

ON THE HYPOTHETICAL GIVEN

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to assess the viability of a perceptual epistemology based on what Anil Gupta calls the “hypothetical given”. On this account, experience alone yields no unconditional entitlement to perceptual beliefs. Experience functions instead to establish relations of rational support between what Gupta calls “views” and perceptual beliefs. I will argue that the hypothetical given is a genuine alternative to the prevailing theories of perceptual justification but that the account faces a dilemma: on a natural assumption about the epistemic significance of support relations, any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given results in either rationalism or skepticism. I conclude by examining the prospects for avoiding the dilemma. One option is to combine the hypothetical given with a form of holism. Another is to combine the view with a form of hinge epistemology. But neither offers a simple fix.

1 Introduction

Recent work in the epistemology of perception is dominated by two models of the structure of perceptual justification: one on which experience directly

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supports perceptual beliefs, and one on which experience supports perceptual beliefs only in conjunction with certain background beliefs. My aim in this paper is to assess the viability of an alternative model introduced in Anil Gupta’s (2006) *Empiricism and Experience* and (2019) *Conscious Experience: A Logical Inquiry*. The model in question is what Gupta calls the “hypothetical given”: experience alone yields no unconditional entitlement to perceptual beliefs—experience functions instead to establish relations of rational support between accounts of the self and world (“views”, as Gupta calls them) and particular perceptual beliefs.¹

I will advance two main theses concerning the hypothetical given. First, the theory is a genuine alternative to the prevailing accounts of the structure of perceptual justification; it is not a mere notational variant of the other theories that assign a role to background beliefs. Second, any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given faces a dilemma: on a natural assumption about the epistemic significance of support relations, the hypothetical given leads to either rationalism or skepticism.

I first press this dilemma against Gupta’s perceptual epistemology, as Gupta develops it in response to an objection due to Selim Berker.² I then show how the dilemma generalizes to afflict any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given. The source of the dilemma lies in what I will call the “constraint model” of rational support: support relations serve only to transmit entitlement from one state to another, where the entitlement-type of the supported state is constrained by the entitlement-type of the supporting state—e.g. a pragmatic entitlement to one belief cannot ground an epistemic entitlement to another by means of a support relation.

I conclude by examining the prospects for avoiding the dilemma by denying the constraint model. One option is to combine the hypothetical given with a form of holism. Another is to combine the view with a form of hinge epistemology. But neither offers a simple fix. It remains an open question whether holism or hinge epistemology can provide a plausible alternative to the constraint model. So it remains an open question whether defenders of the hypothetical given can succeed in avoiding rationalism or skepticism.

¹See Gupta (2006, Chapter 4) and Gupta (2019, Chapter 4). Gupta frames his epistemology in terms of “entitlement”, and I will follow suit. But I see little difference between Gupta’s sense of the term and the more familiar notion of propositional justification (in particular, Gupta’s use of “entitlement” has no connection to Burge’s (2003) or Wright’s (2004) uses of the term).

²See Berker (2011) and Gupta (2011).

2 What is the Hypothetical Given?

We can characterize the hypothetical given by contrasting it with three distinct accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. I will set out these accounts by using the kind of directed graphs familiar from discussions of foundationalism and coherentism (with one twist to be introduced later).³

For example:

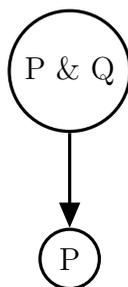


Figure A

This graph tells us that a belief with content $P \ \& \ Q$ supports a belief with content P : the circles represent beliefs, the letters inside the circles give the contents of the beliefs, and the arrow stands for the support or counting-in-favor-of relation.

Let me add several clarifications about these graphs. First, I follow Berker (2015) in distinguishing graphically between what I will call the *direct* support depicted in Figure A from the *conjunctive* support depicted in Figure B:

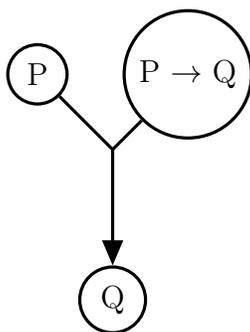


Figure B

³The graphs to follow are based on those of Berker (2015). See also Pryor (2012).

The Y-arrow represents the fact that it is only the two beliefs together that jointly count in favor of the belief that Q —neither the belief that P nor the belief that $P \rightarrow Q$ individually counts in favor of the belief that Q .⁴

Second, it is important to distinguish between the *structure* of justification and the *transmission* of justification. Our graphs only depict the former: they illustrate the support relations obtaining between items of epistemological interest (beliefs, experiences, propositions, etc.). The presence of such support relations does not suffice for the supporting states to “transmit” or thereby create justification for the supported state, since one might have lacked justification for the supporting states in the first place.⁵ For example, the presence of a direct support relation between the belief that P and the belief that $P \vee Q$ does not suffice for anyone to thereby become justified in believing that $P \vee Q$, since one might have had no reason for believing that P in the first place. Nevertheless, support relations plausibly give rise to what Gupta (2006, 76) calls a “hypothetical entitlement”: *if* one is justified or otherwise epistemically entitled to believe that ϕ , and the belief that ϕ supports the belief that ψ , then one is entitled to believe that ψ .⁶ Applied to the support relation depicted in Figure B, this means that: *if* one is entitled to believe that P and that $P \rightarrow Q$, then one is entitled to believe that Q .

⁴Conjunctive support corresponds to what Berker (2015) calls “Y-support”. Also, it is important not to confuse the direct support depicted in Figure A with the notion of immediate justification. As I explain in the next paragraph below, the mere presence of a support relation will very often fail to supply justification for the supported state. Moreover, as we’ll see later in this section, it is entirely coherent to hold that relations of direct support may themselves be grounded or enabled by the presence of justified background beliefs. Thus, justification conferred (in part) via relations of direct support may turn out to be mediate, not immediate. See n. 8 and also my discussion of what I call “Figure 3-type accounts” below.

