Problems of Wright’s entitlement theory

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ABSTRACT
I am concerned with Crispin Wright (2004, 2007, 2012 and 2014)’s entitlement theory, according to which (1) we have non-evidential justification for accepting propositions of a general type, which Wright calls cornerstones, and (2) this non-evidential justification for cornerstones can secure evidential justification for believing many other propositions—those we take to be true on the grounds of ordinary evidence. I initially focus on strategic entitlement, which is one of the types of entitlement that Wright has described in more detail. Wright (2014) argues that strategic entitlement is a form of epistemic justification rather than pragmatic, as some critics have contended. I respond that whether or not strategic entitlement is epistemic, it is very dubious that there are cornerstones we are strategically entitled to accept. Thus, it is very implausible that (1) could be defended by appealing to strategic entitlement. After this, I argue that even if (1) were true, (2) would be false because non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones cannot secure evidential justification for believing ordinary propositions. This criticism is more ambitious than the previous one because it aims to strike all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once. My argument relies on elementary probabilistic regimentations of the so-called leaching problem.

1. Introduction

I am concerned with Crispin Wright (2004, 2007, 2012 and 2014)’s entitlement theory, according to which (1) we have non-evidential justification for accepting propositions of a general type, which Wright calls cornerstones, and (2) this non-evidential justification for cornerstones can secure evidential justification for believing many other propositions—those we take to be true on the grounds of ordinary evidence. I initially focus on strategic entitlement, which is one of the types of entitlement that Wright has described in more detail. Wright (2014) forcefully argues that strategic entitlement is a form of epistemic justification rather than pragmatic, as some critics have contended. I respond that whether or not strategic entitlement is epistemic, it is very dubious that there are cornerstones we are strategically entitled to accept. Thus, it is very implausible that (1)

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1 I’m in debt to Nikolaj Pedersen, Tommaso Piazza and Aidan McGlynn for useful comments upon earlier drafts of this paper.
could be defended by appealing to strategic entitlement. After this, I argue that even if (1) were true, (2) would be false because non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones cannot actually secure evidential justification for believing ordinary propositions. This criticism is more ambitious than my first one because it aims to strike all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once (as each of them is supposed to be a type of non-evidential justification). My argument relies on elementary probabilistic regimentations of the so-called teaching problem. My discussion of Wright’s entitlement theory will give me the opportunity to review objections recently raised against it by other epistemologists—in particular, Davies (2004), Pritchard (2005), Jenkins (2007) and Pedersen (2009)—and Wright’s responses.

The paper is organized as follows: §2 and its two subsections introduce Wright’s view of external world scepticism and Wright’s response to the sceptic based on entitlement theory—the emphasis will be on Wright’s strategic entitlement. §3 deals with the question whether strategic entitlement is epistemic. §4 argues that it is very dubious that there are cornerstones we are strategically entitled to accept. §5 contends that no type of non-evidential entitlement to trust cornerstones can secure evidential justification for believing propositions depending on them. §6 presents my concluding considerations.

2. Wright’s entitlement theory as a response to scepticism

Wright (2004, 2007, 2012, 2014) contends that there is a type of epistemic justification for accepting propositions—called by him epistemic entitlement or simply entitlement—which rational subjects possess by default. Epistemic entitlements are non-evidential and unearned, in the sense of not being based on any a priori or a posteriori information or cognitive accomplishment of the

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2 Other epistemologists have defended similar notions of entitlement. For useful discussion see Altschul (2011) and Wright (2014: §11.2).
subject. Because of this feature, our epistemic entitlements to accept various propositions would enable us to defuse sceptical arguments of an important type that recur in philosophy. I will first examine how these sceptical arguments work, and then how our entitlements would enable us to neutralize them.

2.1 Scepticism and cornerstones

Wright says that a proposition is a cornerstone for a given region of thought just in case ‘it would follow from a lack of warrant for it that one could not rationally claim [possession of] warrant for any belief in the region’ (2004: 167-8). 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, in the following 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—any doubt about $C$ (absent other relevant information) will tend 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

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3 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).

4 In more recent papers, Wright also uses the terms presuppositions and authenticity conditions to refer to cornerstones and less general propositions with the same epistemic functions.

5 As we will see, entitlements are meant to have an internalist character. But Wright doesn’t commit to warrant in general having this character.
justification for $C$ would prevent us from both *acquiring* and rationally claiming justification for any correlated $B$.  

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 justification for believing $C$. From these two premises the sceptic concludes that we cannot acquire justification for believing any proposition in $D$, and thus that 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 epistemic justification for $C$.
(C) We cannot acquire and thus rationally claim epistemic justification for any proposition in $D$.

One might wonder why the sceptical argument should ultimately aim to conclude that we cannot rationally *claim* justification. Wright’s response—which I find plausible—is that the most worrying sceptical challenges in philosophy are targeted at the level of claims to justification rather than mere possession of justification (cf. 2004: 210-11 and 2014: 220).

Wright (2004) considers two different strategies for supporting (B), which he calls the *Cartesian* and the *Humean* from the names of the first 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 instance, $C$ could be the proposition that our sensory experiences are normally reliable, or the more fancy proposition that we are not globally hallucinated by a malevolent demon. So interpreted, $C$ is a cornerstone for the class $D$ of all

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6 Some passages in Wright’s papers antecedent to his (2014) could be interpreted as if Wright contended that lack of justification for $C$ would prevent us from *only* 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. For discussion see McGlynn (2016).

7 Also called by Wright I-II-III argument.
propositions about perceivable facts. For it is intuitive—or so the sceptic would argue—that if we lacked antecedent justification for $C$, none of our experiences could provide us with justification for believing any proposition in $D$. Thus we couldn’t claim justification for them. 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 other people normally experience what we experience), which—nevertheless—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 this requirement could be satisfied only if we had *already* acquired justification for $C$ (cf. 2004: 168-9).

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

\[
\text{All } F\text{s are } G\text{s,}
\]

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

\[
(O) \text{ Very many observed } F\text{s are } G\text{s.}
\]

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 $C$. For inductive inferences can be reliable only if the world does contain natural regularities. Note that $C$ is, in this setting, a cornerstone for the generalizations in $D$. Hume can be interpreted as contending that we cannot possibly have justification for $C$ because we could
acquire justification for believing $C$ 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 a material world, other minds, and the past. Let me just consider the first type of scepticism, which is the most discussed in philosophy. (The reader can easily work out how the Humean strategy articulates for other types of scepticism.) Suppose $D$ is the class of all propositions about perceivable facts, and that $C$ 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 (according to Wright) a proposition $E$ that we have just an experience as if $P$. The Humean sceptic argues that the ampliative inference from $E$ to $P$ can give us justification for believing $P$ only if we have independent justification for $C$. For the inference from $E$ to $P$ is a good one only if our experience is a reliable guide to the external word, which presupposes that there is a material world broadly manifest in our normal sensory experience. The Humean sceptic contends that we cannot possibly have justification for $C$ because we could acquire justification for $C$ only by deductively inferring $C$ from some independently justified proposition in $D$. But this could happen only if we had already acquired justification for $C$ (cf. 2004: 170-74).

