Adam Marushak on the Hypothetical Given

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Adam Marushak (2019) offers a valuable reading of the hypothetical given, one that enables him to compare it in an illuminating way to other approaches in the epistemology of perception. Marushak also raises a problem for this reading; here he deepens an objection due to Selim Berker (2011). The problem takes the form of a dilemma. On one of its horns, the proponent of the hypothetical given is said to be committed to rationalism; and on the other horn, to skepticism. In Section I below, I argue, after a brief review of Marushak’s reading of the hypothetical given and his dilemma, that even if we grant that the arguments of both horns are sound, the commitments incurred are light and unproblematic. In Section II, I go on to reflect on the Marushak reading. I argue that while the reading captures an important aspect of the hypothetical given, it needs to be refined in light of certain distinctions.

I. Marushak’s Dilemma

1. The core idea underlying the hypothetical given is that experience renders rational transitions—not, as is commonly held, perceptual beliefs (or perceptual judgments or ostensive definitions). Suppose you see a bird sitting in a tree and, as a result, acquire the perceptual belief that the bird is a cardinal. Here you undergo a transition from your antecedent view to the belief that the bird is a cardinal. According to the hypothetical given, your visual experience does not render rational your perceptual belief. It renders rational the transition from your antecedent view to your perceptual belief.

   Now, it may appear that the hypothetical given accords experience a role that is exceedingly thin. For, in one respect, the role is even thinner than that accorded by Cartesian conceptions of experience. According to these conceptions, experience can render rational such perceptual beliefs as “it looks as if there is a bird over there” and “I am sensing something red.”
But on the hypothetical given, experience renders rational only transitions to these beliefs, not
the beliefs themselves. I have argued that the hypothetical given, contrary to first appearances, in
fact accords experience a substantial role—indeed, a role so substantial that it enables an
attractive empiricism. For instance, while Cartesian conceptions face insuperable logical
problems in sustaining the rationality of our commonsense conception of the world, the
hypothetical given does not. For it is possible that a series of experiences institutes revisions that
force convergence to the commonsense conception. More precisely, it is possible that the
hypothetical givens provided by the experiences transform each admissible view to one that
contains the commonsense conception. In such a scenario, I claimed, the rationality of our
commonsense conception would be sustained.¹

2. Marushak challenges this last claim. His challenge relies on two ideas: first, a particular
reading of the hypothetical given (which I shall call the Marushak reading) and, second, the
substantiality of the admissibility constraint on initial views.² The Marushak reading sees
experience as establishing relations of (rational) support between views and perceptual beliefs.
Thus, in the cardinal example above, your visual experience of the bird establishes, according to
this reading, a relation of rational support between your antecedent view and your perceptual
belief that the bird is a cardinal. The experience does not, on this reading, stand in the relation of
support to your belief; the support relation holds only between your view and your belief. The
role of the experience is to institute—or, as Marushak also puts it, enable—the support relation
between the view and the belief. The hypothetical given, on this reading, differs sharply from
other views in perceptual epistemology, all of which take experience to stand in the support
relation to perceptual beliefs. Again building on Berker’s work (Berker 2015), Marushak

¹For an explanation of admissibility and for a more precise account of convergence and
the hypothetical given, see chapter 4 of Conscious Experience: A Logical Inquiry (Gupta 2019;
henceforth CE) and chapters 4 and 5 of Empiricism and Experience (Gupta 2006; henceforth
E&E).

²Berker’s challenge also relied on a particular reading of the hypothetical given and on
the substantiality of the admissibility constraint. My response to Berker was to reject his reading
as too narrow (Gupta 2011). Marushak’s reading of the hypothetical given is substantially
different from Berker’s.
provides diagrams that bring out nicely some of the differences between the different views in perceptual epistemology.

3. The second idea on which Marushak’s challenge relies is the substantiality of the admissibility constraint on initial views. This constraint rules out, for example, solipsism as an admissible initial view; it allows us to ignore solipsism in the determination of convergence.\(^3\) The rationale for this is, on the one hand, clear and compelling: solipsism is a rigid view, in the sense that its conception of the self and the world is thoroughly insensitive to experience. All possible series of experience leave solipsism fundamentally unchanged. Hence, the fact that a series of experiences is unable to bring solipsism into agreement with, say, the commonsense view does not cast doubt on the rationality of accepting the latter view. On the other hand, the ruling out of solipsism (and other such views) is a cause for concern, a concern that Marushak’s dilemma brings nicely to the fore.