⁵For discussion of transmission see, for instance, Davies (2004), Moretti & Piazza (2013), Pryor (2004, 2012), Silins (2005), Tucker (2010), and Wright (2002, 2004). I depart from some authors in using the term “transmission” to mark a phenomenon concerning propositional justification, not doxastic justification—i.e. transmission concerns one’s justification for believing propositions one may or may not actually believe. Transmission in this sense is sometimes discussed under the heading of the “flow of justification” (see Berker (2015)).

⁶I am passing over various complications. For instance, one’s entitlement to believe that ψ should be proportionate to the strength of the support relation. In addition, one might only be entitled to believe that ψ if one recognizes that the belief that ϕ supports the belief that ψ , or recognizes that the support relation obtains while at the same time retaining one’s entitlement to believe that ϕ . Similar complications arise in the formulation of closure principles. See Hawthorne (2005).

Let us turn now to our four accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. On the first, experience directly supports perceptual beliefs:

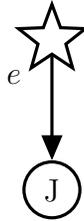


Figure 1

Here the star represents an experience e , which stands in a relation of direct support to a perceptual belief with the content J . I have chosen not to label the content of experience e , since theorists might endorse the general structure depicted in Figure 1 while disagreeing about the nature of e 's content or even whether e has content. For this reason, I will speak of “Figure 1-type accounts” plural, allowing that one might fill in such details in various ways.

Figure 1-type accounts are typically associated with so-called liberal or dogmatist theories of perceptual justification.⁷ On liberal theories, an experience as of its being the case that J immediately supplies one with *prima facie* justification for believing that J .⁸ I take it that many who advance such theo-

⁷See, for instance, Huemer (2001), Pollock (1974), Pryor (2000, 2004, 2012), and Silins (2008). The terminology of liberalism and conservatism (to be introduced below) is due to Pryor (2004) and Silins (2008).

⁸A few points of clarification about my definition of liberalism: First, I intend the “as of” locution to be neutral as to whether the experience itself has content (Cf. Neta (2010)). For example, relationalists might take an experience to be as of its being the case that J iff the experience acquaints one with an object and its properties such that the object's having these properties make it the case that J . Second, I will depart from Pryor (2000, 2001) and Silins (2008) in how I characterize immediate justification. Pryor and Silins define immediate justification as justification not due (even in part) to one's having independent justification for believing further propositions. But as we will see below, there are other ways in which justification plausibly counts as mediate (e.g. through being established by support relations from or coherence with other beliefs, or through being established by the presence of suitable background beliefs). I thus prefer a positive characterization of immediate justification: e immediately justifies S in believing P iff e 's justifying S in believing P derives solely from features of e itself, assuming S has the requisite conceptual

ries endorse our Figure 1-type structure.⁹ And Figure 1-type accounts plausibly motivate these theories: it is typically denied that experiences themselves stand in need of justification, so experience alone will plausibly justify perceptual beliefs if Figure 1-type accounts are correct. However, I will refrain from simply identifying liberalism with Figure 1-type accounts. The reason for this is that our graphs only depict relations of support; it is a further question how views about support cohere with larger views about the conditions of justification. Such questions will gain more urgency below.

On our second account, an experience supports a perceptual belief only in conjunction with certain background beliefs:

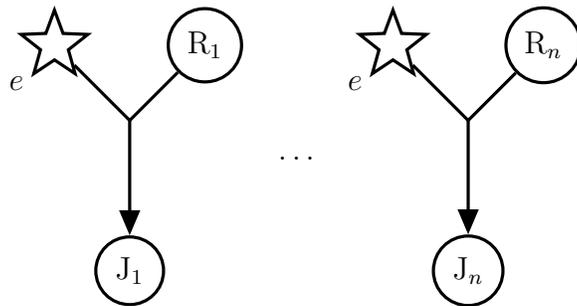


Figure 2

The Y-arrow indicates that neither the experience nor the background belief directly supports the perceptual belief; it is only the experience together with the background belief that jointly supports the perceptual belief.¹⁰ Examples of such background beliefs might be: the belief that one's senses are reliable, the belief that the lighting conditions are normal, the belief that one is not a brain-in-a-vat, and so on. The ellipsis dots in Figure 2 indicate that one and the same experience will support different perceptual beliefs when conjoined with different background beliefs. For example, an experience as of a green

resources to entertain P. This definition ensures that immediate justification counts as a form of foundationalist justification (cf. Pryor (2001)). See n. 12 and §6 for further discussion.

⁹Pryor (2012) explicitly endorses this structure.

¹⁰Berker (2015) uses the term “hypothetical given” to label Figure 2-type accounts. He is explicit that his use of this term departs in certain ways from Gupta's, but the differences in usage do not affect the general point that Berker reads Gupta as advancing a Figure 2-type account. I give an alternative characterization of Gupta's theory below.

sculpture conjoined with the belief that the lighting conditions are normal will support the belief that the sculpture is green; the same experience conjoined with the belief that one is wearing blue glasses will support the belief that the sculpture is yellow.

As we emphasized above, such support relations do not guarantee that one is justified in holding the supported perceptual beliefs. Background beliefs themselves stand in need of support, so it is plausible that one's justification for holding the supported perceptual beliefs depends on one's justification for holding the relevant background beliefs. For this reason, Figure 2-type accounts are typically associated with so-called conservative theories of perceptual justification.¹¹ On conservative theories, an experience as of its being the case that J justifies one in believing that J partly in virtue of one's being independently justified in believing some further propositions—such as those concerning the reliability of perception, the falsity of skeptical hypotheses, and so on.¹²

Now, I take it that many who advance conservative theories do endorse Figure 2-type accounts.¹³ Some may even assume that conservatism is the only option for those endorse who Figure 2-type accounts. But it would be a mistake to simply identify conservatism with such accounts. One reason is the point noted above: it is a further question how views about support motivate or otherwise cohere with views about the larger conditions of perceptual justification. In the case of Figure 2-type accounts, this is no mere plea for caution. As we'll see in §6, there is a view about the larger conditions of justification that allows one to adopt a Figure 2-type account without endorsing conservatism. Conversely, we'll see below that there exist alternative accounts of the structure of justification that also cohere with conservatism.