### 2.2 Entitlement theory and strategic entitlement

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. Wright thus acknowledges that many instances of premise (A) of (SCEPTICISM) are true. Nevertheless, he rejects the correlated instances of premise (B) as false.
He contends that in these cases we do 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 and Humean reasoning share the same lacuna. In both cases the sceptic insists that we can have no justification for \( C \) because we couldn’t acquire one on the basis of any evidence. In doing so, the sceptic overlooks the possibility that we might have an *uneearned* justification for \( C \)—i.e. an *epistemic entitlement* to accept that \( C \)—which doesn’t depend on any evidence. Since—according to Wright—we do have such an entitlement in many cases, despite what the Cartesian or Humean sceptic claims, \((B)\) is false in many cases, and thus various 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 genuinely 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 subcases, belief and cognate notions—for instance, the notion of *taking for granted* that \( X \) is true,\(^8\) the one of *acting on the assumption* that \( X \) is true,\(^9\) and the one of *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 latter sense. For Wright, ‘entitlement is rational trust’ (2004: 194).

It is instructive to examine how Wright arrives at selecting just 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,

\(^8\) 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 proved guilty.

\(^9\) In the same sense in which some say that when one drives a car one should prudently act on the assumption that the other drivers are nothing but dangerous fools.
a subject $S$’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 $C$—that is to say, with both $S$’s disbelieving $C$ and being agnostic about $C$—in the same way in which $S$’s believing $C$ is incompatible with doubting $C$. This second requirement is crucial for Wright’s response to the sceptic, for if $S$ doubted a cornerstone $C$ when accepting it, $S$ couldn’t rationally believe any proposition $P$ in the region of thought depending on $C$ even if she had evidence appropriate for $P$. For $S$ would be rationally committed to doubting $P$ as well. (More accurately, since belief is often involuntary, $S$ may come to believe $P$, but this belief would not be rational or fully rational.) Consider for example the cornerstone $C$ saying that $S$ is not constantly hallucinated by a malevolent demon. The sceptic would argue that since $S$ has no evidence (or no strong evidence) against or in favour of $C$, $S$ should be agnostic about $C$. But if $S$ did so, $S$ would become unable to rationally form any belief about her physical environment on the grounds of her experiences (cf. 2004: 192-193). The only notion of accepting a proposition $C$ close to the one of believing $C$ that satisfies the requirement of being incompatible with doubting $C$ is—according to Wright—the notion of trusting $C$ (cf. 2004: 194-195).

As said, however, there is an important feature of belief that the notion of trust cannot retain or replicate. Let me stress this again, as it will be crucial in ensuing discussion. If we think of ‘belief’ as referring to a rationally constrained and rationally constraining mental state—i.e. essentially constrained by evidence and essentially constraining further thought and action—then ‘trust’ will refer to a mental state that share much of the second ingredient with belief, but not the first. For cornerstone propositions are such that—according to Wright—we can rationally trust them though we have no evidence for their truth. This contrasts with belief because it appears counterintuitive to say that we can rationally believe a proposition when we have no or very little evidence for its truth (cf. 2002: 181-183 and 194).

10 For further discussion on this problem see Wright (2014: 227-228.)
Wright (2004) has individuated four ways in which epistemic entitlement could arise, which he has called 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 two sections, I will concentrate on strategic entitlement. Wright (2014) has refined his notion of strategic entitlement and defended it from various objections. In particular, he has attempted to show that this type of entitlement is a genuine form of epistemic justification. To forestall possible confusion, let me stress here that Jenkins (2007) and Pedersen (2009)—which I discuss in the next sections—have nominally directed their arguments against Wright’s entitlement of cognitive project. As a matter of fact, however, both authors interpret entitlement of cognitive project as a form of strategic entitlement, and they make arguments that essentially target the latter. This is why I will present the objections by these two authors as aiming to strike strategic entitlement.\(^\text{11}\)

Saying that a strategy \(ST\) is the dominant strategy with respect to a set of alternative strategies and given certain 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, in relation to the goals to achieve. Consider for example Robinson Crusoe starving in a desert island. His goal is to survive. For him, eating the fruits that he has found is the dominant strategy with respect to not eating them, for if he eats them, he will survive if the fruits are edible, and he will die if they are poisonous. But if he doesn’t eat them, he will die of starvation in any case.

Wright stipulates that a rational thinker \(S\) is (absolutely)\(^\text{12}\) 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) independently of \(S\)'s particular context, to accept \(P\) is for \(S\) always a dominant strategy or at least an

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\(^\text{11}\) My view is that interpreting Wright’s entitlement of cognitive project as a form of strategic entitlement is misleading, for Wright carefully distinguishes between these two types of entitlement and appears to take them to be independent of one another (see for example Wright 2014: 245). I hasten to say, however, that Jenkins (2007: 28) herself admits that Wright doesn’t seem to think of entitlement of cognitive project as a form of strategic entitlement.

\(^\text{12}\) Wright (2004: 182-183) also characterizes a notion of contextual strategic entitlement but he doesn’t consider it to be relevant for the justification of cornerstones. I return to this issue in §3.
essential step in a dominant strategy (cf. 2004: 182-184), where to accept \( P \) specifically means to
\( trust \ P \) (cf. 2004: 194 and especially 2014: §11.3).

Wright’s model of strategic entitlement (cf. 2014: 226) is inspired by a non-orthodox
interpretation of Reichenbach’s vindication of induction,\(^\text{13}\) one that reads Reichenbach’s argument
as aiming to provide a non-evidential reason for \( trusting \) the cornerstone that

\((C1) \ Inductive \ methods \ are \ truth-conducive.\)

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

\((INDUCTION)\)

\((a_1) \) Independently of the context, it is for us important and valuable to rationally form many
true beliefs about the future.
\((b_1) \) Suppose nature is regular. If we trust \( C1 \) and use inductive methods, we will rationally
form many true beliefs about the future. Whereas if we don’t trust \( C1 \), we won’t
rationally form many true beliefs about the future.\(^\text{14}\) Suppose nature is not regular. In this
case, whether or not we trust \( C1 \), we won’t rationally form many true beliefs about the
future.
Therefore:
\((c_1) \) Independently of our context, trusting \( C1 \) is for us an essential step in a dominant
strategy.
Furthermore:
\((d_1) \) We have no sufficient reason to believe that \( C1 \) is true or false.
Therefore:
\((e_1) \) We are strategically entitled to trust \( C1 \). (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:\(^\text{15}\)

\[^{13}\text{See especially Reichenbach (1938: §38). For a more faithful reconstruction of Reichenbach’s vindication and its criticism see for instance Salmon (1991).}\]
\[^{14}\text{If we don’t trust \( C1 \), given our evidential predicament, for Wright we should presumably be agnostic about it.}\]
\[^{15}\text{Wright (2004: 186) outlines a quite similar argument to show that we are strategically entitled to accept that the world is generally opened to or perceptual faculties.}\]
(ANTI-DEMON)