4. The dilemma is built around the sort of entitlement the proponent of the hypothetical given thinks there is to consider only admissible views at the start of revision.\(^4\) Either this entitlement is, as Marushak puts it, *fully epistemic* or it is less than fully epistemic. Marushak explains the qualification “fully epistemic” thus: “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. (2019, §4).” Now, if the entitlement to consider only admissible views is fully epistemic then, according to Marushak, there is an a priori fully-epistemic entitlement to believing a contingent fact about the world (e.g., that solipsism is false). And this, Marushak thinks, commits the proponent of the hypothetical given to rationalism.\(^5\) On the other hand, if the entitlement is not

[^3]: Here and below, solipsism is to be understood as Cartesian solipsism, the view that experience acquaints the self only with sense-data and their features and, furthermore, facts about the self and its current sense-data are the only realities in the world.

[^4]: In this essay, I am taking ‘rational’ and ‘entitled’ to be two ways of speaking about the same thing: a subject’s belief is rational iff the subject is rational in holding the belief iff the subject is entitled to the belief.

[^5]: Valeriano Iranzo (2009) and Karl Schafer (2011) also argued that the proponent of the hypothetical given is committed to rationalism. I respond to them in, respectively, Gupta 2009
fully epistemic, then the proponent is committed to skepticism. For the support relation, Marushak holds, is governed by the following principle:

(*) 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 (Marushak 2019, §5).

So, if the initial entitlement is less than fully epistemic, then this status will transmit down the revision process to perceptual beliefs. Hence, the proponent of the hypothetical given will end up denying that our ordinary perceptual judgments are knowledgeable. He will thus be landed in (a form of) skepticism.6

5. One concern I have about this dilemma centers on principle (*). This principle is correct for support relations generated by some (perhaps all) logically valid argument-forms,7 but it is doubtful when the notion of support is extended to the hypothetical given. Suppose a belief that $P$ supports the belief that $P \& P$. Here, it is indeed plausible that the support relation only transmits entitlement and cannot bring about any transformation in entitlement-type. If the entitlement to the belief that $P$ is of a type that is not fully epistemic then the entitlement to the supported conjunctive belief is also of a type that is not fully epistemic. Now, although the hypothetical given shares some features with logically valid argument-forms (CE, §75), it is also different from these forms in some important respects (CE, §§76 & 82). Unlike valid argument-forms, the hypothetical given can bring about an enrichment of a view both with new concepts and with knowledge of essentially new facts. A narrow and simple view may, when subjected to the rational pressures of a series of experiences, transform into a broad and sophisticated one (CE, §§227 & 229). And such a transformation may well alter the epistemic status of a belief.

and 2011.

6I have provided here only the bare bones of Marushak’s dilemma. See Marushak 2019, §§4–5, for the full account.

7Whether (*) holds of support relations generated by all logically valid argument-forms depends on how precisely the notion of support is understood.
Initially the subject may lack resources to defend the belief against objections, but later the enriched view may provide ample resources to do so. Similarly, the subject may initially lack resources to persuade others that the belief is true but later may be well provided with such resources. Such changes can affect, it would appear, the epistemic status of a belief. If this is right, then epistemic status may well shift in the course of revision and, consequently, the support relations generated by the hypothetical given may well violate (*).

6. Even if we grant (*) and hold that the arguments of both horns are sound, we can still insist that the hypothetical given entails no commitment that should trouble an empiricist. We now grant that at the start of revision there is a fully-epistemic a priori entitlement to accept a substantive fact about the world—say, for concreteness, that solipsism is false. This concession does not commit us to the idea that we possess, at any stage of our empirical inquiry, a priori knowledge that solipsism is false. For, first, the initial stage of revision is only a fiction that serves a logical function. It does not represent any stage in our actual empirical inquiry. At the initial stage, the idealized subject has no specific commitments concerning the layout of the world—commitments such as that certain trees are closer to one another than they are to the moon. But at no stage in our actual inquiry are we ever without all specific commitments; indeed, without some such commitments, empirical inquiry would be impossible for us. Furthermore, at the start of the idealized revision process, the subject considers the effects of experience on all admissible views. However, at no stage in our actual empirical inquiry are we ever in a position to comprehend, let alone consider, all admissible views. The scope of admissible views only dawns on us gradually as empirical inquiry progresses. Second, the admissibility constraint is applicable only to the initial stage of the idealized revision process; it is not in force at later stages (CE, §97). The possibility is allowed that a series of experiences transforms an admissible view (e.g., a commonsense view) into an inadmissible one (e.g., solipsism). The series of experiences we have undergone are not of that sort, however, and our

