

Problems for Wright's entitlement theory

Luca Moretti
l.moretti@abdn.ac.uk
University of Aberdeen

ABSTRACT

Crispin Wright's entitlement theory holds that we have non-evidential justification for accepting propositions of a general type—which Wright calls “cornerstones”—that enables us to acquire justification for believing other propositions—those that we take to be true on the grounds of ordinary evidence. Entitlement theory is meant by Wright to deliver a forceful response to the sceptic who argues that we cannot justify ordinary beliefs. I initially focus on strategic entitlement, which is one of the types of entitlement that Wright has described in more detail. I suggest that it is dubious that we are strategically entitled to accept cornerstones. After this, I focus on entitlement in general. I contend that, in important cases, non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones cannot secure evidential justification for believing ordinary propositions. My argument rests on a probabilistic regimentation of the so-called “leaching problem”.

Keywords: scepticism, epistemic entitlement, epistemic justification, epistemic risk, epistemic consequentialism, Crispin Wright

1. Introduction

Crispin Wright's *entitlement theory* holds that we have non-evidential justification for accepting propositions of a general type—which Wright calls “cornerstones”—that enables us to acquire justification for believing other propositions—those that we take to be true on the grounds of ordinary evidence. Entitlement theory is meant by Wright to deliver a forceful response to the sceptic who argues that we cannot justify ordinary beliefs.

In the following, I initially focus on *strategic* entitlement, which is one of the types of entitlement that Wright has described in more detail. Against Wright, I submit that it is dubious that we are strategically entitled to accept cornerstones. For we are strategically entitled to do so only if a longstanding and apparently plausible view about the ultimate epistemic goal—veritic dual goal monism—is false. After this, I focus on entitlement in general. I contend that non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones in important cases cannot secure evidential justification for

believing ordinary propositions. My argument rests on probabilistic regimentation of the so-called “leaching problem”. This criticism potentially strikes all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once, as each of them is supposed to be a type of non-evidential justification.

The paper is organized as follows: in §2, I introduce Wright’s view of epistemic scepticism and Wright’s response to the sceptic based on entitlement theory—the emphasis is on strategic entitlement. In §3, I suggest that it is uncertain that we are strategically entitled to accept cornerstones. In §4, I contend that, in important cases, non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones cannot secure evidential justification for believing ordinary propositions. In §5, I conclude the paper.

2. Entitlement theory as a response to the sceptic

Wright (2004, 2007, 2012, 2014) contends that there is a type of defeasible epistemic justification for accepting propositions—called by him “epistemic entitlement” or simply “entitlement”—which all rational subjects possess by default. Epistemic entitlements are

Grounds, or reasons, to accept a proposition that consist neither in the possession of evidence for its truth, nor in the occurrence of any kind of cognitive achievement—for example, being in a perceptual state that represents it to one that *P*, or seeming to recollect that *P*—which would normally be regarded as apt to ground knowledge or justified belief that *P*. (Wright 2014: 214)¹

In short, epistemic entitlements are *non-evidential* and *unearned* justifications, for they are not based on any a priori or a posteriori information or cognitive accomplishment of the subject.

¹ For other epistemologists who have defended notions of entitlement similar to Wright’s see Altschul (2020) and Graham *et al.* (2020).

Because of this feature, according to Wright, epistemic entitlements enable us to defuse sceptical arguments of an important type that recurs in philosophy. In the following, I first describe these sceptical arguments, and then how our entitlements would enable us to neutralize them.

2.1 Cornerstones, scepticism and epistemic entitlements

For Wright, a proposition is a *cornerstone* for a given region of thought just in case “it would follow from a lack of [independent] warrant for it that one could not rationally claim [possession of] warrant for *any* belief in the region” (2004: 167-168).² I give examples of cornerstones below. By “warrant” Wright refers to a disjunctive notion of justification that encompasses both evidential/earned justification and non-evidential/unearned justification (cf. 2004: 178 and 209). Since the word “warrant” has been given quite different meanings in epistemology, I prefer to use the more generic term “justification” to refer to both evidential/earned and non-evidential/unearned justification. Being able to rationally claim justification for a belief *B* means—for Wright—being able to substantiate a claim that one has justification for *B* “in a context of rational discussion and adduction of evidence, commonly recognized—very much as a claim to innocence, or guilt, may be [substantiated] in the forum of a court of law” (2014: 220). Lack of justification for a cornerstone *C* would prevent us from rationally claiming justification for any belief *B* in the relevant region of thought because—according to Wright—doubting *C* (absent other relevant information) tends to *undermine the rational force of the evidence* in favour of *B* (cf. 2004: 174 and 2014: 217-218). Thus, more precisely, for Wright, lack of justification for *C* would prevent us from both *acquiring* and rationally claiming justification for *B*.³

² In more recent papers, Wright uses the terms “presuppositions” and “authenticity conditions” to refer to cornerstones (and less general propositions with similar epistemic functions).