(a₂) Independently of the context, it is for us important and valuable to rationally form many true beliefs about our environment.¹⁶

(b₂) Suppose our sense organs are normally reliable. If we trust C₂ (together with the negations of any other sceptical conjecture) and use perception, we will rationally form many true beliefs about our environment. Whereas if we don’t trust C₂, we won’t rationally form many true beliefs about our environment.¹⁷ Suppose our sense organs aren’t normally reliable. In this case, whether or not we trust C₂, we won’t rationally form many true beliefs about our environment.

Therefore:

(c₂) Independently of our context, trusting C₂ is for us an essential step in 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. I will consider objections in the next sections.¹⁸ Wright’s overall conception of the architecture of epistemic justification— involving cornerstones and epistemic entitlements— might appear contrived or distant

¹⁶ Note that Wright takes (a₂)— as well as (a₁) in (INDUCTION)— to be a contingent proposition. According to Wright there is in fact nothing in the human nature or the nature of rationality that entails the truth of (a₂) or (a₁). Wright acknowledges that the effectiveness of his strategic entitlement response to the sceptic is conditional on the truth of contingent premises like (a₂) and (a₁). He insists that this doesn’t weaken his response (cf. 2014: 240-241 and 244).

¹⁷ If we don’t trust C₂, given our evidential predicament, for Wright we should presumably be agnostic about it.

¹⁸ An immediate concern about the cogency of (INDUCTION) might stem from doubting the second part of (b₁)— the claim that if nature is not regular, whether or not we trust C₁, we won’t rationally form many true beliefs about the future. Consider in fact the apparently possible case in which: (i) nature is not regular, (ii) we don’t trust C₁ but (iii) we trust the hypothesis H₁ that a non-inductive method— e.g. crystal glazing— is reliable, and (iv) H₁ happens to be true. One may contend that in this case— against what (b₁) says— we would rationally form many true beliefs about the future if we used the non-inductive method referred to in H₁. Reichenbach (1938)’s response to objections of this sort is two-fold. First, he contends that in the envisaged situation nature is actually regular because there is a regular connection between what our reliable source of information— e.g. a crystal ball— says and the truth. Second, Reichenbach argues that since our source of information is reliable, we can use induction to conclude that whatever our source says is always or mostly true. If Reichenbach is correct, in this case our trusting C₁ and acting accordingly doesn’t do any worse than our not trusting it. Thus the conclusion that trusting C₁ is for us an essential step in a context-independent dominant strategy stands unfurled.

Although Reichenbach’s response might dispel doubts concerning (b₁) in (INDUCTION), it doesn’t seem to me that an analogous response is available if one doubts (b₂) in (ANTI-DEMON) for a parallel reason. The second part of (b₂) says that if our senses aren’t normally reliable, whether or not we trust C₂, we won’t rationally form many true beliefs about our environment. Consider however the logically possible case in which: (i) our senses aren’t generally reliable, (ii) we don’t trust C₂ but (iii) we trust the hypothesis H₂ that the powerful entity that makes our senses unreliable— e.g. a Cartesian demon— always sets out facts and things in our environment in accordance with a given subject S’s blind guesses, and (iv) H₂ happens to be true. One might contend that— against what (b₂) says— we would rationally form many true beliefs about our environment, in this case, if we relied on S’s blind guesses to form those beliefs. I don’t see how a Reichenbachian defensive strategy could apply in this case. Clearly, this is not a situation in which (despite appearances) our senses are reliable. Furthermore, this is not a case in which our trusting C₂ and acting accordingly doesn’t do any worse than our not trusting it. I don’t want to press on with this criticism of (ANTI-DEMON), however, because conjectures like H₂ appear to me very far-fetched. Nevertheless, I cannot exclude that with a bit of ingenuity a more straightforward objection broadly of this type could be raised against (ANTI-DEMON).
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 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 mandated. According to Wright, epistemic entitlements determine *epistemic* rights having 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 normally reliable in absence of evidence to the contrary. Then even those who have no conception of their sensory faculties (e.g. 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 do not place trust in the relevant cornerstones. Only (mature) agents challenged to produce a justification for their perceptual beliefs will become aware of the need to trust relevant cornerstones and their entitlement to do so.

3. **Is strategic entitlement epistemic?**

Wright’s entitlement theory has been criticised by many epistemologists—e.g. Davies (2004), Pritchard (2005), Jenkins (2007), Pedersen (2009), Tucker (2009), Williams (2012 and 2013) and McGlynn (2014). Most of the objections raised by these philosophers have been tackled in Wright (2004, 2012 and 2014). In this section I will focus on what is widely considered to be the central criticism of *strategic* entitlement. Prominently articulated by Pritchard and Jenkins, this criticism essentially says that strategic entitlement to trust cornerstones (assuming that it actually exists) is epistemologically irrelevant because it is not a form of *epistemic* justification. As we will shortly see, Wright (2014) has given this criticism an articulate response that looks promising. In the next
section I will show that, in spite of Wright’s interesting response, the epistemological relevance of strategic entitlement, if not just its existence, is still very questionable.

Prichard (2005: §3) contends that Wright’s strategic entitlement is a type of *pragmatic* rather than *epistemic* justification. For it essentially depends on *instrumental* (or means-end) rationality rather than *epistemic* rationality. Thus strategic entitlement is not a form of *epistemic* entitlement. This would disarm Wright’s response to the sceptic because what the sceptic claims is that we lack *epistemic* justification for accepting cornerstones. (There is another worry: one might suspect that if the justification proper to cornerstones is not epistemic, the propositions depending on them cannot be epistemically justified either.) The intuition apparently driving Pritchard’s criticism is that epistemic rationality is essentially *evidence-constrained* and (more controversially) independent of *instrumental* considerations. So the problem for Wright is that strategic entitlement is essentially *evidence-unconstrained* and *dependent* on instrumental considerations. That is why it doesn’t seem able to produce epistemic justification.

