

# Reply to Comesaña

Jim Pryor

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(1) In my essay, I touched briefly on what I thought were the best reasons to think there is any immediate justification at all. But much of my discussion, there and elsewhere, is concerned not with that broad genus, but with two (overlapping) species of it: (i) immediate justification which is also fallible, defeasible, and especially underminable; and (ii) immediate justification where the source needn't have a content that stands in an argumentatively nice relation to the proposition justified. In my essay, I spent the most time arguing, against the classical Davidsonian "Master Argument," that the case for resisting justification of type (ii) is obscure.

The "dogmatist" epistemology of perception that I've defended elsewhere doesn't *obviously* require there to be immediate justification of type (ii). On many contemporary views of perceptual experience, and in my own initial thinking, experiences *do* have contents that stand in some kind of argumentatively nice relation to the propositions they justify. But I've come to think it's less important than I did before whether that's so. Moreover, I suspect that having a reasonable story about the ways in which perceptual justification can be undermined will independently require a dogmatist to overcome resistance to justification of type (ii).

Comesaña's essay also does not focus on the possibility of immediate justification quite generally, but rather on a particular species, roughly what I've here labeled type (i). He presents what deserves to be recognized as a second "Master Argument" in the direction of coherentism.<sup>1</sup>

The argument has several premises. Klein and Silins have entertained rejecting the Mere Lemmas principle, but most philosophers will agree with that premise. Closure is more controversial. As Comesaña points out, he doesn't really need to rely on a Closure *Principle* but only on the conditional "If you have justification for these premises, you also have justification for this consequence" being true in some particular cases. Some may argue that, even if we accept Closure, Comesaña's examples still illustrate a failure of "warrant-transmission" rather

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<sup>1</sup> As Comesaña notes, Michael Huemer has also stated, but not endorsed, something like this argument.

than the falsity of Inductivism. It's not clear to me whether that can be sustained in the dialectical setting Comesaña has presented, and like him, I will not explore that strategy.

I will focus on the conflict Comesaña highlights between Inductivism and his "Entailment Principle." As Comesaña says, this principle "enshrines" the idea that:

That Q is true is what would happen if P were true, so how can the truth of Q justify S in rejecting P?

I have discussed this motivating idea elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> I agree the idea is intuitively compelling. If my friend Sandra tells me (Q) the FBI's silence about captured aliens justifies her in thinking they're hiding something, and hence in rejecting that (P) they don't have any captured aliens, I want to protest: but if they didn't have any, this silence is just what you'd expect! All the worse for Sandra's argument if, as in Comesaña's examples, the hypothesis being rejected *entails* the observations that allegedly tell against it.

In the end, though, I think this idea is seductively false. Of course Sandra's argument is a bad one; but I think the Entailment Principle must be an over-generalization about why. I don't think it's an easy matter to persuade one of this, so all I can do here is try to motivate some second thoughts about the principle. I'll also suggest that it's not just the Inductivist that the principle threatens: some of the Inductivist's opponents are in no position to embrace Comesaña's argument, either.

(2) Comesaña proposes to ignore the non-contingent, but I can't see how to assess the Entailment Principle without looking at aspects of how entailment and justification interact that lie beyond where he directs our attention. Some of the doubts I'll raise require you to attend to the difference between two kinds of case:

Case 1. You have some background justification B, which entails not-P, but doesn't yet justify you in rejecting P.

Case 2. You have the same background justification B, and acquire some extra evidence X, and B and X together do justify you in rejecting P.

If you agree that we sometimes lack justification for believing things entailed by our evidence, and that this lack can be remedied, then presumably you'll think of the remedy as working like X does in Case 2.

(3) Now, Comesaña's Entailment Principle says:

If P entails Q, then Q cannot justify S in believing not-P.

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<sup>2</sup> See Principle "NFI" in my "When Warrant Transmits," in Annalisa Coliva, ed., Wittgenstein, Epistemology and Mind: Themes from the Philosophy of Crispin Wright (Oxford, forthcoming).

I presume that whatever underwrites that principle would also underwrite the more general:

If P entails Q (against the unchallenged background of B), then Q (together with B) cannot justify S in believing not-P.

There may be complications here, especially if we seek a version of this principle applicable to degrees of confidence in P, but I will assume that in the kinds of cases Comesaña is considering, these principles stand or fall together.

(4) Take some conspiracy theory, like Sandra's. Imagine the best possible evidence you can against her theory, which falls short of entailing its falsehood. If you are an Inductivist, you probably agree there is such evidence—you needn't also subscribe to more controversial claims about fallible *immediate* justification. Now, if Sandra has any skill as a conspiracy theorist, you know what will happen. Her original theory will get supplemented with additional convolutions to explain why your evidence is just what we should expect. Imagine she takes a shortcut, and just conjoins your evidence to her original theory. So now her new theory entails your evidence. Now, you only committed to that evidence telling against her original theory; perhaps you hesitate to say it tells against her new theory. So go gather evidence telling against the new theory: about why the combination of her old theory and the new conjunct are improbable and incredible. Let's suppose this new evidence also falls short of entailing her theory is false. So she will conjoin that and present her third theory...