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8Imagine two mathematicians who both accept a particular mathematical claim $M$. One of the mathematicians, let us imagine, is unable to answer objections to $M$ while the other can not only answer the objections but can also provide a proof of $M$. The second mathematician certainly knows $M$, but whether the first knows it is doubtful.
entitlement to deny solipsism issues from that fact. It follows that our entitlement to deny solipsism is not a priori. We can thus insist, with the empiricists, that all our factual knowledge is rooted in experience. And we can reject the rationalist idea that reason reveals substantive facts or provides us an a priori entitlement to accept them. Marushak’s dilemma, even if we grant that it is sound, does not commit us to any rationalist thesis objectionable to an empiricist. It is perfectly consistent with a thoroughgoing empiricism. Let us note also that the motivation for the admissibility constraint is entirely empiricist: to give experience a more powerful role in shaping our view of the world. Views such as solipsism cripple experience, and that is why it is legitimate to rule them out at the initial stage of the idealized revision process (CE, §101).

II. Support and the Hypothetical Given

7. I value the Marushak reading for bringing the hypothetical given into relation with the epistemological notion of support. I do think, though, that several different notions of support (and its inverse: dependence) need to distinguished and, furthermore, the bearing of these notions on the rationality of perceptual beliefs is neither uniform nor straightforward.

8. Let us observe, to begin with, that it is not the entire view that is in play when a subject issues a perceptual judgment or forms a perceptual belief (CE, §105). In the cardinal example above (§1), your perceptual belief that the bird is a cardinal does not depend on your entire view. Your view may contain some irrational elements—for example, it may contain arithmetical and astronomical beliefs that are products of a miscalculation and thus irrational. Hence, your view, taken as a whole, may be irrational. This irrationality may well have no affect, however, on the rationality of your perceptual belief, which may be perfectly rational. Only on a limited portion

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9For the empiricism enabled by the hypothetical given, see E&E, chapter 6, and CE, chapters 8–11.

10Terminology: x supports y iff y depends on x.
of your view bears on your perceptual belief; a large part of it is simply irrelevant.\footnote{We can allow, of course, a notion of support on which the whole antecedent view supports a perceptual belief. With such a relation, however, one cannot infer the irrationality of a perceptual belief from the irrationality of its support. The entitlement-type of the supported state is not now constrained by the entitlement-type of the supporting state. Thus, (*) seems to be false when support is read in this way.}

9. Within this limited portion on which your perceptual belief depends, we can separate two sorts of dependence: first, dependence on concepts; and second, dependence on beliefs. Your perceptual belief brings into play various concepts (“bird,” “cardinal”) and depends on them. Some of these concepts may have been acquired through ostensive definitions that bring into play various other concepts (e.g., “red” and “tree”). Some of these latter concepts, too, may have been defined using yet other concepts. And this process can iterate down through many stages. There is, thus, a universe of concepts extending beyond the immediate constituents on which your belief depends. Some of the ostensive definitions governing the concepts in this universe may be irrational, and this can affect the rationality of your perceptual belief. The affect is not straightforward and is worth studying, but I defer its study to a later occasion. Here I want to focus on the second kind of dependence—the dependence on beliefs.

10. A paradigmatic kind of support relation for a belief is what we may call \textit{derivational support}. Suppose a self-conscious subject $X$ arrives at a belief $R$ through some reasoning.\footnote{I sometimes drop ‘that’ and write (e.g.) ‘believes $R$’ in place of ‘believes that $R$’.