In response to this criticism, Wright (2014) emphasizes that if being epistemically rational is defined just as being *categorically* (or non-instrumentally) supported by evidence, having an entitlement to trust $P$ is not having an epistemic justification for $P$. However, Wright insists that such a definition would be capriciously narrow. A reason is that some forms of *instrumental* rationality can legitimately be categorized as forms of *epistemic* rationality (in some contexts of discussion at least) depending on the kind of goals to which they are in service. For example, the type of strategic entitlement apparently licensed by (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) marks certainly the presence of pragmatic rationality. Yet since the goals to which this type of entitlement is in service are *epistemic*—namely, rationally entertaining true beliefs of different types—the rationality involved in it also qualifies, in an important sense, as *epistemic* rationality (cf. 2014: 239). Note that this response doesn’t commit Wright to embracing controversial views—such as
Foley (1987)’s—according to which all epistemic rationality is nothing but a species of instrumental rationality. Quite the opposite, Wright can still maintain that some types of epistemic rationality are non-instrumental (cf. Wright 2014: 239, note 39). Wright’s response to Pritchard addresses the challenge about instrumental rationality (the contention that epistemic rationality is non-instrumental or categorical) but it says nothing regarding the challenge about evidence (the contention that epistemic rationality is evidential). Therefore it lays itself open to further criticism, which I now discuss.

Jenkins (2007) argues that as entitlement to trust a cornerstone is for Wright a non-evidential justification, entitlement cannot be epistemic justification. Let’s dub (NEEJ) the thesis that we have non-evidential justification for trusting cornerstones that qualifies as epistemic justification. Jenkins makes a case against (NEEJ) by first observing that the best chance we have to vindicate this thesis rests upon arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON), which exploit the game-theoretic notion of a dominant strategy (cf. 2007: 27-31). Jenkins then contends that, under closer scrutiny, these game-theoretic arguments prove actually unable to vindicate (NEEJ). These arguments can at best show—according to her—that we possess some type of non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones that doesn’t qualify as epistemic justification (cf. 2007: 31-36). This casts heavy doubts on the truth of (NEEJ), or it shows at very least that Wright hasn’t given convincing reasons in support of (NEEJ), considering that the game-theoretic defence of (NEEJ) is the only one sufficiently developed by Wright.

Some of Jenkins (2007)’s objections to conclude that cases like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) fail to support (NEEJ) presuppose an instrumentalist conception of epistemic rationality called epistemic consequentialism. Since Wright doesn’t subscribe to this conception (cf. 2014: 239, note 39), it is dubious that these objections can actually strike Wright’s entitlement theory. Let

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19 See in particular Jenkins (2007: 37-44). According to epistemic consequentialism, the epistemic rationality of a subject S’s propositional attitude is always determined by the epistemic value of the consequences resulting from S’s having that attitude compared with the epistemic value of the consequences resulting from S’s not having that attitude.
me set these objections aside and focus on the only one made by Jenkins that doesn’t presuppose—or can be interpreted as not presupposing—a form of epistemic instrumentalism. This is the only objection by Jenkins (2007) that Wright (2014) actually addresses.

As we have seen before, Wright claims that arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) show that S’s acceptance of a cornerstone C is epistemically rational—and thus epistemically justified—because the goals to which the type of entitlement licensed by these arguments is in service are epistemic. Let’s re-formulate Wright’s claim by saying that arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) show that S’s acceptance of a cornerstone C is epistemically rational—and thus epistemically justified—because it entails consequences for S that are epistemically valuable.20 Jenkins (2007: 36-37) anticipates this response by Wright and retorts that even if S’s acceptance of C, when licensed by arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON), has some epistemically valuable consequences, and it is thus itself in some sense epistemically valuable, it is intuitive that S’s acceptance of C is not epistemically rational in these cases because it is not based on evidence. Thus, game-theoretic arguments can make S’s trust in C epistemically valuable but not just epistemically rational. If this is correct—since there is an intuitive intimate link between epistemic rationality and epistemic justification—it seems that S’s trust in C licensed by game-theoretic arguments is not epistemically justified either.

Jenkins (2007: 37) defends her claim by adducing this ingenious thought experiment: imagine that some quirky goddess has so arranged things that if S puts trust in P—a proposition like, say, Goldbach’s conjecture, which S has no evidence to believe to be true or false—then she will arrange for the rest of S’s life to go so fortunately that all other propositions accepted by S as true will always be actually true (or at least highly probable). However epistemically valuable this consequence of S’s trusting P might be, and even if S knew all about the goddess’s intentions, it is

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20 This is not endorsing consequentialism because it is not saying that the epistemic rationality or justification of any proposition can only be determined by the epistemically valuable consequences of the proposition.
strongly intuitive that S’s trust in P would not be *epistemically rational* in these circumstances. Jenkins seems to think that we should conclude by analogy that in situations like those described in (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON), S’s trust in a cornerstone C would not be epistemically *rational* either.

I agree with Jenkins that in the scenario in her thought experiment it is intuitive that S’s trust in P wouldn’t be epistemically rational. However, one thing is the thought experiment and another the objection by analogy based on it. An important question for the appraisal of the objection is how we should precisely unfold the intuition that S’s trust in P wouldn’t be epistemically rational in the above scenario. A straightforward explanation (that doesn’t hinge on epistemic consequentialism)\(^{21}\) appears to me to be the following. Consider this familiar methodological principle:

\[(E) \text{ If } S \text{ has no evidence in favour or against } P \text{’s truth,}^{22} \text{ S’s epistemically rational attitude towards } P \text{ is agnosticism about } P \text{ (and } \sim P).\]

Since S has actually no evidence for P’s truth-value in the situation described by Jenkins, the application of (E) attests that in this situation S’s epistemically rational attitude towards P is to be *agnostic about P’s truth*. Given this, it would be incoherent to maintain that, in these very same circumstances, trusting P—in Wright’s sense of *accepting that P is true*\(^{23}\)—is epistemically rational for S.\(^{24}\)

Wright (2014: 241-242) acknowledges that it would be incoherent to claim that S’s trusting P is epistemically rational in the circumstances specified by Jenkins.\(^{25}\) Nevertheless, he contends that Jenkins’ objection is ineffective because the cases in which S is actually epistemically entitled to

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\(^{21}\) The only explanation that we can find in Jenkins (2007: 37-44) hinges on epistemic consequentialism.

\(^{22}\) I assume that P is a factual proposition that S can easily consider and understand.

\(^{23}\) Recall that Wright explicitly claims that acceptance in the sense of trust is incompatible with agnosticism (see above §2.2).

\(^{24}\) This seems to me to be the gist of Tucker (2009)’s argument against Wright’s epistemic entitlement theory, which Wright (2014) doesn’t explicitly consider.