If you're an Inductivist, then I expect you'll be inclined to think at some stage—if not already at the first—you will be justified in believing one of Sandra's theories is false, even though her theory entails your evidence. (If not, I have some rare grue emeralds you may be interested in...) Note that Sandra's theories have none of the explanatory virtues of typical skeptical hypotheses. They only manage to entail all your evidence because they enumerate that evidence.

Let me acknowledge one possible source of hesitation. If your grounds for disbelieving Sandra's theory are entailed by her theory, you may hesitate to call those grounds "evidence" against her theory. But many Inductivists will still think it's possible to be *justified* in disbelieving Sandra's baroque conspiracy. And you will have some grounds for so believing. Such grounds are all that Comesaña means by "evidence" or "justifier." These Inductivists will agree that these grounds make it reasonable for you to reject a theory, whose truth would entail those grounds. In other words, they should think Comesaña's Entailment Principle here is false.

Of course, Comesaña agrees this is what Inductivism *commits one to* (given his other premises). What I am trying to show is that you should feel no shame in that commitment. This is just a natural application of Inductivism, with no appeal to any of its more controversial extensions. There does seem to be *some* truth in the vicinity of Comesaña's Entailment Principle, as my

reaction to Sandra’s opening argument evidenced. We haven’t yet identified what that is, and Comesaña can fairly hold that against us. But despite its initial allure, an Inductivist who thinks it’s possible to reasonably reject any of Sandra’s conspiracy theories, on some grounds, should feel secure in rejecting the Entailment Principle. As I see it, the challenges here are how to reconcile our intuition that these grounds justify us with our reluctance to count them as “evidence”; and to identify what real truth it is that the Entailment Principle wrongly generalizes.

(5) One response Comesaña may make is that Sandra’s theories must at some point become *intrinsically incredible*, given our background evidence. Perhaps the original theory was even *inconsistent* with that background—though if so, let’s suppose not in a way that’s immediately obvious. Comesaña may object that it’s this intrinsic incredibleness, rather than any evidence, that justifies you in rejecting the conspiracy theories. Hence, these cases don’t undermine the Entailment Principle. (Leaving that Principle free to—in other cases—undermine Inductivism.)

Even if Sandra’s theories were intrinsically incredible from the outset—and even if they were *inconsistent* with our background evidence—we’re supposing this wasn’t initially obvious. Nor *should* it have been obvious. Instead, there was some first evidence X that, together with your background evidence, brought you to the point of being able justifiably reject one of her theories. This is kind of situation envisaged in (2), above. Now, if her theory at that point is P, perhaps you don’t think that your background evidence plus X are enough to justify you in rejecting P+X, though they were enough to justify you in rejecting P. In the previous section, I said that even if an Inductivist hesitates at this stage, he is likely to think there’s some point, some evidence Y, such that your background evidence plus X plus Y are enough to justify you in rejecting P+X+Y.

Perhaps in some sense, P will have already had to carry the seeds of its own rejection in it, for this to be so. (Or at least, the seeds of its own rejectability given B.) But those seeds needn’t be epistemically transparent to us. Later evidence like X and Y can be needed before we’re in a position to justifiably harvest them.

(6) Finally, let’s turn to the question of who Comesaña’s argument threatens. In his essay, he discusses “neo-Rationalists” who oppose a specific form of Inductivism, that takes our perceptual justification to be fallible and immediate. Comesaña discusses whether those Inductivist views are reconcilable with claims the neo-Rationalists make. He also argues by appeal to his Grounding Principle that the a priori justification the neo-Rationalists posit doesn’t prevent the kind of difficulty he’s pressing against the Inductivists from arising. These issues are complex and I don’t agree with everything Comesaña says, but we can’t pursue it here. In any event, the kind of neo-Rationalists he’s envisaging may well be Inductivists elsewhere—for example, about induction—so they should be as eager as their opponents to resist Comesaña’s Master Argument against Inductivism. Given the options we’re considering, that means resisting

the Entailment Principle.

But what about a philosopher who is *resolutely and thoroughly* a Rationalist—who rejects any form of Inductivism. Would such a philosopher be in a position to coherently embrace the argument?

Not necessarily. There may be *some* non-Inductivist views, perhaps the one Comesaña expresses his own sympathy for, that the argument does not threaten. But I think other non-Inductivist views may want also to reject the Entailment Principle.

Seeing this requires keeping in mind the contrast described in (2), above. For given the kind of view we're now considering, any counter-example to the Entailment Principle must take this form: some evidence Q supports not-P in a non-Inductive way, and hence entails not-P (at least, against your background evidence B). At the same time, P (against B) entails Q. Hence, P must already be *inconsistent* with B. However, as we've already noted, that doesn't necessarily mean B already *justified you* in rejecting P. It may be that only B plus Q do that. If we don't forget the difference between entailing and justifying, I expect that some Rationalist views will want to diagnose our epistemic position with respect to Sandra's conspiracies in just this way.

More generally, the issue is that even reason-based evidence can be undermined. One can acquire evidence that at least makes it *likely* that one's reasons are unresponsive, or are not competently in hand. If our Rationalists are going to be non-Skeptics, they'll probably want our use of reasoning faculties to make *some* justified headway against Skeptical hypotheses that threaten to undermine them in those ways. Like the Inductivist, they may want to do so even when those hypotheses entail whatever it is that the Rationalist deems is our evidence. And as we've observed, our having *justification* to reject the Skeptical threats may sometimes require this, even in cases where the threats *entail* their own falsity.