Perhaps belief $R$ is the belief that the Pythagorean theorem is true; perhaps it is the belief that the earth will keep warming for the next twenty-five years. As our subject reasons his way to $R$, he would have gone through various intermediate steps at which he would have acquired various other beliefs. Suppose at a stage in his reasoning, the subject accepts $P$ and “if $P$ then $Q$” and then moves to accept $Q$. In such a case, let us say that $P$ and “if $P$ then $Q$” stand in the relation of \textit{immediate derivational priority} to $Q$ and constitute (for $X$) the \textit{immediate derivational basis} of $Q$. Let us also say that the belief $Q$ is \textit{derivative}. Now, $X$’s beliefs $P$ and “if $P$ then $Q$” may themselves be derivative and possess immediate derivational bases. Some of the beliefs in these derivational bases, too, may be derivative and may possess their own derivational bases. A
structure is thus induced in X’s beliefs by the relation “immediate derivational priority.” Let us think of derivational priority as the ancestral of this relation. Then, derivationally prior beliefs in the structure support those that are derivationally posterior, and the posterior ones (derivationally) depend on the prior ones. Finally, let us say that (derivationally) foundational beliefs are those beliefs to which no other beliefs are derivationally prior.

11. Let us observe some features of this structure. Let us work with the simple example given above, in which X’s beliefs P and “if P then Q” support the belief Q. Let us observe:

(i) If X ceases to believe P or to believe “if P then Q” then X should consider whether to continue to accept Q. More generally, loss of support for a belief entails that the belief be reassessed; it opens up the question whether the belief should be abandoned.¹³

(ii) If X ceases to believe Q then he should consider whether to abandon P or to abandon “if P then Q”; both options are open to him. More generally, when a belief is abandoned the option of abandoning any one of its supporting elements is in principle open to the subject.

(iii) In his reasoning, as X moved to accept Q on the basis of P and “if P then Q,” the acceptance of P and “if P then Q” persisted as he came to accept Q. More generally, the elements supporting a belief persist as the subject reasons to the belief.¹⁴

(iv) X’s beliefs P and “if P then Q” suffice to explain why X believes Q. More generally, supporting beliefs suffice to explain the supported belief.

12. It is a common view of the relation of experience to belief that experience, too, can support belief, either by itself or in conjunction with other beliefs. Some philosophers (e.g., David Armstrong) go so far as to identify experience with a particular kind of belief. Now, it should be observed that none of the four features listed above hold of the relation of experience to belief. Let e be the visual experience you underwent when you acquired the perceptual belief, B, about the bird being a cardinal. Consider the idea that e together with the conjunction C of certain other beliefs supports B. Let us observe:

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¹³Since X is self-conscious, we can take it that X keeps track of how he has arrived at his beliefs; in particular, X keeps track of the immediate derivational bases of his derivative beliefs.

¹⁴I am bracketing the complexities created by indexicals and tenses.
(i*) When you cease to undergo e there is no rational pressure on you to reconsider your perceptual belief, B, that the bird is a cardinal. Loss of experiential support does not generally entail that the perceptual belief be reassessed.

(ii*) Suppose that, for various reasons, you abandon the perceptual belief. You now do not have the option of abandoning the visual experience e. The talk of abandoning an experience makes no sense. You can abandon the belief that the experience is non-illusory, but experience is not the sort of thing for which the question of abandonment arises.

(iii*) As you reason on the basis of your experiences to a particular belief, the intermediate beliefs you acquire persist, but not the experiences. These generally change through the course of reasoning as your attention is directed toward different things.

(iv*) Your experience e and the conjunction of beliefs C does not suffice to explain your perceptual belief about the bird being a cardinal. To work up an explanation, one needs to bring in also the relationship of your experience to concepts such as “bird” and “cardinal.”

13. It is a merit of Marushak’s reading of the hypothetical given that it separates sharply the role of experience in cognition from that of belief. In each of the three rival accounts with which Marushak compares the hypothetical given, beliefs can support beliefs and so too can experiences. The parallel fails, however, on Marushak’s reading of the hypothetical given: while beliefs can support beliefs, experiences cannot do so. Marushak is perfectly correct to read the hypothetical given as affirming a sharp distinction between the roles of experience and belief. As I have already indicated, however, the idea of transition should not be assimilated with that of support. To say that experience renders rational transitions from views to perceptual beliefs is not to say that experience enables the support relation between views and perceptual beliefs. The support relation is best seen as fragmenting into several different relations—relations that hold between various elements of views and beliefs, not between whole views and beliefs. We took note earlier of dependence relations between perceptual beliefs and concepts and definitions. Let

15For the relations that are needed, see CE, chapter 8.

