

# Entitlement, epistemic risk and scepticism

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## ABSTRACT

Crispin Wright maintains that we can acquire justification for our perceptual beliefs only if we have antecedent justification for ruling out any sceptical alternative. Wright contends that this fact doesn't elicit scepticism, for we are non-evidentially entitled to accept the negation of any sceptical alternative. Sebastiano Moruzzi has challenged Wright's contention by arguing that since our non-evidential entitlements don't remove the epistemic risk of our perceptual beliefs, they don't actually enable us to acquire justification for these beliefs. In this paper I show that Wright's responses to Moruzzi are ineffective and that Moruzzi's argument is validated by probabilistic reasoning. I also suggest that Wright cannot answer Moruzzi's challenge without endangering his epistemology of perception.

*Keywords:* epistemic entitlement; epistemic risk; perceptual justification; scepticism; Crispin Wright; Roger White.

Some of Crispin Wright's ideas have been playing a pivotal role in recent epistemological conversation. Wright maintains that we can acquire justification for our perceptual beliefs only if we have antecedent justification for ruling out any sceptical alternative. He contends that this fact doesn't elicit scepticism, for we are non-evidentially entitled to accept the negation of any sceptical alternative. Sebastiano Moruzzi has challenged Wright's contention by arguing that since our non-evidential entitlements don't remove the epistemic risk of our perceptual beliefs, they don't actually enable us to acquire justification for these beliefs. In this paper I show that Wright's responses to Moruzzi are ineffective and that Moruzzi's argument is validated by probabilistic reasoning. I also suggest that Wright cannot answer Moruzzi's challenge without endangering his epistemology of perception.

Wright (2004, 2007 and 2014) contends that the architecture of perceptual justification is such that:<sup>1</sup>

(PJ) A subject S's experience as if  $p$  gives S (defeasible) justification<sup>2</sup> for believing  $p$  only if S has antecedent justification for accepting  $\sim sh$ , where  $\sim sh$  is the logical negation of any sceptical alternative  $sh$  to  $p$ .<sup>3</sup>

(PJ) raises at least two concerns. To begin with, it looks at odds with everyday epistemic practices; one may thus doubt that (PJ) is true. Ordinarily, the reasons we attribute to ourselves or others for holding perceptual beliefs make no reference to sceptical alternatives. Imagine you have an experience as if the cat is on the mat. You would normally answer the question 'What reason do you have to believe that the cat is on the mat?' by saying 'I see it'. Responding 'I see it and have independent reason to rule out that I'm deceived by the Matrix' would appear out-of-place (cf. Pryor 2000 and McGrath 2013).

The second concern is that (PJ) prompts perceptual scepticism (cf. Pryor 2000 and Schiffer 2004). Consider a subject S experiencing as if ( $P$ ) the cat is on the mat. Suppose  $SH$  is the proposition that  $P$  is false but the Matrix makes S hallucinate as if  $P$ . The sceptic may adduce (PJ) to argue that S's experience as if  $P$  gives S justification for believing  $P$  only if S has antecedent justification for accepting  $\sim SH$ . The sceptic will insist that S cannot have this antecedent justification. For any *a posteriori* evidence S might happen to possess can be conjectured to be in turn a hallucinatory state caused by the Matrix. Furthermore, S doesn't have *a priori* evidence for  $\sim SH$ . So S has no evidence justifying her acceptance of  $\sim SH$ . The sceptic will conclude that S's experience as if  $P$  cannot justify S's belief that  $P$  and—by generalizing this example—that S's experiences cannot justify any of S's perceptual beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> White (2006) and Neta (2010) defend similar principles.

<sup>2</sup> By 'justification' I will always mean *propositional* (rather than *doxastic*) justification.

<sup>3</sup> I use small letters for propositional variable and capital letters for propositional constants.