\(^{25}\) More precisely, Wright (2014: 241) writes that this claim would involve a *compromise*—one that would force us to neglect legitimate evidential reasons to doubt P, and thus not to accept P. I think that speaking of *incoherence* rather than a compromise makes things clearer-cut.
trust $P$ are not analogous to the one considered by Jenkins—in particular, these cases are such that it would not be incoherent to claim that in them $S$’s trusting $P$ is epistemically rational because of the structure of epistemic rationality itself (cf. 2014: 242). Although Wright is not crystal-clear on this point, the most plausible interpretation is that—according to him—$S$ can be epistemically entitled to trust $P$ only in those cases in which (E) is not supposed to be applied.

As expected, according to Wright, the cases in which it would not be incoherent to assert that $S$’s trusting $P$ is epistemically rational even if $S$ lacked evidence for $P$’s truth-value—that is to say, the special cases in which (E) is not supposed to be in use—are or include those in which $P$ is a cornerstone. As Wright (2014: 244-245) stresses, if we denied this and insisted that the epistemic reasons for accepting propositions can only be evidential, we would have to conclude—along with the sceptic—that whatever non-evidential reasons we might have for accepting a cornerstone, they couldn’t be epistemic. Rather than endorsing a “suicidal” conception of epistemic rationality of this type—according to Wright—we had better revise the assumption that epistemic reasons for accepting propositions can only be evidential, if we had adopted it initially.

Although Wright’s ingenious response to Jenkins’ criticism should be worked out in more detail,26 I admit that I find his strategy quite promising.27 Clearly, Wright’s response wouldn’t persuade the steadfast sceptic who decided to stick to the thesis that epistemic reasons can only be evidential. But this doesn’t seem to me to be a major problem for Wright’s anti-sceptical project based on entitlement theory. Epistemologists distinguish between two types of antisceptical projects (see for instance Pryor 2000 and Vogel 2005). The first is quite ambitious: refuting the sceptic on her own terms—that is, showing that we have the knowledge or justification we think we have by using only premises that the sceptic permits us to accept. The chance of success of this project is

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26 Wright should for instance clarify what makes the case described in Jenkins’ thought experiment and the cases concerning cornerstones situations essentially different.
27 To forestall possible misunderstandings, note that my claim is a conditional: if game-theoretic arguments like those considered here are actually capable of showing that we are strategically entitled to trust cornerstones, then Wright may succeed in arguing that this form of justification is epistemic in a proper sense.
clearly very slight. The second type of antiscptical project is more modest: refuting the sceptic by our own standards. In this case the sceptic is thought of as presenting us with arguments from premises that we may initially find plausible to the conclusion that we cannot know or justifiably believe anything. The more modest antiscptical project consists in defusing these arguments while retaining as many as possible of the premises that we find plausible. Wright’s defence of his entitlement theory looks in line with this second, more plausible type of antiscptical project.

4. There are probably no cornerstones we are strategically entitled to trust

Suppose Wright’s response to Jenkins turned out to be successful—to the effect that if game-theoretic arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON) actually licentiate strategic entitlement to trust cornerstones, then this type entitlement can properly be said to be epistemic. I will now argue that even if this were the case, it would still be uncertain that there are cornerstones that we are strategically entitled to trust. For (INDUCTION), (ANTI-DEMON) and all game-theoretic arguments of this sort appear to be invalid.

My argument draws from one made in Pedersen (2009). Against the cogency of cases like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEMON), Pedersen adduces an instrumental conception of epistemic rationality—defended for instance in James (1889), Foley (1987) and Alston (1989)—according to which all epistemically rational subjects as such aim at two general goals: acquiring true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. On this view, any epistemically rational subject as such aims not only at acquiring true beliefs about, say, the future or the environment, but also at avoiding false beliefs about either. Pedersen shows that, on this view, an epistemically rational subject S is not strategically entitled to trust propositions like C1 or C2. For when both acquiring true beliefs (about the future or the environment) and avoiding false beliefs (about the future or the environment) are taken to be the goals that S aims at, it turns out that trusting C1 or C2 is no longer an essential step
in a dominant strategy for S (cf. Pedersen 2009: §6). (I reproduce the gist of Pedersen’s reasoning below.) This result sheds doubts on the conclusions of game-theoretic arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEM0N), for it appears to entail that we are not strategically entitled—as epistemically rational subjects at least—to trust C1 or C2.

Although Wright hasn’t directly answered Pedersen’s objection, he has given it an indirect response: that objection relies on an instrumental conception of epistemic rationality, but (as emphasized in §3) instrumental conceptions of epistemic rationality are generally controversial and, at any rate, Wright is not compelled to accept any of them. This rejoinder would seem to defuse Pedersen’s criticism. Nevertheless, it appears to me that game-theoretic arguments like (INDUCTION) and (ANTI-DEM0N) are still vulnerable to an objection similar to Pedersen’s but that doesn’t require assuming that epistemic rationality is a type of instrumental rationality. Let me now articulate this objection.

According to Wright (2004), a subject S is strategically entitled to trust C just in case S has no evidence for disbelieving C and, independently of S’s context, it is (an essential step in) a dominant strategy for S to trust C. Note that this characterization doesn’t appeal to any specific conception of epistemic rationality or an epistemically rational subject—these notions are not even mentioned in this characterization. Nevertheless, Wright intends to make sure that our trust in cornerstones is permanent or stable, in the sense of securing that ‘its rationality generalizes across a variety of situations and contexts and, in the limit, across situations and contexts in general’ (2004: 182).28 That is why Wright’s characterization of strategic entitlement crucially appeals to the notion of a context-independent dominant strategy for S.

28 Clearly, not just all acceptances are permanent or stable in this sense. Recall for example Robinson Crusoe’s example in § 2.2. Crusoe is only contextually strategically entitled to accept (in some sense of this term) that the fruits he has found are edible—that is to say, just so long as he needs nutrition and no other possible way of getting it but eating the fruits obtains (cf. Wright 2004: 182).
It is important to realize that in order to establish whether a strategy \( ST \) of \( S \) dominates \( S \)’s alternative strategies independently of \( S \)’s context, we cannot consider just one of \( S \)’s various context-independent goals. For these goals of \( S \) may push in opposite directions with the result that if \( ST \) dominates its alternatives in light of one of \( S \)’s context-independent goals, \( ST \) may no longer dominate them in light of \( S \)’s all context-independent goals considered together. Consequently, claiming that \( S \)’s strategy \( ST \) dominates its alternatives irrespective of \( S \)’s context is claiming that—precisely—considering \( S \)’s all context-independent goals,\(^{29}\) \( ST \) turns out to do at least as well as its alternatives in every possible situation and to do better in at least some situation.