³ Some passages in Wright’s papers antecedent to Wright (2014) can be interpreted as if Wright contends that lack of justification for *C* would prevent us from rationally claiming justification for *B*, but *not* from acquiring justification for *B*. Wright (2014)’s conception of entitlements as *epistemic rights* (see below) is no longer open to this interpretation, as it is primarily meant to account for acquisition of justification rather than claiming justification. See McGlynn (2017).

The general type of sceptical argument that our epistemic entitlements would enable us to defuse depends on two premises. The first says that some proposition *C* that we routinely accept as true is in fact a cornerstone for a given region of discourse *D*. The second premise says that we cannot have independent justification for believing *C*. From these two premises the sceptic concludes that we cannot acquire justification for believing any proposition in *D*, and thus we cannot rationally claim justification for any of these propositions. Schematically:

(SCEPTICISM)

(A) *C* is a cornerstone for the propositions in *D*.

(B) We cannot have independent justification for *C*.

(C) We cannot acquire and so rationally claim justification for any proposition in *D*.

One might wonder why the sceptic should aim to conclude that we cannot rationally *claim* justification. This is so because Wright interprets the sceptic as issuing a *higher-order* challenge: if her argument goes through, what is crucially put in doubt is our right to *claim* justified belief and knowledge (cf. 2004: 210-211 and 2014: 220). Although I don't find this reading implausible, for the sake of simplicity, hereafter I will only concentrate on possession of justification.

Wright (2004) considers two different strategies to support (B), which he calls the *Cartesian* and the *Humean* one, from the names of philosophers who arguably used instances of them. The Cartesian sceptic identifies *C* with a proposition stating that we are *not* cognitively detached from reality in a certain way. For example, *C* could be the proposition that our sensory experiences are normally reliable, or the fancier proposition that we aren't globally hallucinated by a malevolent demon (or the *Matrix*). So interpreted, *C* is a cornerstone for the class *D* of all propositions about perceivable facts. For it is intuitive—or so the sceptic would argue—that if we lacked independent justification for *C*, none of our perceptual experiences could provide us with justification for

believing any proposition in *D*. The Cartesian sceptic argues that we cannot have antecedent justification for *C* because we could only acquire it by performing some *empirical* procedure (e.g. verifying that others normally experience what we experience), which could yield justification for *C* only if we were justified in taking the execution of the procedure itself to have happened in the *real* world, rather than in our hallucination of it. But, clearly, this requirement could be satisfied only if we had *already* acquired justification for *C* (cf. 2004: 168-169).

The strategy of the Humean sceptic, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily play with a scenario of cognitive detachment from reality, but it makes a case that certain epistemic practices involve vicious circularity. This strategy is exemplified by a possible reconstruction of Hume's inductive scepticism. Suppose *C* says that our world abounds in natural regularities, and *D* is the class of all generalizations in form

All *F*s are *G*s,

ranging on a potentially infinite number of cases, where *F* and *G* refer to distinct and observable natural properties. The best evidence for the truth of any such generalization is presumably a proposition having form:

(*O*) Very many *F*s observed in different circumstances are *G*s, and no observed *F* is not *G*.

Yet it appears true that the inductive inference from a justified proposition of type *O* to a generalization in *D* can produce justification for the generalization only if there is independent justification for accepting *C*—or so the sceptic would say. Note that *C* is, in this setting, a cornerstone for the generalizations in *D*. Hume can be interpreted as contending that we cannot have independent justification for *C* because we could get this justification for *C* only by

deductively inferring C from some independently justified generalization in D . But this could happen only if we had *already* acquired justification for C (cf. 2004: 169-70).

The Humean path of reasoning can be used to foster various forms of scepticism—for instance about the existence of the external world, other minds, and the past. Let me consider the first type of scepticism, which is the most discussed in philosophy. (The reader can easily work out how the Humean strategy supports other types of scepticism.) Suppose D is the class of all propositions about ordinarily perceivable facts, and C says that there exists a material world. Take any proposition P in D —for instance, the Moorean one that this is a hand. Our best evidence for believing P is presumably an experience that P . The Humean sceptic would argue that this experience could give one justification for believing P only if one had independent justification for C . The Humean sceptic would contend that one cannot possibly have independent justification for C because one could acquire justification for C only by deductively inferring C from some independently justified proposition in D . But this could happen only if one had *already* acquired justification for C (cf. 2004: 170-174).