To address the first concern, Wright has argued that the epistemological views that disallow (PJ), like Pryor (2000 and 2004)'s dogmatism, are in various ways problematic<sup>4</sup> (cf. Wright 2007). The only direct argument—and I think the most forceful case—for the truth of (PJ) is nonetheless a Bayesian one due to White (2006), who defends a view of the architecture of perceptual justification similar to Wright's. Let me outline White's argument, as I will use it later on. White adopts an entrenched model that construes epistemic justification as rational confidence. Let  $\Pr$  be a probability function interpreted subjectively.  $\Pr(p)$  expresses S's rational confidence that  $p$ .  $\Pr(p|q)$  expresses S's rational confidence that  $p$  conditional on S's learning  $q$ . Suppose  $E$  is the proposition that S has an experience as if ( $P$ ) the cat is on the mat, and  $SH$  is the proposition that  $P$  is false but the Matrix makes S hallucinate as if  $P$ . Since  $SH$  entails  $E$ , if S learns  $SH$ , S must be certain that  $E$ . Hence  $\Pr(E|SH) = 1$ . Since S shouldn't expect to experience as if the cat on the mat,  $\Pr(E) < 1$ . Thus  $\Pr(E|SH) > \Pr(E)$ . This inequality implies that  $\Pr(\sim SH|E) < \Pr(\sim SH)$ . Furthermore, since  $P$  entails  $\sim SH$ ,  $\Pr(P|E) \leq \Pr(\sim SH|E)$ . The last two inequalities imply by transitivity that  $\Pr(P|E) < \Pr(\sim SH)$ . This formula says that if S learns  $E$ , S's confidence in  $P$  must remain strictly smaller than S's prior confidence in  $\sim SH$ . Thus, S's learning  $E$  can make S rationally confident of  $P$ 's truth only if S is antecedently rationally confident of  $\sim SH$ 's truth. This shows that S's experiencing as if  $P$  can give S justification for believing  $P$  only if S has antecedent justification for accepting  $\sim SH$  (cf. 2006: 534-534). This argument can be reformulated to apply to any perceptual proposition  $p$ , any proposition  $e$  stating that S experiences as if  $p$ , and any correlated sceptical alternative  $sh$ . The conclusion is that

$$(PC) \Pr(p|e) < \Pr(\sim sh).$$

(PC) vindicates (PJ).

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, they would produce *easy justification* and infringe probability principles.

Although Wright often construes epistemic justification as rational confidence (see for instance 2014: 233-234), he hasn't explicitly adduced (PC) to support (PJ). Wright (2007: 42) has nevertheless levelled a Bayesian objection to Pryor's dogmatism consisting of a variant or incomplete version of White's argument.<sup>5</sup> So Wright would endorse this argument. Note that (PJ) takes S's evidence to be S's *experience as if p*, whereas (PC) takes S's evidence to be S's *reflective belief* that (*e*) she has an experience as if *p*. One could question whether S's belief that *e* constitutes a reliable model of S's experience as if *p* in epistemic evaluations (cf. Moretti 2016). Wright nevertheless doesn't distinguish between one's experience and one's reflective belief that one has an experience when discussing scepticism (cf. 2002, 2004, 2007 and 2014). Wright seems to share White (2006: 353) and Silins (2007: 120n17)'s conviction that one's experiences and one's reflective beliefs about one's experiences are interchangeable in most epistemic contexts.

To address the second concern—the worry that (PJ) elicits scepticism—Wright (2004, 2007 and 2014) admits that there is no or very little evidence in support of propositions like  $\sim SH$ . Yet he argues that there exists a type of *non-evidential*, epistemic justification—called by him *entitlement*—that all rational subjects possess by default for *accepting* the logical negation of any sceptical alternative.<sup>6</sup> Acceptance is an attitude more inclusive than belief. Belief entails acceptance but the reverse is false. Wright acknowledges that an entitlement to accept  $\sim SH$  is not one to *believe*  $\sim SH$ . For it is dubious that S could rationally believe a proposition with no or very little evidence for its truth (cf. 2004: 176). This thesis is widely held in epistemology nowadays (cf. Chignell 2017: §5). Wright suggests that the type of acceptance licensed by S's entitlements is *rational trust*, or a very similar attitude (cf. 2004: 194).