Let us turn now to such accounts, the last of which constitutes the hypothetical given. In order to depict these accounts, we will have to make one crucial addition to our graphs. Notice that the graphs we've drawn so far only tell us what supports what—the graphs do not indicate *why* these support relations obtain. However, views about the source of these support

¹¹See, for instance, Cohen (1999), Sellars (1956), White (2006), and Wright (2004).

¹²My definition of conservatism follows Pryor (2004) and Silins (2008). However, since I have defined liberalism differently (see n. 8), liberalism and conservatism cease to be exhaustive options in the epistemology of perception. See §6 for discussion of a theory that is neither liberal nor conservative.

¹³See Cohen (1999) for one example of a conservative epistemology employing a Figure 2-type account.

relations will often lead to very different accounts of the larger epistemology of perception. I propose, then, that we expand our graphs so that they also depict what I will call the “enablers” of these support relations. Indeed, we’ll see below that such expanded graphs are in fact *necessary* for marking key epistemologically relevant distinctions.

Consider the following:

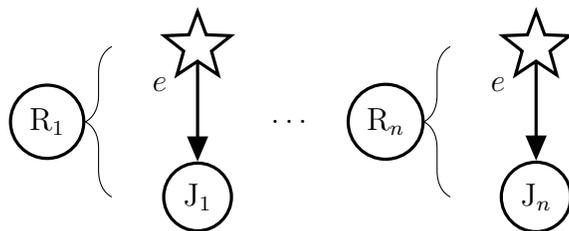


Figure 3

A curly bracket indicates that the term on the left-hand side of the bracket is an enabler of the support relation on the right-hand side of the bracket. An enabler is a state or object distinct from both terms of the support relation depicted on the right-hand side of the bracket that functions to establish, ground, or “turn on” the support relation obtaining between these terms. In other words, an enabler is that which *institutes* the rational link between these terms—a link which would not be present in the absence of the enabler. However, the enabler itself does not figure as a term in the support relation at issue.¹⁴

¹⁴Cf. Neta (2010, 701–702); I interpret Neta (2010) as advancing a Figure 3-type account. Dancy (2004, Chapter 3) draws a similar distinction for practical reasons between what he calls “favorers” and “enablers”: enablers do not themselves figure in relations of support but instead explain why favorers stand in such relations. However, Dancy seems to assume that if the presence of a state disables a support relation, then the absence of that state counts as an enabler (e.g. he counts the fact that a promise was not made under duress as an enabler of the fact that one’s having made the promise favors performing the promised action). I will not make this assumption. Enablers, as I understand them, play the positive role of intuitively “turning on” the support relation. But it is not clear that the absence of a state that turns off the support relation plays even a partial role in turning on that relation. Dancy seems alert to this distinction since he distinguishes between different types of enablers (see also Dancy (2004, 50–51) on what he calls “epistemic enablers”). I will instead reserve the term “enabler” for the item(s) that play the positive, “turning-on” role. I leave further analysis of this role to future research.

For example, on Figure 3-type accounts, background beliefs play the role of enabler: they institute support relations obtaining between experiences and perceptual beliefs. This logical role for background beliefs is importantly different from the role assigned by Figure 2-type accounts. An analogy will help illustrate the point: an argument form like *modus ponens* does not itself stand in a relation of support to a conclusion—the argument form instead figures in an explanation of why the *premises* stand in such a relation of support.¹⁵ Similarly, in Figure 3-type accounts, background beliefs do not stand in conjunctive relations of support with perceptual beliefs. Rather, background beliefs figure in an explanation of why *experiences* directly support perceptual beliefs.¹⁶

This logical difference makes a key epistemological difference. One worry about Figure 2-type accounts is that they lead to an implausible account of so-called doxastic justification, or well-foundedness.¹⁷ If background beliefs figure as one of the *relata* in a support relation with perceptual beliefs, then it would seem that one only counts as justifiedly holding these perceptual beliefs if one bases them in part on these background beliefs. After all, one only holds a belief for the right reasons if one holds it because of the considerations that support it. However, it is psychologically implausible that perceivers actually base their perceptual beliefs on background beliefs about, say, the reliability of perception or the falsity of skeptical hypotheses.

Figure 3-type accounts skirt this objection. Background beliefs do not themselves stand in relations of support to perceptual beliefs, so there is no requirement that well-founded perceptual beliefs be based on background beliefs. Instead, well-foundedness only requires that a perceptual belief be based on an experience, since it is only the experience itself that supports the perceptual belief.¹⁸

Figure 3-type accounts also diverge in epistemologically significant ways from Figure 1-type accounts. Return to Figure 1 with the idea that a graph will specify the enablers of support relations. We should then read Figure 1 as claiming that, *contra* Figure 3-type accounts, the relation of direct support between the experience and the perceptual belief has no enabler. The

¹⁵This analogy is inspired by one Gupta (2006, 80–82) and Gupta (2019, 94–96) use to clarify the hypothetical given. I discuss Gupta’s analogy below.

¹⁶Again, see Neta (2010, 701–702).

¹⁷See Silins (2008) for this objection and Feldman & Conee (1985) for discussion of well-foundedness.

