisions of one's view that are grounded in experience.

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<sup>17</sup> See Williams 1989, p. 44, n. 3, and 2001, pp. 93-94.

When emphasizing the empiricist nature of his project, Gupta makes a positive point about the role of experience in his proposal and a negative point about the role of reason: he claims that according to his proposal “experience is the supreme epistemic authority” (p. 213; repeated on p. 220, n. 3), and he claims that according to his proposal “reason has no special insight into the nature of reality” (p. 175). I have just argued that both of these claims are not entirely accurate. Since reason passes verdict on the admissibility of views and delineates the contours of the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  and  $\rho_e(v)$  functions, experience is not the only epistemic authority in Gupta’s account. And since the  $\Gamma_e(v)$  and  $\rho_e(v)$  functions encapsulate epistemic truths, I think there is no denying that, for Gupta, reason has special insight into nature of *epistemic* reality, at the very least. Moreover, depending on whether reason makes a greater contribution than experience in determining the output of  $\rho_e(v)$  for some values of  $e$  and  $v$  (an issue on which, I have argued, Gupta’s formal machinery is by itself silent), it might even turn out, on Gupta’s proposal, that reason *does* have special insight into the nature of non-epistemic reality, and that reason is *as* supreme an epistemic authority on some matters as experience is on others.<sup>18</sup>

## V. Second Worry: Do We Really Get Categorical Entitlements?

So far I have not presented any actual objections to Gupta’s proposal, but rather have just been voicing some concerns about the way in which it is advertised. Now, however, it is time to dig a little deeper and raise some worries about the details of Gupta’s account, for I think there is a serious lacuna in Gupta’s explanation of how hypothetical perceptual entitlements can together give rise to categorical entitlements. According to Gupta, we have an absolute entitlement to believe the common core of the admissible outcomes generated by the sequence of experiences we have actually undergone. However, it is far from clear that Gupta has provided us with enough material to account for why this might be so. Let me explain.

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<sup>18</sup> In particular, I have serious doubts that experience on its own is enough to achieve convergence with regards to mathematical claims, logical claims, moral and other normative claims, and meta-philosophical claims. Gupta sets aside these cases when laying out his framework in *Empiricism and Experience* (see, for example, p. 4, n. 1, where he says that he will not be considering our knowledge of mathematics), but a full-blown defense of empiricism would of course require extending that framework to these other cases, which are precisely the sorts of cases that have proven the most resistant to an empiricist treatment over the centuries.

Suppose there are only  $m$  acceptable starting views:  $s_1, s_2, s_3, \dots s_m$ .<sup>19</sup> Moreover, suppose that for a given finite sequence of experiences  $E = \langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots e_n \rangle$  and for a given proposition  $P$ ,  $P \in \Omega_E$ . According to Gupta, it follows that any rational being who has had sequence of experiences  $E$  is absolutely entitled to believe  $P$ . But does this really follow? From the definition of  $\Omega_E$ , we know that  $P \in \rho_E(s_1)$ ,  $P \in \rho_E(s_2)$ ,  $P \in \rho_E(s_3)$ , ... and  $P \in \rho_E(s_m)$ . Given Gupta's account of the hypothetical given, this means that the following raft of conditionals holds:

If  $S$  was entitled to hold  $s_1$  before having experience  $e_1$ , then  $S$  is now entitled to believe  $P$  after having sequence of experiences  $E = \langle e_1, e_2, e_3, \dots e_n \rangle$ .

If  $S$  was entitled to hold  $s_2$  before having experience  $e_1$ , then  $S$  is now entitled to believe  $P$  after having sequence of experiences  $E$ .

...

If  $S$  was entitled to hold  $s_m$  before having experience  $e_1$ , then  $S$  is now entitled to believe  $P$  after having sequence of experiences  $E$ .

But Gupta's desire conclusion, namely "S is now entitled to believe P," only follows from this set of conditionals if we make the following additional assumption:

(\*) Before having experience  $e_1$ ,  $S$  was (absolutely) entitled to hold at least one admissible view.