Wright acknowledges that (SCEPTICISM) is valid. Furthermore, he maintains that there are actually cornerstones for important areas of discourse—for instance, about perceivable reality, other minds, and the past. He thus acknowledges that many instances of premise (A) of (SCEPTICISM) are true. Nevertheless, Wright rejects the correlated instances of premise (B) as false. He contends that in these cases we normally possess justification for C , and that neither the Cartesian nor the Humean way to argue can show that the contrary is true.

Wright thinks that the Cartesian way to argue and the Humean way to argue share the same lacuna. In both cases the sceptic insists that we cannot have justification for C because we cannot acquire it on the basis of evidence. In doing so, the sceptic overlooks the possibility that we might have *unearned, non-evidential* justification for C —i.e. an *epistemic entitlement* to accept C . Since—according to Wright—we normally have such justification, (B) is normally false,

irrespective of the Cartesian or Humean sceptic's contentions. Thus, most instances of (SCEPTICISM) are unsound. In all these cases, we have (and can rationally claim) justification for believing *P*.

Note that an epistemic entitlement to *accept C* cannot be an epistemic entitlement to *believe C*, for it is hard to understand how one could rationally believe a proposition without having evidence for its truth (cf. 2004: 176). Indeed, Wright thinks of acceptance as an attitude more general than belief. Acceptance includes, as sub-cases, belief and cognate notions—for instance, the notions of *taking for granted* that *X* is true,⁴ *acting on the assumption* that *X* is true,⁵ and *trusting* that *X* is true on reasons that don't bear on the likely truth of *X* (cf. 2004: 177). When Wright says that we are entitled to accept a cornerstone *C*, he means that we are entitled to *trust C* in the last sense. So, “entitlement is rational trust” (2004: 194).

It is instructive to examine how Wright arrives at selecting trust. To play the epistemic role that it is supposed to play in the architecture of epistemic justification, the sought notion of acceptance must be—so to speak—a very close surrogate of the notion of belief, in the sense that it should retain or closely replicate as many as possible rational features proper to belief. For instance, a thinker *S*'s accepting *C* must commit *S* to accepting *C*'s consequences in the same way as *S*'s believing that *C* commits *S* to believing *C*'s consequences. Also, *S*'s accepting *C* must be incompatible with *S*'s *doubting C* in the same way in which *S*'s believing *C* is incompatible with doubting *C*. This second requirement is crucial to Wright's response to the sceptic, for if *S doubted* a cornerstone *C*, *S* couldn't rationally believe any proposition *P* in the region of thought depending on *C* even if she had evidence appropriate to *P*. For *S* would be rationally committed to *doubting P*

⁴ In the same sense in which a judge in a court of law is required to take it for granted that the defendant is innocent until proven guilty.

⁵ In the same sense in which people say that when one drives a car one should prudently act on the assumption that the other drivers are nothing but dangerous fools.

as well.⁶ The only notion of accepting a proposition C close to the notion of believing C that satisfies the requirement of being incompatible with doubting C is—according to Wright—trusting C (cf. 2004: 194-195).

As said, there is however an important feature of belief that the notion of trust cannot retain or replicate. Let me stress this again, as this will be crucial in ensuing discussion. Belief is a mental state essentially constrained by *evidence*, but trust does not have this feature. Cornerstones are such that—according to Wright—one can rationally trust them *even if one has no evidence for their truth*. This sharply contrasts with belief. For it is counterintuitive that one can rationally *believe* a proposition when one has no evidence for its truth (cf. 2004: 181-183 and 194).

Wright (2004) individuated four ways in which epistemic entitlement could arise, which he calls “strategic entitlement”, “entitlement of cognitive project”, “entitlement of rational deliberation”, and “entitlement of substances”. Only the first two types of entitlement have been described in some details by Wright. In the remainder of this section and in the next section, I concentrate on strategic entitlement.

2.2 Strategic entitlement

Wright (2014) has refined the notion of strategic entitlement and defended it from various objections. Saying that a strategy ST of a rational agent S is the *dominant* strategy with respect to a set of alternative strategies available to S and given S 's goals or values is saying that, in every possible situation, ST does at least as well as its alternatives and, in at least some situation, ST does better. Consider for example Robinson Crusoe starving in a desert island. His main goal is to survive. For him, eating a fruit that he has found is the dominant strategy with respect to not eating

⁶ Since belief is often involuntary, S may nevertheless come to believe P , but this belief would not be rational or fully rational. See Wright (2014: 227-228) for discussion.

it, for if he eats it, he will survive if the fruit is edible, and he will die if it is poisonous. But if he doesn't eat it, he will die of starvation in any case.