This conclusion can be made a bit more precise. As we have seen in §2.2, Wright (2014) refines his original view of strategic entitlement by stressing that this form of entitlement is in service of—specifically—epistemic goals.\(^{30}\) Wright would now claim—presumably—that a subject \( S \) is strategically entitled to trust a proposition \( P \) just in case \( S \) has no evidence for disbelieving \( P \) and, on the grounds of \( S \)’s context-independent epistemic goals, it is (an essential step in) a dominant strategy for \( S \) to trust \( P \). (This conception of strategic entitlement doesn’t appeal to any specific conception of epistemic rationality and, in particular, any instrumental conception of epistemic rationality.) Call epistemic strategy any one that aims at satisfying only epistemic goals. Again, note that in order to determine whether an epistemic strategy of \( S \) dominates its alternatives irrespective of \( S \)’s context, we cannot consider just one of \( S \)’s context-independent epistemic goals. For \( S \)’s context-independent epistemic goals may push in opposite directions to the effect that if a strategy of \( S \) dominates in light of one of these epistemic goals, it no longer dominates in light of all these epistemic goals considered together. For this reason, if we want to determine whether an epistemic strategy of \( S \) dominates its alternatives irrespective of \( S \)’s context, we must consider \( S \)’s all context-independent epistemic goals.

\(^{29}\) To be more precise we should consider \( S \)’s overall preference ordering.

\(^{30}\) This was certainly already implicit in Wright (2004).
Now take again (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 a context-independent dominant epistemic strategy. So (INDUCTION) is invalid. The same holds true of (ANTI-DEMON). Since premise (a₂) describes just one of our context-independent epistemic goals, (c₂) cannot follow logically from (a₂) and (b₂) through the notion of a context-independent dominant epistemic strategy. Thus (ANTI-DEMON) is also invalid.

A complaint might be that I have given no evidence that our context-independent epistemic goals may conflict with one another. Here is some evidence. Take the only context-independent epistemic goal of ours mentioned in (INDUCTION)—i.e. rationally forming many true beliefs about the future. Consider now the goal of not rationally forming many beliefs about the future that are false. This looks like another context-independent goal of ours. For when we are concerned about the future, we generally appear to care about avoiding errors as much as we care about getting things right. Furthermore, it is hard to deny the intuition that this goal is epistemic in the quite generic sense of it used by Wright to characterize epistemic rationality. To show that these two epistemic goals conflict, let’s replace (a₁) in (INDUCTION) with:

\[(a₁^*)\] Independently of the context, it is for us important and valuable (i) to rationally form many true beliefs about the future and (ii) not to rationally form many beliefs about the future that are false.

Remember that a crucial step in (INDUCTION) to infer that trusting C₁ is for us an essential part of a context-independent dominant strategy was the intermediate conclusion that, if nature is not regular, not trusting C₁ does no better than trusting C₁. If it had turned out that not trusting C₁ does better than trusting C₁, the conclusion would have been that trusting C₁ is not an essential step in a dominant strategy for us. But this is exactly what happens when (a₁) is replaced with (a₁*). Suppose nature is not regular. If we trust C₁ and use inductive methods, we will rationally form many false beliefs about the future and, perhaps, only a few true beliefs about the future. So we will satisfy
neither (ii) nor (i). But if we don’t trust $C_1$ (neither any non-inductive method to generate beliefs about the future),\(^31\) we won’t rationally form many beliefs about the future—so neither true beliefs nor false beliefs. Thus we will satisfy at least (ii). If nature is not regular, in light of $(a_1^*)$, not trusting $C_1$ does better than trusting $C_1$. Hence, when $(a_1)$ is replaced with $(a_1^*)$, for us trusting $C_1$ turns out not to be an essential step in a context-independent dominant strategy.

Take now the goal of not rationally forming many beliefs about our environment that are false. This would seem to be another context-independent goal of ours. For when we are concerned about our environment, we generally appear to care about avoiding errors as much as we care about getting things right. Furthermore, it is hard to deny the intuition that this goal is epistemic in the generic sense of it used by Wright to characterize epistemic rationality. The reader can easily verify that a result analogous to the above one holds true for (ANTI-DEMON) once $(a_2)$ is replaced by:

$(a_2^*)$ Independently of the context, it is for us important and valuable (i) to rationally form many true beliefs about our environment and (ii) not to rationally form many beliefs about our environment that prove false.

After the replacement, for us trusting $C_2$ turns out not to be an essential step in a context-independent dominant strategy.

It seems plausible that the same devastating result would obtain for most, if not all, cornerstones whenever we attempted to substantiate the claim that we are entitled to trust them through game-theoretic arguments like (INDUCTION) or (ANTI-SCEPTIC). The reason is this: given a cornerstone $C$ for a region of discourse $D$ such that rationally forming many true $D$-beliefs is a context-independent goal of ours, it is typically the case—it seems to me—that not rationally forming many $D$-beliefs that are false is also a context-independent goal of ours. Suppose $D$ is for example the area of discourse about the past (or other minds). It appear to be true that, quite independently of the context, it is for us important and valuable both (i) to rationally form many true beliefs about the past (or other minds) and (ii) not to rationally form many beliefs about the

\(^{31}\) Including crazy methods like crystal glazing.
past (or other minds) that are false. Perhaps there are atypical regions of discourse for which (i) and (ii)—mutatis mutandis—are not true together, but Wright has given us no example of it. In conclusion, it appears plausible that for at least most cornerstones there will be no game-theoretic argument showing that we are strategically entitled to trust them. If we actually possess epistemic justification for trusting cornerstones—as Wright claims—it is very dubious that it could come from strategic entitlement.

5. Non-evidential justification for trusting cornerstones cannot secure evidential justification for believing other propositions

I will now argue that since any entitlement to trust a cornerstone C is supposed to be a non-evidential justification for C, no entitlement to trust C can secure justification for believing any proposition P dependent on C on the grounds of intuitively relevant evidence for P. This criticism is more devastating than my first one because it 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. My objection—if successful—shows that entitlement theory has no real antisceptical punch. For what the sceptic essentially claims—at least the one that Wright has in mind—is just that we cannot acquire and rationally claim justification for believing most ordinary propositions on the grounds of the intuitively relevant evidence.