¹⁸Neta (2010) motivates a Figure 3-type account on these grounds.

importance of this difference lies in the conditions we might impose on a background belief’s functioning as an enabler. If one must be justified in holding a background belief in order for it to play this role, then defenders of Figure 3-type accounts incur a significant burden: they must explain how it is that one comes by justification for background beliefs (the same goes for defenders of Figure 2-type accounts).¹⁹ Figure 1-type accounts invite no such question. Instead, their defenders must explain how features of experience and perceptual belief on their own institute the relevant support relations, or why we should instead take these relations as primitive. Importantly, none of these differences are apparent if we omit enablers from our graphs. Both Figure 1 and Figure 3-type accounts take experiences to stand in relations of direct support with perceptual beliefs, so our original Figure 1 would have stood for both.

Let us turn finally to the hypothetical given:

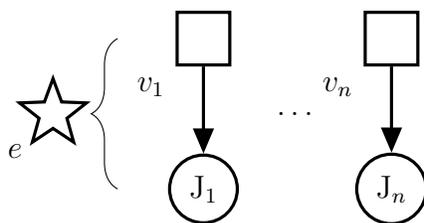


Figure 4

This account differs from all of the above in that experience stands in no relations of support—whether direct or conjunctive—with perceptual beliefs. Instead, the role of experience is to establish relations of rational support between *views* (represented by the squares) and perceptual beliefs.²⁰ The role of experience is thus analogous to that of background beliefs in Figure

¹⁹A more complete graphical representation of the structure of justification would depict the states or experiences that support such background beliefs.

²⁰Figure 4 is based on Gupta’s own graph in Gupta (2009, 464). However, Gupta himself does not employ the terminology of “support relations” when describing his theory. He will say that experience establishes “rational links”, “constraints”, or “connections” between views and perceptual beliefs—connections that have the force of “therefore” (see Gupta (2006, 80–81), Gupta (2009, 464), Gupta (2011, 45), and Gupta (2019, 94–96)). He will also say that experience licenses “transitions” from one view to another (Gupta (2011, 52 n. 20) and Gupta (2019, 94–96)). My formulation of his theory in terms of support is intended as an interpretation of these remarks. Support relations establish rational

3-type accounts: the having of an experience figures in an explanation of why a view supports a perceptual belief, but the experience does not itself figure in relations of support.

As with Figure 3-type accounts, adding enablers to our graphs is necessary for representing the hypothetical given. Were we to omit enablers, Figure 4 could equally well represent a pure coherentism of the sort defended by Davidson (1986), on which experience only causes perceptual beliefs that independently stand in relations of rational support. But on the hypothetical given, experience itself makes a rational contribution: it *institutes* relations of support.

Gupta likens this contribution of experience to that of an argument form (Gupta (2006, 80–82) and Gupta (2019, 94–96)). An experience establishes relations of support between views and perceptual beliefs, just as an argument form establishes relations of support between sets of premises and conclusions. Take one of Gupta’s examples: you are staring out your kitchen window and see a red bird fly by; you judge, let us assume rationally, “That’s a cardinal”. On Gupta’s theory, the rational contribution of your experience is this: “Because of your visual experience, a *rational linkage* obtained between your view and your judgment, which made your *move* to the judgment rational. The experience did not render your judgment rational; it rendered your *transition*, your *move*, to the judgment rational” (Gupta (2019, 94); his emphasis). Your antecedent view contained your general conception of the self and the world (e.g. you are one person among many who inhabit a world containing various physical objects), your particular beliefs about this self and world (e.g. that all red birds in the area are cardinals), your stock of concepts such as “cardinal”, and your disposition to treat certain experiences as triggering the application of these concepts.²¹ In light of your particular experience while looking out the window, this antecedent view now comes to support the perceptual judgment “That’s a cardinal”. The presence of this

constraints and license transitions, and it is difficult to see how a connection between a view and a perceptual belief could have the force of “therefore” unless the view supports the perceptual belief. Still, there are passages in which Gupta appears to endorse a Figure 3-type account, e.g. when he speaks of experience “entailing” perceptual beliefs relative to a view (Gupta (2019, 96, 349)). Nevertheless, since Gupta denies that experience has content (see Gupta (2019, Chapter 6)), I read the aforementioned remarks as a kind of shorthand and interpret Gupta as endorsing a Figure 4-type account. Thanks to Tom Breed for raising the question of whether Gupta endorses a Figure 3-type account.

²¹See Gupta (2019, 97–99) for further discussion of the elements that constitute a subject’s view.

support relation does not guarantee that your antecedent or even subsequent view is rational, nor does it guarantee that the bird is a cardinal. Rather, the support relation grounds the rationality of the *transition* from the view to the belief. Similarly, a valid argument form might link a set of premises and a conclusion, thereby rendering rational the transition from those premises to that conclusion but leaving open whether the premises or conclusion are true, or even rational to believe.

The hypothetical given assigns a unique logical role to experience, as compared with the other accounts given above. An argument form is not another premise in an inference.²² Similarly, on the hypothetical given, an experience is not another relatum in a support relation with a perceptual belief. However, it is important to spell out the epistemological significance of this structural difference.

It is often assumed that experience itself must stand in relations of support to perceptual beliefs, if experience is to make any difference to the rationality of these beliefs. It is then argued that only items with content, or perhaps conceptual content, can stand in such relations. It is then concluded that experience must have content, if experience is to properly serve as a tribunal for perceptual beliefs.²³ But the hypothetical given demonstrates that the initial assumption is false: it is possible for experience to make a rational contribution without itself standing in relations of rational support to perceptual beliefs (compare again the contribution of an argument form like *modus ponens*). The hypothetical given thus undermines one prominent argument for thinking that experience has content.

However, there is a potential cost to denying that experience itself stands in relations of support to perceptual beliefs. Recall our discussion of well-foundedness from above: it is plausible that one only justifiedly holds a given belief if one bases that belief on the considerations that support it. But we said it was psychologically implausible that anyone bases their perceptual beliefs on background beliefs about the reliability of perception or the falsity of skeptical hypotheses. The same goes for basing one's perceptual beliefs on views encompassing one's entire conception of the self and world. The hypothetical given thus faces a problem analogous to the one we raised for Figure 2-type accounts—namely, the hypothetical given would appear to result in an implausible account of well-foundedness.