Consider now a rational agent *S* and a cornerstone *C*. Wright claims that since *S* has no evidence in favour or against *C*, *S* is in a situation analogous to Robinson Crusoe's with respect to whether or not she should trust *C*. He suggests that by switching from practical to *epistemic* goals, it is possible to show—via reasoning essentially similar to the Robinson Crusoe case—that *S* has *epistemic* justification for trusting *C*. Wright calls *strategic entitlement* any justification of this type. In characterising strategic entitlement, Wright appeals to *epistemic consequentialist* intuitions (cf. Jenkins 2007, Pedersen 2009 and 2020, and Elstein and Jenkins 2020).⁷ Epistemic consequentialism holds that—roughly—the epistemic standing of a belief or acceptance of *S*—e.g. its being rational or justified—is determined by the (expected) epistemic consequences of *S*'s having that belief or acceptance.

Let's see how strategic entitlement works in more details. Wright stipulates that *S* is strategically entitled to accept a proposition *P* just in case: (i) *S* has no sufficient reason to believe that *P* is true or false, and (ii) regardless of *S*'s context, to accept *P* is for *S* a dominant strategy (cf. 2004: 182-184), where “to accept *P*” specifically means “to *trust P*” (cf. 2004: 194 and 2014: §11.3). Wright's model of strategic entitlement is inspired by a non-orthodox interpretation of Reichenbach's vindication of induction (cf. 2014: 226),⁸ one that reads Reichenbach's argument as aiming to provide a non-evidential, epistemic reason for *trusting* the cornerstone that

(CI) Inductive methods are truth-conducive.

⁷ Wright (2014: 239n39) insists that his appeal to these intuitions doesn't commit him to embracing epistemic consequentialism as a general conception of epistemic justification.

⁸ See especially Reichenbach (1938: §38). For a more faithful reconstruction of Reichenbach's vindication, see Salmon (1991).

This is my best re-construction of Wright's argument:

(INDUCTION)

(a₁) Regardless of the context, it is for us epistemically valuable to form many true beliefs about the future.

(b₁) Suppose nature is regular. If we trust *CI* and use inductive methods, we⁹ will form many true beliefs about the future. Whereas if we don't trust *CI*, we won't form many true beliefs about the future. Suppose nature is not regular. In this case, whether or not we trust *CI*, we won't form many true beliefs about the future.

Therefore:

(c₁) Regardless of the context, trusting *CI* is for us a dominant strategy.

Furthermore:

(d₁) We have no sufficient reason to believe that *CI* is true or false.

Therefore:

(e₁) We are strategically entitled to trust *CI*. (Cf. 2014: 227)

Wright thinks that a similar strategy can be deployed to respond to other forms of scepticism—for instance, external world scepticism (cf. 2004: 186). Consider the cornerstone:

(C₂) We are not constantly hallucinated by a malevolent demon.

Although Wright doesn't explicitly formulate an argument to show that we are strategically entitled to trust *C₂*, he would presumably propose one like this:

⁹ In (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) "we" is to be read as "we as rational thinkers".

(ANTI-DEMON)

(a₂) Regardless of the context, it is for us epistemically valuable to form many true perceptual beliefs.

(b₂) Suppose our sense organs are normally reliable. If we trust *C2* (together with the negation of any other similar sceptical conjecture) and use perception, we will form many true perceptual beliefs. Whereas if we don't trust *C2*, we won't form many true perceptual beliefs. Suppose our sense organs aren't normally reliable. In this case, whether or not we trust *C2*, we won't form many true perceptual beliefs.

Therefore:

(c₂) Regardless of the context, trusting *C2* is for us a dominant strategy.

Furthermore:

(d₂) We have no sufficient reason to believe that *C2* is true or false.

Therefore:

(e₂) We are strategically entitled to trust *C2*.

No doubt, (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) are open to criticism.¹⁰ I consider some objections in the next sections. Here, let me dwell on a possible general concern about Wright's epistemology. Wright's conception of the architecture of epistemic justification—involving cornerstones and epistemic entitlements—may appear contrived or distant from actual epistemic practices. But it is not necessarily so. To clarify how epistemic entitlements come into play, Wright (2014: 221-222 and 243) draws a comparison with the notion of civil right. An agent need not

¹⁰ For example, Pritchard (2005) and Jenkins (2007) contend that Wright's arguments can at best show that we have *pragmatic* reasons to trust cornerstones, but not epistemic reasons. Wright (2014) tries to cope with this criticism. Furthermore, Elstein and Jenkins (2020) suggest a way to respond to it on Wright's behalf. See Pedersen (2020) for discussion. For further objections, see Tucker (2009), Volpe (2012), Williams (2012 and 2013) and McGlynn (2015).