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. Accordingly, a subject S can justifiably believe P only if S can justifiably accept C. Recall that ‘acceptance’ is for Wright a generic label for propositional attitudes that refers to both belief and trust. Wright endorses the widespread epistemological view—which I find very plausible—according to which genuine belief (rather than a mere belief-like state) in a proposition requires evidence substantiating
its truth. Since the truth of no cornerstones can be substantiated by evidence, Wright concludes that cornerstones can only be rationally trusted but not believed. This engenders the leaching problem. In short, to oppose the sceptic, Wright claims that $S$ can rationally believe $P$ when $S$ possesses relevant evidence for $P$ even if $S$ can only rationally trust but not believe $C$. It seems intuitive, however, that $S$’s rational belief in $P$ requires $S$ to be able to rationally believe $C$ too. Or, equivalently, it appears intuitive that $S$ cannot rationally believe $P$ when $S$ possesses (what looks like) relevant evidence for $P$, if $S$ can only rationally trust but not believe $C$. Hence, there seems to be something amiss in Wright’s entitlement theory.\(^{32}\) (Cf. Davies 2004: 222)

Wright denies that there is a leaching problem—at least one that matches the above description.\(^{33}\) Let’s see why he denies this. An apparently straightforward way to flesh out the intuition that $S$ cannot justifiedly believe any proposition $P$ when $S$ possesses (what looks like) appropriate evidence for $P$ if $S$ cannot justifiedly believe any relevant cornerstone $C$ is the following. Note first that if the truth of a cornerstone $C$ cannot be substantiated by evidence so that $S$ cannot justifiedly believe $C$, there is a sense in which $S$ runs a risk in accepting $C$—the epistemic risk of accepting or trusting a proposition as true that is in fact false. This is so even if $S$ trusts $C$ rationally. In general, whenever $S$ can only trust a proposition $X$, but not believe it, however rational this trust might be, there will always be an element of risk in $S$’s trusting $X$ that strong evidence for the truth of $X$ would eliminate. Considering the link of epistemic dependence holding between $P$ and the cornerstone $C$, it seems plausible that the risk of $S$’s accepting $C$ should generally be inherited by $S$’s accepting $P$, in the sense that:

\(^{32}\) It is Wright (2004) who refers to this problem by using the label “the leaching problem”—that is to say, the problem that rational trust in cornerstones seems to be ‘leaching upwards from the foundations, as it were like rising damp, to contaminate the products of genuine cognitive investigation’ (207).

\(^{33}\) Importantly, Wright (2004: 208-209 and 2014: 229) recognizes that there is actually a higher-order leaching problem, which can be described as follows: since $S$ can only rationally trust $C$ but not rationally believe it, $S$ can only rationally trust but not rationally believe the proposition that $[S$’s believing $P$ is rational or justified]. Wright insists that this higher-order leaching problem is one we can live with and that it doesn’t entail that there must be a first-order leaching problem (which would imply that $S$ can only rationally trust $P$ but not rationally believe it). I’m not completely sure it is true this higher-order leaching problem doesn’t involve any first-order leaching problem within Wright’s theoretical framework, but I will set this concern aside for the time being.
(R) If accepting \( C \) is risky for \( S \), then accepting \( P \) is also risky for \( S \).

Suppose now that \( S \) can only rationally accept but not rationally believe \( C \) (as it is generally the case, according to Wright). In this case, the acceptance of \( C \) is risky for \( S \). Through (R), the acceptance of \( P \) will also be risky for \( S \). Accordingly, whatever evidence \( S \) might possess, it won’t suffice to rationally sustain \( S \)’s belief in \( P \). (Cf. Wright 2004: 208-209 and 2014: 228).\(^{34}\) Hence the leaching problem emerges.

Wright denies that there is a leaching problem because he thinks that, under closer scrutiny, ‘the idea that the [epistemic] risk transfers from \( C \) to \( P \) is just the contrapositive of the idea that … evidential warrant transmits from \( P \) to \( C \). So interpreted, then, the worry about leaching is just a version of the discredited assumption that warrant is unrestrictedly transmissive.’ (Wright 2014: 229, my emphasis.)\(^{35}\) I think that this (very condensed argument) by Wright’s is problematic and ultimately fallacious. Before criticizing it, let’s try to understand what Wright has exactly in mind.

Wright notoriously maintains that justification doesn’t necessarily transmit across known entailment (see Wright 2002, 2007 and 2011). Wright says that \( S \)’s justification\(^{36}\) for believing \( X \) depending on evidence \( Z \) transmits across the entailment from \( X \) to \( Y \) just in case (i) \( S \) actually has justification for believing \( X \) from learning \( Z \), (ii) \( S \) knows that \( X \) entails \( Y \), and (iii) \( S \) has a justification for believing \( Y \) in virtue of the satisfaction of both (i) and (ii). Furthermore, Wright says—or would seem to say—that \( S \)’s justification for believing \( X \) depending on evidence \( Z \) is transmissive across the entailment from \( X \) to \( Y \) just in case:

\[
\text{(T)} \quad \text{If (i) } S \text{ had justification for believing } X \text{ from learning } Z \text{ and (ii) } S \text{ knew that } X \text{ entails } Y, \text{ then (iii) } S \text{ would have a justification for believing } Y \text{ in virtue of the satisfaction of both (i) and (ii).} \quad \text{(Cf. 2002: 332).}
\]

\(^{34}\) Wright attributes this argument to Sebastiano Moruzzi.

\(^{35}\) The thesis that justification is not always transmissive is also adduced by Wright to cope with the problem of alchemy (see Davies 2004: §II, Wright 2004: §II, McGlynn 2014, Wright 2014), which also affects his entitlement theory and that I won’t consider in this paper.

\(^{36}\) It is worth emphasizing that here Wright is speaking of propositional justification rather than doxastic.
To consider an example, take O to be an extremely improbable consequence of a newly introduced scientific hypothesis H, which entails an unchecked prediction K. If (a competent scientist) S verified O, this would probably give S strong justification for fully believing H. In this specific case it seems true that S’s justification for believing H coming from O is transmissive across the entailment from H to K. For, after replacing Z with O, X with H, and Y with K, (T) appears satisfied. Namely, it appears true that if both (i) and (ii) were the case, (iii) would also be the case.

There are other cases, though, in which a subject S’s justification for believing X from Z is not transmissive across the entailment from X to Y, for (T) proves false. Wright claims that (T) won’t be satisfied in any case in which S’s acquiring justification for believing X from Z requires S to have independent justification for accepting Y (cf. Wright 2002: 335-336). This claim strikes me as very plausible. Suppose S has two identical copies v₁ and v₂ of the Critique of Pure Reason. L₁ is the proposition that this book looks like v₁. V₁ is the proposition that this book is actually v₁. Not-V₂ is the proposition that this book is not v₂. Let’s replace Z with L₁, X with V₁, and Y with Not-V₂. It is easy to see that S’s acquiring justification for believing V₁ from her learning L₁ requires S to have independent justification for accepting Not-V₂.³⁷ Suppose now that (i) S learned L₁ and thereby acquired justification for V₁. Also suppose that (ii) S knew that V₁ entails Not-V₂. In this case S couldn’t acquire justification for believing Not-V₂ in virtue of—among other things—the satisfaction of (i). Rather, (i) would be satisfied in this case just because S would have independent justification for Not-V. Therefore, (iii) would be false. Since it is the case that if (i) and (ii) were true, (iii) would be false, (T) is false.³⁸ This is a case of non-transmissivity.