Wright's thesis that we are entitled to propositions like  $\sim SH$  has attracted criticism of various types (see McGlynn 2017 for a survey). For instance, some authors contend that what

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<sup>5</sup> The objection—which Wright attributes to Schiffer (2004)—says that the dogmatist is committed to maintaining that, for any *p* and *e*,  $\Pr(p|e)$  must be sufficiently high, but that she cannot provide a justification for the required value of  $\Pr(\sim sh)$  and other priors.

<sup>6</sup> More generally, for Wright, we are entitled to accept certain *hinge propositions* inclusive of these negations.

Wright calls entitlement isn't *epistemic* justification (cf. Pritchard 2005 and Jenkins 2007). Wright (2014) has made a good effort to address most of these objections. In the following, I concentrate on an important criticism made in discussion by Sebastiano Moruzzi (cf. Wright 2004: 208n 26), which hasn't properly been addressed.

Moruzzi's objection exploits the notion of *epistemic risk*. Wright emphasizes that whenever a proposition  $p$  is insufficiently supported by evidence, so that S cannot justifiedly *believe*  $p$ , S runs a risk in accepting  $p$ —the risk of accepting a proposition as true that is actually false. Since this type of risk is *incompatible* with S's justifiably believing and knowing  $p$ , Wright calls it *epistemic risk*. Note that S's accepting  $p$  can be epistemically risky even if  $p$  is *justified* by a non-evidential entitlement. For example, S's accepting  $\sim SH$  is epistemically risky though S is *entitled* to  $\sim SH$  (cf. Wright 2004: 208-209 and 2014: 228). Moruzzi's objection rests on the intuition that for any  $p$  and correlated sceptical alternative  $sh$ , the epistemic risk of  $\sim sh$  *transmits* to  $p$ . The objection says that since S's accepting  $\sim sh$  is epistemically risky despite S's entitlement to  $\sim sh$ , S's accepting  $p$  is also epistemically risky despite S's experiencing as if  $p$ . Consequently, S's justification for  $p$  depending on S's experience as if  $p$  (if any) cannot sustain S's belief that  $p$ . If this is true, S's entitlements might enable S to *trust* perceptual propositions, but they cannot enable S to *believe* them. The sceptical challenge invited by (PJ) would remain unanswered in this case.

Wright (2004) and Wright (2014) have respectively given Moruzzi's objection two different responses. In both papers Wright insists that no epistemic risk transmits from  $\sim sh$  to  $p$  but the reasons he adduces go in opposite directions. I now criticize both responses in turn.

Wright (2004: 207-209) argues that the intuition that the epistemic risk of  $\sim sh$  transmits to  $p$  is flawed because it relies on a false assumption.

Since the risk involved is that of acceptance of a proposition without knowledge of or evidential [justification] for its truth, the idea that the risk transfers from  $[\sim sh]$  to  $p$  is just the contrapositive of the idea that knowledge and evidential [justification] transmit from  $p$  to  $[\sim sh]$ . So interpreted, then, the worry about [epistemic risk] is just a version

of the discredited assumption that [justification] is unrestrictedly transmissive. (2014: 229)

Let's unpack this condensed explanation. The expression 'evidential justification' refers to justification depending on evidence (i.e. a belief or an experience) sufficient to sustain belief. Recall that  $p$  entails  $\sim sh$ . Wright (2002, 2003 and 2007) has argued that evidential justification doesn't always transmit across entailment. S's justification for  $p$  resting on evidence  $e$  transmits across the entailment from  $p$  to  $q$ —according to Wright—just in case (i) S has justification for believing  $p$  from  $e$ , (ii) S knows that  $p$  entails  $q$ , and (iii) S has justification for believing  $q$  in virtue of the truth of both (i) and (ii). Wright claims that (iii) remains unsatisfied whenever S's acquiring justification for believing  $p$  from  $e$  requires S to have antecedent justification for accepting  $q$ . Suppose for instance S has two identical copies,  $H$  and  $H^*$ , of *Hamlet*.  $O$  is the disjunctive proposition that *this* book looks like  $H$  or  $H^*$ .  $A$  is the proposition the book is actually  $H$ .  $B$  is the proposition that the book is *not*  $H^*$ . S's acquiring justification for believing  $A$  from  $O$  requires S to have antecedent justification for accepting  $B$ . Suppose that this requirement is met and that (i) S learns  $O$  thereby acquiring justification for believing  $A$ . Also suppose that (ii) S knows that  $A$  entails  $B$ . In these circumstances—according to Wright (2002, 2003 and 2007)—it is intuitive that S cannot acquire justification for believing  $B$  in virtue of the truth of (i) and (ii). So (iii) is false. This is a case of transmission failure. If (PJ) is true, the entailment from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$  should also instantiate transmission failure, for S's acquiring justification for believing  $p$  from her experience as if  $p$  requires S to possess antecedent justification for accepting  $\sim sh$  (cf. Wright 2007).