know or even conceive of her civil rights in order to have them. When she acts in ways that her rights mandate, her actions are in good standing even if she is unaware that they are so. According to Wright, epistemic entitlements determine *epistemic* rights that have analogue features in the sphere of action constituted by the formation and management of belief. Suppose for example there is a general entitlement to trust that one's own sensory faculties are reliable in the absence of contrary evidence. Accordingly, even those who have no conception of their sensory faculties (e.g. very young children), but who forms beliefs spontaneously in response to their sense experience, are acting in accordance with their epistemic rights. Thus, they are justified in entertaining those beliefs even if they don't place trust in the relevant cornerstones. Only mature agents, when challenged to give justification for their perceptual beliefs, may become aware that they need to trust cornerstones and that they are entitled to do so.

3. Problems for strategic entitlement

As Pedersen (2009) has shown, a basic problem for strategic entitlement is that anti-sceptical arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON), which appeal to dominance, look invalid.¹¹

Let me detail a version of Pedersen's objection. According to Wright (2004), a subject *S* is strategically entitled to trust a cornerstone *C* just in case *S* has no evidence for or against *C* and, regardless of the context, trusting *C* is a dominant strategy for *S*.

Note that it is plausible that *S* has more than one context-independent goals at once. In order to establish whether a strategy *ST* of *S* dominates *S*'s alternative strategies irrespective of the context, we cannot thus consider only one of *S*'s context-independent goals. For these goals may push in opposite directions, to the effect that if *ST* dominates its alternatives in light of *one* of *S*'s context-independent goals, *ST* may not dominate them in light of *all* context-independent goals of *S*

¹¹ Pedersen (2009) nominally criticises entitlement of cognitive project, but his objection hits strategic entitlement too.

taken together. That ST of S dominates its alternatives irrespective of the context must thus mean that, *considering all context-independent goals of S* , ST does at least as well as its alternatives in every possible situation and does better in at least some situation.

One might observe that Wright is interested in individuating dominant strategies only with respect to *epistemic* goals of S . But this doesn't change much. To determine whether a strategy of S dominates its alternatives irrespective of the context, we must then consider all context-independent *epistemic* goals of S .

Now take (INDUCTION). Since premise (a₁) describes just one of our context-independent epistemic goals, (c₁) cannot follow logically from (a₁) and (b₁) through the notion of dominant strategy properly characterized. So (INDUCTION) is invalid. The same holds true of (ANTI-DEMON). Since premise (a₂) describes just one of our context-independent epistemic goals, (c₂) doesn't follow from (a₂) and (b₂) through the notion of dominant strategy. Thus (ANTI-DEMON) is also invalid.

A complaint might be that I have given no evidence that our context-independent epistemic goals conflict with one another. Here is some evidence. Take again (ANTI-DEMON). The only context-independent epistemic goal mentioned in (ANTI-DEMON) is forming many true perceptual beliefs. This seems to be a context-independent epistemic goal that we actually have. Consider however the different epistemic goal of not forming many *false* perceptual beliefs. This looks like another context-independent epistemic goal of ours. For when it comes to our beliefs about our environment, we *generally* care about avoiding errors as much as we care about getting things right. To show that these two epistemic goals actually conflict, let's replace (a₂) in (ANTI-DEMON) with:

- (a₂*) Regardless of the context, it is for us epistemically valuable both (i) to form many true perceptual beliefs and (ii) not to form many false perceptual beliefs.

Remember that a crucial step in (ANTI-DEMON), in order to infer that trusting $C2$ is for us a dominant strategy, was the intermediate conclusion that if our sense organs aren't normally reliable, not trusting $C2$ does no better than trusting $C2$. If it had turned out that in this case not trusting $C2$ does better than trusting $C2$, the conclusion would have been that trusting $C2$ is *not* a dominant strategy for us. But this is exactly what happens when (a_2) is replaced by (a_2^*) . Suppose our sense organs aren't normally reliable. If we trust $C2$ (together with the negation of any other similar sceptical conjecture) and use perception, we will form many false beliefs about our environment and, perhaps, only a few true beliefs about it. So, we will satisfy neither the goal of not forming many false perceptual beliefs nor the goal of forming many true perceptual beliefs. But if we don't trust $C2$, we won't form many perceptual beliefs—so neither true nor *false* perceptual beliefs. In this case, we will satisfy at least the goal of not forming many false perceptual beliefs. If our sense organs aren't normally reliable, in light of (a_2^*) , *not* trusting $C2$ does better than trusting $C2$. Hence, when (a_2) is replaced with (a_2^*) , trusting $C2$ is *not* a dominant strategy for us.