²²Cf. Carroll (1895).

²³See McDowell (1994) and Brewer (1999).

All of this is to say: the hypothetical given is not a notational variant of the other accounts that assign a role to background states, like beliefs or views. We must take care to distinguish between the different logical roles such background states might play: they might figure themselves as related in either direct or conjunctive support relations with perceptual beliefs, or they might figure merely as enablers for direct support relations between experiences and perceptual beliefs. Each role must be distinguished, for as we've seen, these logical differences result in key epistemological differences.

Still, there is a commonality between each of our last three accounts. In assigning a role to background states, these accounts would all seem to motivate conservatism. Background states themselves stand in need of support, so it is plausible that one's justification for perceptual beliefs depends in part on one's justification for these background states. The upshot is that an assumption often held by both liberals and conservatives is mistaken: a Figure 2-type account is not the only structure capable of supporting conservatism.²⁴

To sum up, we've located the hypothetical given within a group of four accounts of the structure of perceptual justification, none of which is equivalent to the others.²⁵ We can chart the key differences between these accounts with the following table, which concerns the structural relationship between an experience e and perceptual belief J :

²⁴Cf. Neta (2010).

²⁵Of course, this is not to say that these accounts exhaust the logical space. I also wish to leave open the possibility of what I will call "structural pluralism": different experience/perceptual belief pairs involve different justificatory structures. For example, one might endorse a Figure 1-type account regarding perceptual beliefs with proper and common sensibles as contents, but one might endorse a Figure 2-type account regarding perceptual beliefs with more sophisticated contents (cf. Pryor (2000, 538–539) and Pryor (2004, 357)).

The Structure of Perceptual Justification

	Fig. 1- type accounts	Fig. 2- type accounts	Fig. 3- type accounts	The Hypothetical Given
Does e figure as a relatum in a support relation with J?	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Does e figure as a relatum in a relation of <i>direct</i> support with J?	Yes	No	Yes	No
Is the relation of direct support between e and J established by some (justified) background belief R?	No	Question does not arise	Yes	Question does not arise

Table 1

3 Gupta on Categorical Entitlement

We've seen that the Gupta's theory offers a unique account of the structure of perceptual justification. In the remainder of this paper, I want to raise a worry about the extent to which his account limits our options for theorizing about the epistemology of perception. The worry takes the form of a dilemma: on a natural assumption about the epistemic significance of support relations, Gupta's theory leads to either rationalism or skepticism.

We can work our way into this dilemma by noting an initial obstacle facing any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given. We said above that the relations of support established by an experience give rise to hypothetical entitlements: if one is entitled to view v and undergoes experience e , then one is entitled to the perceptual beliefs J that are supported by v , given e . But how does one become entitled to a view in the first place? This question is particularly pressing because views themselves would seem to be supported by perceptual beliefs: e.g. one's belief that the lighting conditions are normal is presumably supported by beliefs about the color of the light, and so on. We thus confront a circle: our entitlement to perceptual beliefs rests on our entitlement to a view, but our entitlement to a view also

rests on our entitlement to perceptual beliefs. An immediate concern, then, is that this circle prevents us from ever obtaining a *categorical* entitlement to perceptual beliefs—that is, an entitlement that does not rest on some further condition’s being satisfied.

Gupta’s key innovation is to approach this problem with the same tools that he and Nuel Belnap pioneered to handle interdependent definitions.²⁶ The crucial notion here is that of “convergence”. A set of interdependent definitions will sometimes converge on a single extension for a predicate, provided one updates the extensions by a process of continual revision. Similarly, a set of initially conflicting views can ultimately converge on some core account of the self and world when revised under the pressure of experience.

To see how this works, start with the set of all possible views. The role of reason, Gupta argues, is to winnow down this initial set. Reason can exclude views like solipsism—according to which only the self and its sense-data exist—on the grounds that such a view is inappropriately “rigid”: its core account of the self and world will be unchanged regardless of the subject’s course of experience.²⁷ But this is not to say that solipsism is thereby known to be false—Gupta’s aim is precisely to avoid a rationalist theory on which we have *a priori* entitlements to beliefs about contingent features of the actual world. Solipsism is merely unfit as a *starting point* for empirical inquiry, since it fails to allow experience the possibility of reshaping our fundamental conception of the self and world. Reason thus selects a set of “admissible” views: those whose broadly logical features—such as non-rigidity and overall coherence—make them suitable starting points for empirical inquiry.

At outset of inquiry, the admissible views may give widely divergent accounts of the self and world. But suppose these views converge on some core account when revised in light of a suitably rich course of experiences. Gupta claims that one is categorically entitled to the view *c* that is the subject of this convergence.²⁸ Hence, one is categorically entitled to the perceptual beliefs supported by *c*, given this course of experiences. Convergence thus explains how the hypothetical given can sustain categorical entitlement to perceptual beliefs.

However, Berker (2011) objects to this account of categorical entitlement. On the hypothetical given, an experience establishes relations of support

²⁶See Gupta & Belnap (1993). See Gupta (2006, Chapter 3) for a primer on interdependent definitions.

²⁷See Gupta (2006, Chapter 5, §E) and Gupta (2019, 113–114).