However, what explains why (\*) is true? More conditional entitlements? Or something of a different sort?

Just how pressing this problem is can be seen once we realize the following: on Gupta's conception of the given, entitlements flow (as it were) from input views to output views when one has an experience. Thus if one has a *sequence* of experiences, entitlements can gush from one view to the next, but only if one is entitled to the first *ur*-view from whence all these entitlements flow. Moreover, this initial entitlement must be a *categorical* entitlement. So I fail to see how hypothetical entitlements, on their own, can yield categorical entitlements, even when convergence occurs. We still need there to be categorical entitlements standing at the head of the revision process, and it is just not clear what sort of account could be provided of those initial categorical entitlements with the materials Gupta has provided us. Gupta himself writes at one point that "the move from [a] conditional entitlement to a categorical

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<sup>19</sup> Presumably there will always be a non-denumerably infinite number of acceptable starting views, but for ease of exposition it will be harmless to engage in the fiction that the number of admissible views is finite.

entitlement requires a *prior* entitlement to my view” (p. 76), and the prior entitlement in question is clearly a prior *categorical* entitlement, not a hypothetical one. So in order to get categorical entitlements out, we need to put categorical entitlements in; but Gupta has not explained how we can put categorical entitlements in, so he has not explained how we can get categorical entitlements out.

During Gupta’s official presentation of how hypothetical entitlements can give rise to categorical entitlements, Gupta has us imagine that our rational being is what he calls a “raimex”: an ideal *rational*, *imaginative*, and *experiencing* being (p. 95). He also has us imagine that, when convergence occurs, the raimex has realized that convergence has occurred: the raimex has considered every acceptable starting view and come to the conclusion that each way of rationally developing one of those views in light of the experiences that it has had results in a view that overlaps on a given proposition, say P (pp. 95-101). This makes it extremely tempting to think that the raimex is non-conditionally justified in believing P because it can run through the following story in its head: “If I had started by accepting  $s_1$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P; if I had started by accepting  $s_2$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P; ... and if I had started by accepting  $s_m$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P. So no matter which admissible view I had started by accepting, I would right now be entitled to believe P. Therefore I am entitled to believe P.”

However, this sort of reasoning conflates the two different formulations of the hypothetical given that I mentioned in §II. According to the incorrect (but tempting) interpretation of Gupta on the hypothetical given, if subject S has experience  $e$  and holds view  $v$ , then S is entitled to believe each of the propositions in  $\Gamma_e(v)$ . According to what I believe is the correct interpretation, if subject S has experience  $e$  and is entitled to hold view  $v$ , then S is entitled to believe each of the propositions in  $\Gamma_e(v)$ . So really the raimex should be saying to itself the following: “If I had started by being entitled to accept  $s_1$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P; if I had started by being entitled to accept  $s_2$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P; ... and if I had started by being entitled to accept  $s_m$ , then right now I would be entitled to believe P.” Moreover, there is no way for the raimex to get from this piece of reasoning to the conclusion “I am entitled to believe P” without invoking additional assumptions about its being

categorically entitled to hold at least one of the initial views. So Gupta's conceit of having us imagine a raimex who runs through the revision process in its head is no help in explaining how categorical entitlements can arise from hypothetical ones.<sup>20</sup>

## VI. Third Worry: Does Convergence Ever Occur?

I have just argued that Gupta has not actually provided us with the resources to explain why we are categorically entitled to believe the propositions in the common core of the admissible outcomes generated by a given finite sequence of experiences. Let us now pass over this problem and ask another question: will there in fact *be* any propositions in the common core of the admissible outcomes generated by the ordinary sequences of experiences that most of us have had? That is, does convergence actually occur for us? Are we absolutely entitled to believe anything, on Gupta's proposal?