Parallel considerations apply to (INDUCTION) to the conclusion that trusting $C1$ isn't actually a dominant strategy for us. This becomes apparent when (a_1) is replaced by the following proposition: regardless of the context, it is for us epistemically valuable both (i) to form many true beliefs about the future and (ii) not to form many false beliefs about the future. It seems plausible that the same negative result obtains for most, if not all, cornerstones. The reason is this: given a cornerstone C for a region of discourse D such that forming many true D -beliefs is a context-independent goal of ours, it is *typically* the case that not forming many false D -beliefs is

also a context-independent goal of ours.^{12, 13} Suppose *D* is the area of discourse about the past. It appears true that, irrespective of the context, it is for us epistemically valuable both to form many true beliefs about the past and not to form many false beliefs about it. This strongly suggests that dominance arguments are ill-suited to show that we are entitled to accept cornerstones. If we actually possess epistemic justification for trusting cornerstones—as Wright contends—it is dubious that this justification comes from strategic entitlement.

Let's consider a possible response. Pedersen (2020: 306) calls *veritic dual goal monism* the view that forming true beliefs and avoiding forming false beliefs are the sole ultimate epistemic goals we have. He contends that if a type of epistemic *pluralism* is true, in alternative to veritic dual goal *monism*, then rational subjects can actually have non-evidential, epistemic justification for accepting cornerstones.

The type of pluralism invoked by Pedersen (2020) maintains that the set of our epistemic goals is not exhausted by forming many true beliefs and not forming many false beliefs. It also encompasses independent epistemic goals such as forming many *coherent* beliefs and many *metacognitively truth-linked* beliefs. Unlike truth and error-avoidance, coherence and metacognitive truth-link don't depend on the world for their realization. Whether or not they are realized is determined internally, by our attitudes. Coherence is a property of certain systems of beliefs that rests on features such as logical consistency, probabilistic consistency, and inferential and explanatory connections between the beliefs. Metacognitive truth-link is a sort of metacognitive coherence. To simplify a bit, according to Pedersen, *S*'s belief *B* is metacognitively truth-linked if and only if *S* could coherently take her forming *B* to be an instance of truth-seeking

¹² Factoring in possible weights for these two epistemic goals wouldn't break the ties, since these weights are intuitively the same.

¹³ Pedersen (2020: 306-307) suggests that there is good reason to care about avoiding false beliefs once we care about having true beliefs. If attaining many true beliefs were the sole epistemic goal, it would be *too* easy for us to achieve it. We could do so by being extremely epistemically irresponsible—for instance, by believing everything we are told. But this seems epistemically inappropriate, for we would also acquire many *false* beliefs.

enquiry (whether or not it's *actually* an instance of it). *S* can do this just in case *S* accepts all the cornerstones relevant to *B* (cf. 2020: 309).

Let us go back to (ANTI-DEMON). Suppose our context-independent epistemic goals associated with perceptual enquiry are four: (i) to form many true perceptual beliefs, (ii) to not form many false perceptual beliefs, (iii) to form many coherent perceptual beliefs, and (iv) to form many metacognitively truth-linked perceptual beliefs. Pedersen maintains that if these are our context-independent epistemic goals, then we have epistemic, non-evidential reason to trust *C2*. His argument appeals to the promotion or maximization of context-independent epistemic value. The key idea is that if (i)-(iv) constitute our context-independent epistemic goals, accepting *C2* and forming perceptual beliefs promotes epistemic value more than not accepting *C2* and not forming perceptual beliefs.

Here is a simplified version of Pedersen's reasoning. Suppose we accept *C2* (together with any other cornerstone for perceptual beliefs), and so we form perceptual beliefs. If our perception is normally reliable, we will satisfy (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv). If our perceptual faculties aren't normally reliable, we will acquire many false perceptual beliefs that will nevertheless satisfy both (iii) and (iv). On the other hand, suppose we don't accept *C2* and so acquire no or only a few perceptual beliefs. Whether or not our sensory faculties are reliable, we will satisfy only (ii). Now, suppose that the overall epistemic value of a strategy equals the sum of the epistemic goals achieved by it across alternative states of the world. Accepting *C2* and forming perceptual beliefs scores 4 if our perception is normally reliable, and 2 if our perception is not so. Thus, the epistemic value of this strategy is 6. On the other hand, not trusting *C2* and not forming perceptual beliefs scores 1 if our perception is normally reliable, and 1 if our perception is not so. Thus, the epistemic value of this strategy is just 2. Pedersen (2020: 308-313 and 323-324) concludes that since our accepting *C2* promotes epistemic value more than our not accepting *C2*, we should rationally accept *C2*.