My best interpretation of Wright's passage quoted above is this: if you have the impression that the epistemic risk of  $\sim sh$  transmits to  $p$ , this is only because you *mistakenly* presuppose that evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive so that any evidential justification for  $p$  must transmit to  $\sim sh$ . In fact, if you presuppose this and realize that S doesn't have evidential justification for  $\sim sh$  because  $\sim sh$  is epistemically risky, you are bound to conclude—on pain of

contradiction—that S doesn't have justification for believing  $p$  either, which means that  $p$  is also epistemically risky.

This diagnosis is misguided because it confuses S's justification for  $\sim sh$  that S acquires upon experiencing as if  $p$  with S's antecedent justification for  $\sim sh$  resting on S's mere entitlement to  $\sim sh$ . Suppose you endorse both (PJ) and Wright's entitlement theory but presuppose that evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive. Imagine you realize that S lacks antecedent justification for believing  $\sim sh$ . Given your presupposition, you can still conclude without contradiction that S has justification for believing  $\sim sh$ —namely, evidential justification transmitted to  $\sim sh$  from  $p$ . In fact note that this justification transmitted to  $\sim sh$  is not antecedent justification for believing  $\sim sh$ , which S lacks, but justification that S is supposed to acquire when she experiences as if  $p$  and deduces  $\sim sh$  from  $p$ . Since you can conclude that S has evidential justification for  $\sim sh$ , you aren't bound to maintain that S lacks evidential justification for  $p$ , so that  $p$  is epistemically risky. This shows that the intuition that  $\sim sh$ 's epistemic risk transmits to  $p$  doesn't depend on presupposing (mistakenly or not) that evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive.

Wright (2014: 228-235) has given Moruzzi's objection a novel response. It says that no epistemic risk transmits from  $\sim sh$  to  $p$  because  $\sim sh$  is *not* epistemically risky after all. This response is also flawed.

Although Wright (2014) endorses (PJ), in this paper he concedes that evidential justification—when suitably qualified—*transmits* from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$ . Wright contends that (PJ) blocks the transmission of two types of justification. Firstly, no justification transmitted from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$  can be a *first-time* justification for accepting  $\sim sh$ . For S can acquire justification for  $p$  from experiencing as if  $p$  only if S has *already* justification for accepting  $\sim sh$ . Furthermore, no justification transmitted to  $\sim sh$  from  $p$  can *raise*  $\sim sh$ 's 'rational credibility'. For 'whatever limit

there was to the rational credibility of  $[\sim sh]$  as an object of trust ..., it remains as an upper bound on its rational credibility as an object of belief based on the appearance that  $[p]$ ' (2014: 233).<sup>7</sup> Wright argues that, nevertheless, (PJ) *doesn't* debar evidential justification from transmitting from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$  if the justification is neither a first time justification for accepting  $\sim sh$  nor one that boosts  $\sim sh$ 's credibility. Drawing from Hawthorne (2004: 39-40) and McGlynn (2014), Wright contends that this transmission can persuasively take place through a two-stage inference: suppose S has evidential justification for  $p$ . This justification will first transmit to the disjunction  $p \vee \sim sh$ , entailed by  $p$ . This is so, for Wright, because it is compelling that any justification for believing either disjunct of a disjunction is by itself justification for believing the disjunction. S's justification for  $p \vee \sim sh$  will then transfer to  $\sim sh$ , which is *a priori equivalent* to the disjunction (cf. 2014: 231-233). Wright thinks that since S is entitled to  $\sim sh$ , S will acquire justification for believing  $p$  from her experience as if  $p$ , and this evidential justification will transfer to  $\sim sh$ . This would show that Moruzzi's challenge ultimately *dissolves*, as 'we no longer have the assumption in place that there can be no evidential [justification] for  $[\sim sh]$ ' (2014: 235).<sup>8</sup> In other words, we no longer have the assumption in place that  $\sim sh$  is epistemically risky.