The most pressing threat to convergence is that presented by solipsist views and by skeptical scenarios involving brains-in-vats, evil demons, and the like. Gupta's move of deeming solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views to be unacceptable starting points for revision because they

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<sup>20</sup> In the body of this paper I have put forward an interpretation of Gupta's account of the hypothetical given according to which entitlements to views plus experiences yield entitlements to perceptual judgments, both because I think this is the interpretation that best fits his text (see n. 8), and because it is a natural way of understanding Gupta's claim on pp. 80-82 that the epistemology of the given in experience is analogous to the epistemology of valid argument schemata such as *modus ponens*, given the (not unheard of) assumption that the epistemology of valid argument schemata works as follows: if one is entitled to believe the premises, then one is entitled to believe the conclusion. However, since the epistemology of valid argument schemata is a controversial matter, Gupta could attempt to resist my argument in this section by endorsing a different epistemology of valid argument schemata, and by extension a different account of the hypothetical given.

For example, one currently popular account takes the rational relation between premises and conclusion in a valid argument schemata to take the form of a wide-scope requirement, such as

*wide-scope logical requirement:* S is rationally required (if she believes the premises, to believe the conclusion).

(On the wide-scoping program, see Broome 1999 and the references contained in Schroeder 2004.) An analogous interpretation of the hypothetical given would be as follows:

*wide-scope hypothetical given:* S is rationally required (if she has experience  $e$  and holds view  $v$ , to believe  $\Gamma_e(v)$ ).

Moving to a wide-scope version of the hypothetical given frees us from a model whereby justification flows from inputs to outputs, so the problem I have been discussing in this section disappears. However, two new problems appear: first, since it is always possible to obey the proposed wide-scope requirement by suspending judgment on (the relevant parts of) the view in the antecedent, we now need a story about why it is irrational to suspend judgment in order to explain why convergence yields categorical requirements on belief, and second, since it is always possible to obey the proposed wide-scope requirement by shifting to a radically different set of beliefs, we now need to argue that it is *never* rational to hold a solipsist or brain-in-a-vat view, not just that it is unacceptable to start by holding such a view, or else convergence on ordinary external-world propositions will never occur.

Thus I believe that the problem I identify for Gupta in this section really takes the form of a dilemma: if he endorses a model for the hypothetical given whereby entitlements transmit from antecedently held views to newly held perceptual judgments when one has a given experience, then my argument from the body of the paper applies; whereas if he endorses a non-transmission model for the hypothetical given (such as that provided by the wide-scope interpretation), then he loses the resources to explain why we can't move to a solipsist view (or suspend judgment) after a single experience.

possess the dynamical property of being rigid is an artful attempt to dodge these skeptical worries. However, skepticism is a many-headed hydra: often one lops off one head, only to find that two more grow back in its place. And that is just what happens here, for even if Gupta's strategy succeeds in defusing the threat posed by standard versions of the solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views, there are variants of those views that escape Gupta's strategy.

For example, consider the following two types of views:

a *no-writing-in-the-sky solipsist view* = a view according to which all that exists is the subject's mind and its sense-data, unless the subject has an experience as of the stars in the sky realigning themselves to read, "You are a flesh-and-blood creature living in an external world created by the one true God," in which case a commonsense, religious view of the world is true;<sup>21</sup>

a *no-scent-of-lavender brain-in-a-vat view* = a view according to which the subject is a solitary brain-in-a-vat being fed illusory experiences, unless the subject has an experience as of smelling lavender, in which case the commonsense view of the world is true (since the brain-in-a-vat technology is unable to simulate the smell of lavender).

Both of these views are indisputably non-rigid: there are possible courses of experience which would entitle a rational being who holds one of these views to fundamentally alter her basic account of the self and the world. So these sorts of views cannot be ruled inadmissible on the grounds that they are not rigid. Moreover, if these views are deemed admissible, then they will ensure that convergence on a commonsense view of the world does not occur for those subjects who never experience the smell of lavender or never seem to see the stars form words in the sky.