Although Pedersen describes his argument as based on the maximization of epistemic value, it could be re-described as one based on dominance. In the setting described above, accepting *C2* is in fact a dominant strategy of ours.

Does all this substantiate Wright's claim that we are strategically entitled to accept cornerstones? Let me doubt it.¹⁴ The conclusion that we should rationally accept *C2* is correct only if veritic dual goal monism is false. However, not every philosopher would concede this. Quite the opposite, many epistemologists endorse veritic dual goal monism because they find it very plausible in itself and superior to its alternatives. See for instance—among many others—James (1889), Foley (1987), Alston (1989), Goldman (1999), David (2005) and Olsson (2007). These epistemologists would probably insist that if coherence and metacognitive truth-link are epistemic goals, this is so because they are *instrumental* epistemic goals. In other words, they would claim that if coherence and metacognitive truth-link are epistemically valuable, they are so only insofar as they facilitate the formation of many true beliefs or the avoidance of many false beliefs, which are the sole *final*, context-independent epistemic goals.¹⁵ In this case, our accepting *C2* and forming perceptual beliefs doesn't promote epistemic value more than our not accepting *C2* and forming perceptual beliefs. In fact, suppose we trust *C2* and form perceptual beliefs. If our sense organs are normally reliable, we satisfy (i), (ii), (iii) and (iv). However, if the satisfaction of (iii) and (iv) is valuable only as a means to satisfy (i) and (ii), and the latter are *already* satisfied, the fulfilment of (iii) and (iv) produces no extra-epistemic value. On the other hand, if our sense organs aren't normally reliable, S satisfies only (iii) and (iv). However, if the satisfaction of (iii) and (iv) is valuable only as a means to fulfilling (i) and (ii), and the latter are not satisfied, the satisfaction of (iii) and (iv) produces no epistemic value. In conclusion, the overall epistemic value

¹⁴ Pedersen (2020) ultimately doesn't think this either. Pedersen takes his argument to show that epistemic entitlement is simply consequentialist justification and not a special type of non-evidential justification, as Wright claims (cf. 315-323).

¹⁵ For useful discussion on the instrumental/final epistemic goal dichotomy see Bondy (2020).

of accepting *C*2 and forming perceptual beliefs scores 2, as it is determined only by the satisfaction of (i) and (ii). This is the same as the overall epistemic value of not accepting *C*2 and not forming perceptual beliefs, which is determined by (ii)'s being satisfied twice.

4. A general problem for epistemic entitlement

I now argue that since entitlements to trust cornerstones are *non-evidential* justifications, they cannot secure justification for *believing* the propositions that depend epistemically on them. I show that this is true at least in certain important cases. This criticism potentially strikes all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once, for all of them are supposed to be forms of non-evidential justification. This objection—if successful—shows that entitlement theory doesn't offer an effective response to the sceptic. For it doesn't help reject the sceptic's claim that we have no justification for *believing* ordinary propositions.

My objection turns on the so-called problem of *leaching*, discussed for the first time in Wright (2004) and Davies (2004). Suppose *C* is a cornerstone for a proposition *P*. Wright contends that if *S* has justification for *accepting C* (and the other relevant cornerstones), *S* can have justification for believing *P*. Recall that "acceptance" is, for Wright, a generic label for propositional attitudes that refers to either *belief* or *trust*. Wright endorses the widespread epistemological view—which I find plausible—according to which rational *belief* in a proposition requires *evidence* supporting its truth. Since the truth of no cornerstones can be supported by evidence, Wright concludes that cornerstones can only be rationally trusted, but not believed. This engenders the leaching problem: Wright insists that *S* can rationally *believe P* when *S* possesses evidence for *P* even if *S* can only rationally *trust* but *not believe C*. It is intuitive, however, that *S*'s rational *belief* in *P* requires *S* to be able to rationally *believe C* too. *S* cannot rationally believe *P* when *S* possesses evidence for *P* if *S* can only rationally trust *C*. So, there seems to be something amiss in Wright's entitlement theory (cf. Davies 2004: 222).

The leaching problem becomes even more tangible when it is formulated in terms of *epistemic risk*.¹⁶ If a cornerstone C isn't supported by evidence, so that S cannot justifiedly believe C , there is a sense in which S runs a risk in accepting C —the risk of accepting a proposition as true that is in fact false. This is so even if S can trust C *rationally*, for rational trust doesn't rest on evidence. Since this type of risk is intuitively incompatible with S 's justifiably believing and knowing that C , Wright calls it *epistemic risk*. Imagine now that E is evidence for P for S . Given that P is epistemically dependent on the cornerstone C , it is intuitive that the epistemic risk of S 's prior acceptance C will be inherited by S 's acceptance P on the basis of E . Schematically, it is intuitively plausible that:

(RISK) If S 's acceptance of C prior to acquiring E is epistemically risky, then S 's acceptance of P upon acquiring E is also epistemically risky.