16We can recognize a notion of support on which experience supports beliefs, but this does not alter the fact that the role of experience in cognition and, in particular, its bearing on the rationality of belief is different from that of belief.
us now take note of some dependence relations, different from “derivational dependence,” that can hold between perceptual beliefs and other beliefs.

14. Let us observe that perceptual beliefs are typically derivationally foundational, that is, no belief is derivationally prior to them. Nonetheless, these beliefs can depend on other beliefs. Suppose you are looking at a yellow cube in lighting conditions you take to be normal, and you accept the perceptual belief that the cube is yellow. Your belief that the lighting conditions are normal is not derivationally prior to your perceptual belief; you do not reason your way to the perceptual belief on the basis of your belief about lighting conditions. Nonetheless, your perceptual belief depends on the belief about lighting conditions: if the latter belief is not rational, your perceptual belief is not rational. Let us say that the belief about lighting conditions is rationally prior to the perceptual belief. Let us also say that the perceptual belief is rationally dependent on that belief. Let us call a belief that is not rationally dependent on any other belief autonomous. Perhaps perceptual beliefs that Cartesian conceptions take to be given in experience—beliefs such as “I am sensing something red” and “this sense-datum is red”—are autonomous.

It deserves emphasis that although autonomous beliefs are foundational, the converse does not hold. So, we can grant Cartesian conceptions the idea that autonomous beliefs are foundational but insist, in opposition to them, that foundational beliefs generally fail to be autonomous.17

15. Unlike “derivational dependence,” the relation “rational dependence” can hold across views, views accepted at different moments. Suppose that as you turn your gaze toward a yellow cube, you hear what you know to be expert testimony that lightning conditions are about to become highly abnormal. You experience a change in the cube’s color appearance, from yellow to a different one, and you go on to acquire the belief that the cube is yellow as well as the belief that the lighting conditions are highly abnormal. Here, your experience renders rational

17I discussed the two sorts of dependence, derivational and rational, in my 2019 Rutgers Epistemology Conference lecture, “Foundationalism and Empirical Reason.” I hope to publish this lecture in the near future.
transitions from (portions of) your antecedent view to (portions of) your subsequent view, views that differ from one another and are held at different moments of time. These transitions bring into play cross-temporal dependencies: the rationality of your perceptual belief that the cube is yellow depends on the rationality of your antecedent belief, held at an earlier moment, that the lighting conditions are normal, not on the rationality of the later belief about lighting conditions. Rational dependence can be inter-temporal whereas derivational dependence is invariably intra-temporal.

16. Let us take note of one other dependency relation. Suppose that before you looked at the yellow cube you had acquired the belief that the cube is orange, say on the basis of the testimony of your little daughter. After looking at the cube, you abandoned this belief and acquired instead the perceptual belief that the cube is yellow. Now, there is a rational transition from a portion of your antecedent view to the perceptual belief, a portion that includes such beliefs as “the cube is orange” and “the daughter said that the cube is orange.” There is a sense of “dependence”—explanatory dependence, as we may call it—in which your perceptual belief depends on the beliefs in this portion of your antecedent view. If one wished to understand why you accepted the perceptual belief, one would need to attend to these beliefs. Observe, though, that the dependence relation here is different from “rational dependence” and “derivational dependence.” The rationality of your perceptual belief does not depend on the rationality of (e.g.) the belief that the daughter said that the cube is orange. The latter belief may be irrational, but this irrationality will have no affect on the rationality of the perceptual belief. With “rational dependence” and “derivational dependence,” it is otherwise: if a rationally or derivationally prior belief is not rational then the belief is not rational, either.

There are yet other notions of dependence one can distinguish. Let the three notions isolated above—namely, derivational, rational, and explanatory dependence—suffice for the present.18

17. In conclusion, Marushak’s reading of the hypothetical given is right in seeing it as

18Various dialectical situations such as those in which one is defending a belief or is trying to establish it can bring yet further dependence relations into play.
differentiating sharply the roles of experience and belief in cognition. I have suggested above that it is best not to interpret the “transition” idea invoked in the hypothetical given as “support.” There is a variety of support and dependence relations, and these are best seen as holding between beliefs and elements of views, not between beliefs and whole views. The bearing of these relations on the rationality of perceptual belief is neither uniform nor straightforward.

References