Of course, these views might be deemed inadmissible on grounds not having to do with rigidity: Gupta only insists that non-rigidity is a necessary condition for admissibility, not that it is a sufficient one (p. 155). So we might look for a different restriction on acceptable starting views that would rule out no-writing-in-the-sky solipsist views and no-scent-of-lavender brain-in-a-vat views. But what would this restriction be? I have a difficult time thinking of a well-motivated, non-ad-hoc proposal that would exclude these sorts of views. Moreover, there is a worry that even if we could somehow come up with a new restriction on acceptable starting views that precludes these versions of the original skeptical

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<sup>21</sup> This example is a variant of one proposed by Ned Hall during the question session of a talk by Gupta at Harvard in the spring of 2006. After the bulk of these comments were written, I discovered that Ram Neta makes a very similar point about a very similar example in Neta 2009.

scenarios, it will be possible to think up another version of those scenarios which avoids the new restriction as well.

In fact, matters are even worse than that. It's not just that there are diabolical variants of the solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views which can evade Gupta's requirement that admissible views be non-rigid. I think a little reflection shows that, despite Gupta's claims to the contrary, even the usual versions of the solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views are not rigid. So Gupta's requirement that admissible views be non-rigid doesn't even solve our original problem, since it doesn't exclude the sorts of views it was specifically designed to rule out.

Recall that a view  $v$  counts as being rigid if and only if, for every finite sequence of experiences  $E$ ,  $\rho_E(v)$  is fundamentally equivalent to  $v$ —that is, if and only if the result of revising  $v$  in light of a given finite sequence of experiences always results in a view with the same basic account of the self and the world as  $v$ . Thus in order to assess whether solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views are rigid, we need to ask whether there are any courses of experience which would rationally require a revision of the basic account of the self and the world found in any one of these views. Now I believe that I have already, in effect, provided such an example: I believe that if one holds a standard solipsist view, and one has a sufficient number of experiences as of the stars in the sky rearranging themselves to tell one various things, then it might be rational to give up one's solipsism and accept a different view of the world and the self. However, this sort of example depends on some controversial assumptions about the degree to which (seemingly) testimonial evidence can override the justification that one has for one's current view, so let me now present a series of examples that don't make any such assumptions.

It is easy enough to imagine a sequence of experiences that would rationally mandate moving from the first of the following two views to the second:

*a four-senses solipsist view* = a view according to which all that exists is the subject's mind and its sense-data, which fall into four basic types: visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory;

*a five-senses solipsist view* = a view according to which all that exists is the subject's mind and its sense-data, which fall into five basic types: visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and auditory.

Perhaps if a rational being had the experience as of all sorts of unfortunate, improbable, and intensely

painful events occurring in rapid succession, it might be rational for her to move from the first of the following two views to the second:

a *deceived-by-a-somewhat-evil-demon view* = a view according to which the subject is being fed illusory experiences by a demon whose only evil trait is his penchant for deceiving people;

a *deceived-by-a-very-very-evil-demon view* = a view according to which the subject is being fed illusory experiences by an utterly malevolent demon who not only enjoys deceiving people, but also does his best to subject them to the most painful and unpleasant experiences possible.

Finally, and most controversially, perhaps if a rational being has an experience as of having all sorts of enlightening, amusing, and surprising conversations with other seemingly intelligent beings, then it would be rational for her to move from the first of the following two views to the second:

a *solipsistic brain-in-a-vat view* = a view according to which the subject is a solitary brain-in-a-vat being fed illusory experiences by an evil scientist;

a *collective brain-in-a-vat view* = a view according to which the subject and a number of other conscious beings are brains-in-vats being fed parallel illusory experiences by an evil scientist, so that they all inhabit the same illusory world of mere appearances.