²⁸See Gupta (2006, Chapter 4, §B) and Gupta (2019, Chapter 4, §C).

that give rise to hypothetical entitlements: if one is entitled to view v and undergoes experience e , then one is entitled to the perceptual beliefs J that are supported by v , given e . Suppose one becomes entitled to J in this way. One is then rationally required to revise v in light of J .²⁹ This revision may involve simply adding J to v , or it may involve more fundamental changes to v . One is then entitled to the view v_1 that results from rationally revising v in light of J . The process repeats as one undergoes the next experience e_1 , which entitles one to J_1 , which in turn entitles one to v_2 , the view that results from rationally revising v_1 in light of J_1 . In this way, a *sequence* of experiences E can also give rise to hypothetical entitlements: if one is entitled to v and undergoes E , then one is entitled to the view c that results from rationally revising v in light of E . Now, suppose that all admissible views converge on c when revised in light of E . All that this convergence establishes is the following: *if* one is entitled to one of the admissible views and undergoes E , then one is entitled to c . But recall that Gupta denies we are entitled to any particular view at the start of the revision process. Hence, convergence only yields a set of hypothetical entitlements, none of which secures categorical entitlement to perceptual beliefs.

Gupta’s (2011) reply is that hypothetical entitlements do not exhaust the rational contribution of experience. In general, the rational contribution of a relation of support between ϕ and ψ cannot be represented merely as “if one is entitled to believe that ϕ , then one is entitled to believe that ψ ”. For support relations also yield entitlement via argument by cases. Here one becomes entitled to believe a conclusion if one is entitled to believe a disjunction whose disjuncts all support that conclusion—one need not be entitled to believe any of the disjuncts themselves. By contrast, from the following, one cannot derive entitlement to the conclusion R:

S is entitled to believe that P or Q.

If S is entitled to believe that P, then S is entitled to believe that R.

If S is entitled to believe that Q, then S is entitled to believe that R.

Similarly, Gupta argues, the support relations established by experience do not merely give rise to hypothetical entitlements of the form “if one is entitled

²⁹See Gupta (2006, Chapter 4, §4B) and Gupta (2019, Chapter 4, §C) for the details of the revision process I sketch in the main text.

to v , then one is entitled to believe J ". The support relations established by experience also license an analogue of argument by cases. At the outset of inquiry, one is not entitled to any particular view v , but one is entitled to the disjunction of admissible views: one is entitled to hold that some such view obtains.³⁰ Convergence among the admissible views then yields entitlement to the core view c , just like entitlement to a disjunction yields entitlement to a conclusion that follows from each disjunct. Thus, the hypothetical given sustains categorical entitlement after all.

4 The Dilemma

Gupta's reply succeeds in addressing Berker's objection. Gupta's analogy with argument by cases, plus his proposed entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views, explains how one can become categorically entitled to perceptual beliefs without being entitled to any particular view at the outset of inquiry. However, a further problem remains. The problem concerns the nature of our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views. Our entitlement to this disjunction must come in either one of two varieties: (i) the entitlement is fully epistemic—it is the type of entitlement we ordinarily take ourselves to enjoy for our perceptual beliefs, or (ii) the entitlement is non-epistemic, or somehow less than fully epistemic. On the first horn, Gupta's theory collapses into a form of rationalism. On the second, the theory leads to skepticism.

Suppose our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views is fully epistemic. It is the type of entitlement one enjoys for, say, the belief that the sky is blue. We can contrast this type of entitlement with two others: entitlements to attitudes other than belief, and entitlements to belief of a non-epistemic character. For an example of the latter, consider the type of entitlement one might possess for the belief that the sky is pink, provided one will win a million dollars if one holds this belief. For an example of the former, consider the type of entitlement one might possess to draw on a

³⁰Views are not propositions, so strictly speaking, views cannot be conjoined through logical operations like disjunction (Gupta (2011, 45), Gupta (2019, 118–119)). Nevertheless, one can speak intelligibly of entitlement to believe that some admissible view obtains, as Gupta himself does: "But she is entitled to restrict consideration to admissible views; that is, she is entitled to take it that one of the [admissible] views v_i obtains" (Gupta (2011, 45)). My talk of entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views in the main text should be read as shorthand for this latter entitlement.

certain assumption within the context of a given conversation. All parties to the conversation may have granted the assumption for the sake of argument, but one's entitlement to this assumption does not license one to adopt it outside the context of the conversation. Contrast this with a fully-epistemic entitlement to believe the same proposition: this type of entitlement is not sensitive to the aims of a particular conversation in quite the same way, even if attributions of epistemic entitlement turn out to be context-sensitive along one dimension or another.

Of course, this is just a rough account of the differences between fully-epistemic and other types of entitlements. I take it that all will recognize such a distinction. For our purposes, we might simply gloss the distinction as follows: the mark of a fully-epistemic entitlement is its ability to ground knowledge, at least if the entitlement is suitably strong and there are no defeaters, etc.

Now, we are assuming that our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views is fully epistemic in the sense just explained. But recall that this entitlement stems solely from reason: we possess the entitlement at an idealized point at the outset of empirical inquiry, prior to the point at which experience makes its rational contribution. Thus, it follows that reason gives us an *a priori*, fully-epistemic entitlement to believe a deeply contingent fact about what the world is like—namely, that one of the admissible views obtains. And if we grant ourselves a single-premise entitlement closure principle, we must also have an *a priori*, fully-epistemic entitlement to believe that, say, solipsism is false, since solipsism is not among the admissible views. Consequently, on the first horn, Gupta's theory simply results in rationalism.³¹

However, Gupta might instead reply that we have mistaken the nature of our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views. He writes the following

³¹One might object that rationalism is a thesis about *a priori* knowledge, not *a priori* entitlement. But one wonders why exactly the *a priori* entitlements in question would not yield knowledge, provided that some admissible view in fact obtains. And even if these entitlements fail to yield knowledge, critics of rationalism would likely reject them all the same. It is not the strength of the entitlements but their content and apriority that conflicts with empiricism. Note finally that Gupta himself wants to distance his view from even a moderate rationalism, according to which there is only an *a priori* obligation to believe that solipsism is false (see Gupta (2011, 49)). Still, it is an open question just how damaging it would be to endorse the type of rationalism that results from the first horn of our dilemma. My aim here is simply to establish *that* the resulting theory is rationalist, not to assess whether a rationalist version of the hypothetical given is ultimately sustainable.

in response to Schafer’s (2011) objection that the admissibility constraints entail rationalism:

Admissibility constraints restrict only the *starting points* of revision. They entail no restrictions on views that may occur in the revision process. . . . So admissibility constraints do not yield *a priori* knowledge that solipsism is false. They do not even yield *a priori* directives on belief, e.g. that one ought to believe that solipsism is false (Gupta (2011, 49); his emphasis).