This response to Moruzzi puts the cart before the horse. Wright contends that evidential justification *can* transmit from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$ . Suppose his explanation is correct. Evidential justification *will* transmit from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$  only if S does have evidential justification for  $p$  in the first instance. But Moruzzi's objection was precisely that S couldn't have this justification. Given that S's entitlement to  $\sim sh$  cannot remove  $\sim sh$ 's epistemic risk and this risk—according to Moruzzi—transmits to  $p$ ,  $p$  must be epistemically risky when S experiences as if  $p$ . So S's justification for  $p$  based on S's

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<sup>7</sup> This claim is vindicated by White's model, as  $\Pr(\sim sh|e) < \Pr(\sim sh)$ .

<sup>8</sup> Precisely, Wright maintains that (what he calls) the *leaching problem* dissolves, but Moruzzi's challenge is the only version of the leaching problem analyzed in his paper (cf. 2014: 228-229).

experience as if  $p$  (if any) will be unable to sustain S's belief that  $p$ . Hence, there will be no evidential justification to be transmitted from  $p$  to  $\sim sh$  in the first instance.

Although Wright's responses to Moruzzi are ineffective, we cannot conclude yet that Moruzzi's objection goes through. For Moruzzi's claim that  $\sim sh$ 's epistemic risk transmits to  $p$  hasn't been substantiated. Let me show that this claim can be validated through (PC). Take any perceptual proposition  $p$ , a proposition  $e$  stating that S experiences as if  $p$ , and any correlated sceptical alternative  $sh$ . The term 'risk' is customarily taken to refer to *the probability of an unwanted event*, where 'probability' can be interpreted subjectively (cf. Hansson 2018: §§1, 2). Accordingly, the degree of  $sh$ 's epistemic risk for S, expressed by  $R_s(sh)$ , can be identified with  $\Pr(\sim sh)$ . And the degree of  $p$ 's epistemic risk given  $e$  for S, expressed by  $R_s(p|e)$ , can be identified with  $\Pr(\sim p|e)$ . Since  $R_s(p|e) = \Pr(\sim p|e)$  and  $R_s(sh) = \Pr(\sim sh)$ , it is easy to prove that (PC)  $\Pr(p|e) < \Pr(\sim sh)$  is equivalent to

$$(RS) R_s(p|e) > R_s(\sim sh).$$

(RS) validates Moruzzi's claim that  $\sim sh$ 's epistemic risk transmits to  $p$ . In fact, suppose  $r$  is a threshold value that, if exceeded, the acceptance of the relevant proposition is epistemically risky for S. (RS) entails that if  $R_s(\sim sh) > r$ , then  $R_s(p|e) > r$ . This means that if accepting  $\sim sh$  on the basis of a non-evidential entitlement (and so prior to learning  $e$ ) is epistemically risky for S, accepting  $p$  upon learning  $e$  is also epistemically risky for S.

To conclude, since it is very plausible that the epistemic risk of  $\sim sh$  transmits to  $p$ , Wright's entitlement theory appears unable to neutralize the sceptical challenge arising from (PJ). Wright might still have space for manoeuvre though. He could try to argue that White's Bayesian model is unreliable or misleading. For instance, he might contend that probability calculus is ill-suited to model our rational confidence when we reflect on outlandish conjectures like those adduced by the

sceptic.<sup>9</sup> If this line of response were to succeed, however, Wright should drop the apparently convincing case for (PJ) made by White. One way or another, Wright's epistemology of perception would be endangered.

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<sup>9</sup> Wright might join Weatherston (2007) in arguing that sceptical conjectures (and their negations) are *uncertain* rather than *risky*—in accordance with Keynes (1937)'s distinction—and that standard probability calculus cannot model uncertainty.

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