In each of these cases, I claim that the change in view elicited by experience yields a change in one's basic account of the self or the world. In the move from a four-senses to a five-senses solipsist view, I claim that one's fundamental picture of the self has altered, for now one holds that one is able to detect a whole new type of sense-datum. In the move from a deceived-by-a-somewhat-evil- to a deceived-by-a-very-very-evil-demon view, I claim that one's fundamental picture of the world has altered, for now one holds that the external force responsible for one's illusory experiences has a very different intrinsic nature. And in the move from a solipsistic to a collective brain-in-a-vat view, I claim that one's fundamental picture of both the world and the self has altered, for now one holds that the world in which one finds oneself contains other conscious beings who have the same basic nature as oneself (and thus one no longer thinks of oneself as fundamentally unique).<sup>22</sup> But if all of this is correct, then it is possible

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<sup>22</sup> Perhaps there is room to quibble about these claims I have just made: maybe, for example, a world in which one is deceived by a somewhat evil demon counts as the-same-in-fundamental-respects as a world in which one is deceived by a very, very evil demon, or maybe a world inhabited by a solipsistic brain-in-a-vat is not fundamentally different from a world inhabited by a group of collective brains-in-vats. However: (i) now I am starting to lose track of what makes one account of the world or the self fundamentally the same as another (after all, these changes in view seem as fundamental as Gupta's standard example of a fundamental change in view, namely a shift from a flat-Earth to a spherical-Earth view [see pp. 90, 161]); and (ii) as this sort of



for one to hold a standard version of a solipsist, deceived-by-an-evil-demon, or brain-in-a-vat view and for the rational pressure of experience to force one to fundamentally revise one's basic account of the self or the world. Conclusion: even the standard versions of those views are not rigid.

Gupta might reply that even if these examples show that it can be rational to move from one variety of solipsist view to another (fundamentally inequivalent) variety of solipsist view, none of these examples show that it can be rational to move from a solipsist to a non-solipsist view, or from a brain-in-a-vat view to a non-brain-in-a-vat view, or from a deceived-by-an-evil-demon to a non-deceived-by-an-evil-demon view. Thus it is open to Gupta to concede that the examples I have produced demonstrate that solipsist, brain-in-a-vat views, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon do not possess the property of being rigid *as he originally defined it*, but then to attempt to define that property in some other way. Two proposals readily suggest themselves: according to the first, a view counts as rigid if and only if the rational pressure of experience can never force one to revise *certain portions* of that view; according to the second, a view counts as rigid if and only if it belongs to *a class of views* such that the rational pressure of experience can never force one to revise one's view to one that is not fundamentally equivalent to any view in that class. Then if it is not possible for the rational pressure of experience to compel someone who holds a solipsist view to give up her belief that her mind and its sense-data is all that exists, or if it is not possible for the rational pressure of experience to require someone who holds a solipsist view to shift to a non-solipsist view, Gupta could rehabilitate his claim that solipsist views are rigid, and similarly for brain-in-a-vat and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views. However, both of these proposals face the same problem: they both deem almost all commonsense views to be rigid as well, since surely there are at least *some* aspects of most commonsense views that are immune to pressure from experience (for example, consider mathematical and logical beliefs),<sup>23</sup> and since surely any commonsense view is a member of *some* class of views which it is not possible to be rationally forced out of (for example, consider the class

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response is pressed further and further, there is a worry that any change in our commonsense view in response to experience will now no longer count as a *fundamental* change, so that the rigidity of solipsistic, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views will be preserved only by making commonsense views rigid as well.

<sup>23</sup> Diehard Quineans might insist that mathematical and logical beliefs are revisable in light of experience, but even they must concede that *the epistemic rules by which we revise our web belief* avoid the tribunal of experience, since those rules constitute what it is for us to face the tribunal of experience.

of all views, or the class of all but a few outlier views). Of course, it might be possible to further refine these redefinitions of rigidity to avoid throwing out the commonsense baby with the skeptical bathwater, but I have a difficult time thinking of a well-motivated, non-ad-hoc way of doing so.