This passage suggests that Gupta might treat our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views as somehow less than fully epistemic: it is only an entitlement to hold this disjunction at the starting point of inquiry, or to “restrict the range of views”, as he puts it (Gupta (2011, 45)). But however Gupta wants to frame this entitlement, it must be less than fully epistemic if he is to avoid the first horn of our dilemma.³²

Let us then consider the second horn: suppose our entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views is non-epistemic or somehow less than fully epistemic. The problem here is that Gupta’s account leads to skepticism.

Recall again the parallel between the rational contribution of experience and that of an argument form. Convergence was supposed to yield categorical entitlement in a manner analogous to argument by cases. But suppose one draws a conclusion from a disjunction to which one has a less-than-fully-epistemic entitlement—e.g. suppose one is merely entitled to the disjunction within the context of a given conversation. If one has no independent entitlement to the conclusion so drawn, then one’s entitlement to the conclusion will be less than fully epistemic as well. For example, in our present case, one will not be entitled to endorse the conclusion outside the context of the conversation. Thus, if the rational contribution of experience is akin to that of an argument form, then a less-than-fully-epistemic entitlement to the disjunction of admissible views should yield a less-than-fully-epistemic entitlement to the core view *c* that is the locus of convergence. But remember:

³²Gupta sometimes writes as though the defeasibility of one’s initial entitlement to exclude solipsism from consideration suffices to show that his theory is not rationalist (see e.g. Gupta (2019, 116–117, 118–119) and especially Gupta (2019, 120–121)). But one should not presume that rationalists must be infallibilists. On the contrary, it is entirely coherent to hold a fallibilist rationalism according to which our *a priori* entitlement—or even knowledge—that solipsism is false can be overturned by subsequent experience.

convergence was supposed to explain how we receive categorical entitlement to perceptual beliefs in the first place. So if our entitlement to c is less than fully epistemic, then so is our entitlement to all of our perceptual beliefs. Gupta's theory thus results in skepticism: we have a fully-epistemic entitlement to none of our perceptual beliefs.

5 Generalizing the Dilemma

The dilemma remains even if Gupta drops the analogy with argument by cases. The characteristic feature of the hypothetical given is that experience functions to establish relations of rational support between views and perceptual beliefs. But support relations are plausibly governed by the following principles:

Transmission Only: Support relations serve only to transmit entitlement from one state to another.³³

Transmission Entails Constraint: When support relations transmit entitlement from one state to another, the entitlement-type of the supported state is constrained by the entitlement-type of the supporting state.

The idea behind the first principle is that support relations do not generate entitlement where none existed previously—they merely extend the entitlement one already possesses. For example, suppose you prove a conclusion from a set of premises. The mere fact that the proof is genuine does not make you entitled to believe the conclusion if you have no entitlement to believe the premises.

The second principle states that when transmission occurs, one's entitlement to the supported state cannot outstrip one's entitlement to the supporting state. This type of constraint governs both the degree and character of one's entitlement to the supported states. For example, if one is weakly justified in believing the premises of a valid inference, one is only thereby weakly justified in believing the conclusion. And if one possesses merely

³³One caveat: this principle is intended to apply only to pairs of states, each of which potentially stands in need of support. The principle does not rule out a liberal epistemology on which experience immediately justifies perceptual beliefs, unless experiences themselves require support.

pragmatic reasons for believing the premises, one does not thereby receive any epistemic entitlement to believe the conclusion.

The conjunction of the above principles is what I will call the “constraint model” of rational support:

The Constraint Model: Support relations serve only to transmit entitlement from one state to another, where the entitlement-type of the supported state is constrained by the entitlement-type of the supporting state.

If the **Constraint Model** is correct, then any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given is stuck with our above dilemma. For suppose one begins empirical inquiry with a less-than-fully epistemic entitlement to some view or disjunction of views. The **Constraint Model** ensures that the support relations established by any subsequent experiences yield only less-than-fully epistemic entitlements to perceptual beliefs: by the **Transmission Only** principle, these support relations serve only to transmit entitlement from views to perceptual beliefs, and by the **Transmission Entails Constraint** principle, the entitlement so transmitted remains less than fully epistemic. Alternatively, if one does start off with some fully-epistemic entitlement to a view or disjunction of views, then this entitlement will give one an *a priori*, fully-epistemic entitlement for believing a host of contingent propositions about what the world is actually like.

To sum up, the general problem is this: if the **Constraint Model** is correct, then any attempt to avoid rationalism will result in a gap between the type of entitlement one enjoys at the outset of inquiry and the type of entitlement one aspires to possess for one’s perceptual beliefs.³⁴

6 Possible Replies

I will conclude by examining two strategies for avoiding our dilemma. Each involves denying the **Constraint Model**, but for different reasons.

The first aims to combine the hypothetical given with a form of epistemological holism. This type of holism rejects the **Transmission Only** principle

³⁴This problem is analogous to the so-called leaching problem for Crispin Wright’s account of perceptual justification (see Wright (2004, 2014) and McGlynn (2017)). In both cases, the worry is that a less-than-fully epistemic entitlement to a supporting state will result in a less-than-fully epistemic entitlement to supported perceptual beliefs.