In conclusion, since S 's acceptance of P based on E is epistemically risky, E cannot actually justify S 's belief that P (cf. Wright 2004: 208-209).

Wright (2004 and 2014)'s has argued that (RISK) is false. However, Moretti (2020) has shown that Wright's arguments are inconclusive. To conclude this paper, let me show that key applications of (RISK) can be vindicated by probability calculus. I show that once an elementary formalization of the notion of epistemic risk is implemented, (RISK) is true when P entails C , and C is the logical negation of a sceptical hypothesis. My argument re-interprets the conclusion of a proof given by White (2006) in terms of risk.

Suppose for example that evidence E describes all *apparent memories* that S has at a given time t , and that P is the conjunction of the *contents* of all these apparent memories. So, E states

¹⁶ Wright (2004: 208n 26) attributes this formulation to Sebastiano Moruzzi.

that S apparently remembers that P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n , and P is the conjunction of P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n .¹⁷ A cornerstone C for P is the logical negation of the Russellian sceptical conjecture (R) that the world together with S and all her apparent memories was created just before t . Since P is incompatible with R , P entails C .

Note that E 's truth would be explained (at least to some extent) by the truth of R . Accordingly, it is intuitive that S 's learning E should increase—at least a tiny bit—her degree of rational confidence in R , to the effect that $\Pr(R|E) > \Pr(R)$. Here $\Pr(R)$ expresses S 's rational confidence that R is true, and $\Pr(R|E)$ expresses S 's rational confidence that R is true conditional on her learning E . Since C is the logical negation of R , it follows from $\Pr(R|E) > \Pr(R)$, through probability calculus, that $\Pr(C|E) < \Pr(C)$. Furthermore, since P entails C , it follows through probability calculus that $\Pr(P|E) \leq \Pr(C|E)$. The last two inequalities entail by transitivity that

$$(1) \Pr(P|E) < \Pr(C) \text{ (cf. White 2006).}^{18}$$

The term “risk” is customarily taken to refer to *the probability of an unwanted event*, where “probability” can be interpreted subjectively (cf. Hansson 2018).¹⁹ Accordingly, the degree of C 's epistemic risk for S , expressed by $R_s(C)$, can be identified with $\Pr(\text{Not-}C)$. And the degree of P 's epistemic risk given E for S , expressed by $R_s(P|E)$, can be identified with $\Pr(\text{Not-}P|E)$. Since $R_s(P|E) = \Pr(\text{Not-}P|E)$ and $R_s(C) = \Pr(\text{Not-}C)$, it is easy to prove that (1) $\Pr(P|E) < \Pr(C)$ is equivalent to

¹⁷ I assume that the conjunction of P_1, P_2, \dots, P_n is logically consistent.

¹⁸ White (2006: 553-554) claims that (1) shows that S needs to have independent justification for believing C in order to have justification for P given E . He thinks that this does not produce scepticism because S has non-evidential justification for believing C . The problem is that White appeals to Wright's entitlement theory to support this claim (see 2006: 556n26).

¹⁹ Pritchard (2015 and 2016) has introduced a notion of *modal* risk, which doesn't seem to capture Wright's notion of risk (cf. Moretti 2020).

$$(2) \text{Rs}(P|E) > \text{Rs}(C).$$

So, when P entails C , (2) is true. In these circumstances (RISK) is also true. In fact, suppose r is a threshold value that, if exceeded, accepting the relevant proposition is epistemically risky for S . (2) entails that if $\text{Rs}(C) > r$, then $\text{Rs}(P|E) > r$. This means that if accepting C prior to learning E is epistemically risky for S , then accepting P upon learning E is also epistemically risky for S .

5. Conclusions

I have focused on Wright's entitlement theory, according to which there are different types non-evidential justification—or entitlements—for trusting cornerstones capable of securing evidential justification for believing ordinary propositions. I have inspected Wright's notion strategic entitlement and suggested that it is dubious that we are strategically entitled to accept cornerstones—we are strategically entitled to do so only if veritic dual goal monism is false, which is at least controversial. I have also raised a more general objection that strikes all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once. I have shown that in important cases one's non-evidential justification for accepting a cornerstone doesn't enable one to acquire evidential justification for believing the propositions that depending on it. Although I cannot exclude that Wright might successfully respond to my objections,²⁰ entitlement theory doesn't look in good shape presently.²¹

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²⁰ I have suggested possible ways to reject the risk objection in the conclusion of Moretti (2020).

²¹ I'm grateful to a reviewer from *Brill* for useful feedback.

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