Thus in the end I think that Gupta's strategy of deeming rigid views to be unacceptable starting points for revision does not fully address the problem presented by solipsist, brain-in-a-vat, and deceived-by-an-evil-demon views. Not only are there variants of these views which are clearly responsive to experience and hence clearly non-rigid, but it is likely that even the standard versions of those views are not rigid, if we go by the letter of how Gupta defines rigidity. Now nothing I have said here definitively rules out the possibility that there might be a better way of defining rigidity, or that there might be a plausible additional restriction on the admissibility of views beyond the requirement that they be non-rigid. However, once we see the kinds of resources that the skeptic has available to her, I think we should be highly doubtful that Gupta's strategy of ruling out troublesome views as initial starting points because of their dynamical properties is up to the task at hand. For this reason, I suspect that convergence on ordinary external-world propositions will almost never occur within Gupta's framework, and thus skepticism will be just as inevitable a consequence of Gupta's brand of empiricism as it is for the classical versions of empiricism upon which he is seeking to improve.

I have just mentioned one reason to be suspicious that convergence on all but the most trivial of propositions (such as *that I exist*) could occur within Gupta's system. I now want to close these comments by briefly mentioning a very different reason to doubt that convergence on non-trivial propositions is possible. Most often in *Empiricism and Experience* when Gupta discusses the normative properties of beliefs, he talks of the subject *being entitled* to believe a given proposition, or of belief in a given proposition *being rational* or *being justified* for that subject. Occasionally, though, Gupta takes these claims to be equivalent to the claim that the subject is *rationally required* or *rationally obligated* to believe the proposition in question (see, for instance, pp. 85, 87, 95, 98-103, 215). However, this is a mistake: entitlements as we ordinarily think of them are *permissions*, not *obligations*. If you are entitled to use my office while I am away on sabbatical, then you are permitted to do so, but it would be

extremely bizarre to think that you are *obligated* to use it. So within the realm of practical normativity, entitlements are permissions, not obligations. Now it might be that in the realm of theoretical normativity, there is no deontic category of the merely permissible, so all epistemic entitlements are both permissions and obligations, but this is a substantive (and, I might add, counterintuitive) thesis that must be argued for.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, once it is realized that the default position is to take entitlements to be permissions, not obligations, I think that any hope of convergence on a *single* view when revising in light of experience all but dissipates.

I put forward that I am *rationally permitted* but not *rationally required* to believe every logical consequence of the set of propositions that I currently (rationally) believe. (It's one thing to convict me of a rational failing because my beliefs are contradictory, but quite another thing to convict me of a rational failing because I haven't bothered to take a stand on some extremely abstruse consequence of one of my more obscure beliefs.) Similarly, I put forward that I am *rationally permitted* but not *rationally required* to believe every "perceptual consequence" of the experience that I am currently having. Indeed, this is the most natural way of interpreting Gupta's account of the hypothetical given: when Gupta says that a rational being who is entitled to view  $v$  and has experience  $e$  is entitled to believe each proposition in  $\Gamma_e(v)$ , it is natural to take this to mean that the rational being is rationally permitted to believe each of those propositions, not that she is rationally required.

However, now we have trouble, since for just about any view  $v$  and experience  $e$ , the class  $\Gamma_e(v)$  of "perceptual consequences" of  $v$  and  $e$  will presumably contain a non-denumerably infinite number of propositions. However, this means that our assumption (following Gupta) that there will always be a unique way  $\rho_e(v)$  of rationally revising a given view  $v$  in light of a given experience  $e$  will be massively mistaken, not because there might sometimes be two or three rationally permissible ways of revising a given view in light of a given experience, but rather because there will almost always be a *non-denumerably infinite* number of rationally permissible ways of revising a given view in light of a given experience. But then at almost every stage of Gupta's revision process there will be a *non-denumerably*

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<sup>24</sup> On the general issue of how much permissiveness is acceptable within one's epistemology, see White 2005.

*infinite* number of nodes that branch out from each view that has survived up to that stage of revision. Now *maybe* all of these infinitely branching nodes will eventually converge on a single view; however, that possibility strikes me as incredibly unlikely. So the observation that entitlements are permissions, not obligations, gives us additional reason to be suspicious of Gupta's claim that our ordinary course of experience can rationally force us to converge on our commonsense view of the world.<sup>25</sup>

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