: sometimes the structure of support is such as to create entitlement for the first time, even if none of the states that stand in these support relations are independently justified. For example, on holist coherentism, an entire system of beliefs becomes justified in virtue of the mutual support relations obtaining between its members. The members do not transmit justification to each other; rather, it is their mutual coherence that creates justification for the first time.³⁵ Similarly, on holist infinitism, a belief becomes justified through the presence of an infinitely long, non-terminating, non-repeating chain of supporting states. The chain does not function to transmit justification up through its links—the chain creates justification for the first time.³⁶

If we integrate either of these theories with the hypothetical given, then we should reject the idea that one requires any sort of entitlement to a view or disjunction of views at the outset of inquiry. One does not become entitled to perceptual beliefs through the transmission of some original entitlement to a view. Instead, one's entitlement to a view stems from either (i) the view's overall coherence or relation to other views; or (ii) the view's being supported by an infinitely long, non-terminating, non-repeating chain of supporting states.³⁷

However, there are several challenges facing these proposals. First, combining the hypothetical given with holist infinitism conflicts with Gupta's insistence on the view-relativity of reasons for belief.³⁸ Gupta maintains that a consideration only counts as an epistemic reason relative to a particular view, and thus Gupta should deny that one can construct a chain of reasons supporting a view v that does not at some point include v , or at least include reasons whose status as reasons stems from v .

Second, views are not beliefs: they contain *sets* of beliefs, along with the subject's stock of concepts and overall conception of the self and world.³⁹

³⁵See Berker (2015), BonJour & Sosa (2003), and Poston & McCain (forthcoming) for discussion of holist coherentism.

³⁶See Klein (2003).

³⁷Berker (2015) suggests that holist coherentism is the best framework for developing the central ideas behind Gupta's epistemology. However, as we noted in n. 10, Berker takes Gupta to defend a Figure 2-type account. I instead read Gupta as denying that experiences stand in relations of support. As a result, combining Gupta's theory with holist coherentism requires denying that experiences figure as members of a coherent system. The role of experience will be to explain why some of the support relations obtain between the states that *do* figure as members of the system.

³⁸See Gupta (2019, Chapters 10 and 11), especially p. 317 and pp. 349–350.

³⁹See Gupta (2006, 76, 90–93) and Gupta (2019, 97–98).

A view contains all of these elements, so absent some sort of irrationality or fragmentation, a subject will accept only one view. It makes no sense, then, to speak of a subject's holding a set of views that forms a coherent system. Rather, one must identify a type of coherence that holds *within* a view, perhaps among the beliefs and concepts that constitute the view. And even if one could identify such a structure, Gupta would face the non-trivial task of explaining why this structure is capable of creating entitlement to a view for the very first time, as opposed to merely transmitting a pre-existing entitlement.

If one could succeed in carrying out this task, one will have thereby upset many of the assumptions underlying the current debate over the epistemology of perception. We said in §2 that Figure 2-type accounts, Figure 3-type accounts, and the hypothetical given all seem to support conservatism: each appeals to background states, which themselves stand in need of support. But if holist coherentism is correct, it is the relation between experiences, background states, and perceptual beliefs that generate entitlement to the entire system at once. So while it would still be true that justification for perceptual beliefs involves justification for believing further propositions, the former justification would not hold in virtue of the latter. The reason for this is that grounding relations are typically held to be asymmetric: if A holds in virtue of B, then B does not hold in virtue of A. Thus, one should not characterize the entitlements to states in a coherent system as holding in virtue of each other. Rather, these entitlements hold in virtue of the overall coherence of the system. The resulting epistemology will be neither liberal nor conservative by our above definitions: experience does not supply immediate justification for perceptual beliefs, nor does justification for these beliefs hold in virtue of justification for background states.

I will close by examining one final strategy for avoiding our dilemma—one that is consistent with the **Transmission Only** principle. This strategy involves combining the hypothetical given with a version of hinge epistemology.⁴⁰ The general idea behind hinge epistemology is that entitlements to perceptual beliefs depend on less-than-fully epistemic entitlements to “hinge” propositions—e.g. those concerning the reliability of perception, the falsity of skeptical hypotheses, and so on. There are many ways of developing this framework, but one is to reject the **Transmission Entails Constraint**

⁴⁰For discussion of hinge epistemology see, for instance, Coliva (2015), Pritchard (2015), and Wright (2004, 2014).

principle. That is, one might hold that there exist special types of support relations that transform a less-than-fully epistemic entitlement to hinge propositions into a fully-epistemic entitlement to perceptual beliefs.

If one could make sense of such entitlement transformation, then one could avoid the second horn of our dilemma. Gupta could retain the analogy with argument by cases, treating the disjunction of admissible views as an analogue of a hinge proposition. Entitlement to this disjunction could then ground a fully-epistemic entitlement to perceptual beliefs, even if the former entitlement is less than fully epistemic.

The trouble, of course, is that entitlement transformation remains mysterious. How does a support relation bridge the gap between a less-than-fully epistemic input, and a fully-epistemic output? In this respect, defenders of hinge epistemology would be better off formulating their theories in terms of a Figure 3-type account. Here background states do not themselves stand in relations of support with perceptual beliefs, so the **Transmission Entails Constraint** principle does not result in the entitlement-type of the background states constraining the entitlement-type of perceptual beliefs. Thus, the **Constraint Model** would present no obstacle to a less-than-fully epistemic entitlement to background states grounding a fully-epistemic entitlement to perceptual beliefs. This move is not available to defenders of the hypothetical given, since the latter account requires background states themselves to stand in relations of support.

To sum up: We've seen that the hypothetical given constitutes a genuine alternative to the prevailing accounts of the structure of perceptual justification. The theory assigns a unique logical role to experience that in turn generates a variety of different epistemological commitments than its competitors. Nevertheless, there remain difficult questions about whether the hypothetical given ultimately restricts our options for theorizing about the epistemology of perception. As it stands, any perceptual epistemology based on the hypothetical given threatens to result in either rationalism or skepticism.

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