Consider now a proposition P (e.g. the proposition that there is a hand here), a cornerstone C relevant to P (e.g. the proposition that there is a material world) and a proposition E evidentially

³⁷ If S had no such independent justification, her learning L₁ would give her no reason to believe V₁ more than the incompatible proposition V₂.
³⁸ For a detailed discussion of transmission failure see Moretti and Piazza (2013: §3).
relevant to \( P \) depending on \( C \) (e.g. the proposition that \( S \) has the experience as if there is a hand here). Wright claims—as we saw before—that the thesis (R) that the epistemic risk transfers from \( C \) to \( P \) and thus ‘the worry about leaching’ are a version of the misguided view that evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive. Wright presumably means something along these lines: suppose evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive. Accordingly, \( S \)’s justification for \( P \) based on \( E \) is transmissive across the entailment from \( P \) to \( C \). The following version of (T) is thus true:

(T1) If (i) \( S \) had justification for believing \( P \) from learning \( E \) and (ii) \( S \) knew that \( P \) entails \( C \), then (iii) \( S \) would have a justification for believing \( C \) in virtue of the satisfaction of both (i) and (ii).

(T1) has the this contrapositive consequence: 39

(T2) If \( S \) doesn’t have justification for believing \( C \) in virtue of the satisfaction of both (i) and (ii), and \( S \) knows that \( P \) entails \( C \), then \( S \) doesn’t have justification from learning \( E \) for believing \( P \).

It is (T2) that appears to provide (R) and ‘the worry about leaching’ with a ground. Suppose accepting \( C \) is risky for \( S \), which is the same as saying that \( S \) doesn’t have justification for believing \( C \). If this the case, \( S \) doesn’t have justification for believing \( C \) in virtue of the satisfaction of (i) and (ii) either. Therefore, (conceding that \( S \) knows that \( P \) entails \( C \)) it follows via (T2) that \( S \) doesn’t have justification from \( E \) for believing \( P \), which is the same as saying that accepting \( P \) on the basis of \( E \) is risky for \( S \).

Against this explanation, Wright argues that justification is not unrestrictedly transmissive, and that—crucially—when \( C \) is a cornerstone relevant to \( S \)’s justification for \( P \’s \) based on \( E \), like in the case at stake, this justification of \( S \) is not transmissive across the entailment from \( P \) to \( C \). For, in

39 (T2) logically follows from the conditional material version of (T1)—saying that if both (i) and (ii) are true, then (iii) is true—by contraposition and other elementary logical rules, where the conditional material version of (T1) directly follows from (T1) itself. The intermediate step of deducing from (T1) a conditional material is necessary because (T1), as subjunctive conditional, doesn’t satisfy contraposition.
these circumstances, S’s having justification for believing $P$ from $E$ does require $S$ to have independent justification for $C$, which engenders non-transmissivity. Wright seems to think that since (T1) proves false, (R) has no ground, and the concern about leaching is only apparent.

Let me now clarify why I find Wright’s response to the leaching problem moot and ultimately flawed. A first motive of perplexity about it is this: to make sense of Wright’s words, I charitably interpreted (R) as a principle or schema in which $P$ and $C$ stand for propositions such that the first entails the second. That such a logical relation should hold between $P$ and $C$ appears to me to be an implicit assumption by Wright. For his celebrated account of transmissivity failure can successfully apply to $P$ and $C$ only if $P$ entails $C$. Nevertheless, propositions and relevant cornerstones are not always linked by a logical entailment. For example, the proposition that our sense organs are normally reliable is a cornerstone relevant to the perceptual justification of the proposition that, say, there is a hand here. But the second proposition doesn’t entail the first.

Suppose, therefore, that $P^*$ stands for any proposition, and $C^*$ for any relevant cornerstone appropriate for $P^*$ such that $P^*$ doesn’t entail $C^*$. One may find it intuitive that:

(R*) If accepting $C^*$ is risky for $S$, then accepting $P^*$ is also risky for $S$.

Note that (R*), as well as (R), appears to elicit the leaching problem. Also note that Wright’s explanation of why (R) is actually false or ungrounded couldn’t apply to (R*). For it would make no sense to say that the apparent validity of (R*) depends on the assumption that $S$’s justification for $P^*$ is transmissive across the entailment from $P^*$ to $R^*$. Wright’s response to the leaching problem looks thus incomplete at best—at least to those who, like myself, find (R*) intuitively plausible. For reason of space, I leave my defence of (R*) to another paper. I dedicate the remainder of this section to defend (versions of) the principle (R), in which $P$ is assumed to entail $C$. 
Suppose $E$ is the proposition that $S$ has some specific evidence for believing $P$, and that $C$ is a cornerstone entailed by $P$ relevant to the justifying force of $E$ with respect to $P$. (R) can be interpreted in two alternative ways that are not differentiated by Wright:

(R1) If accepting $C$ upon learning $E$ is risky for $S$, then accepting $P$ upon learning $E$ is also risky for $S$.

(R2) If accepting $C$ prior to learning $E$ was risky for $S$, then accepting $P$ upon learning $E$ is also risky for $S$.

Wright thinks that cornerstones can generally be supported by very little or no evidence at all. Therefore, on his conception of cornerstones, all instances of the antecedents of both (R1) and (R2) are true. Note that if some instance of either conditional proved (non-vacuously) true, the leaching problem would immediately arise. Also note that—in spite of this—Wright’s response to the leaching problem, if successful, could only disprove or discredit the instances of (R1) but no instance of (R2). For only (R1), but not (R2), can be interpreted along the lines of the argument by Wright analyzed above—that is to say, only (R1), but not (R2), can be interpreted as based on the thesis that $S$'s justification for $P$ is transmissive across the entailment from $P$ to $C$. The reason being that, on this interpretation, saying that accepting $C$ is risky for $S$ is equivalent to saying that $S$ doesn’t have—via transmission—justification for believing $C$ upon learning $E$. Thus, this interpretation requires conceiving of $S$'s accepting $C$ as risky upon $S$’s learning $E$. The fact that Wright’s argument can target only (R1) but not (R2) constitutes another limitation of Wright’s response to the leaching problem. I will first argue that—despite Wright’s argument—(R1) is generally true. Then, I will argue that at least some instance of (R2) is true.

Wright’s attempt to reject (R1) is ingenious but unsuccessful. Although the very dubious thesis that evidential justification is unrestrictedly transmissive cannot provide (R1) with a ground, it appears to me that (R1)’s truth simply rests on a quite standard interpretation of the notion of epistemic risk in terms of probability. Let $Pr$ be a function of probability interpreted subjectively. In
other words, let \( Pr(X) \) provide the degree of *rational credence* of a subject \( S \) in the truth of \( X \), where \( 0 \leq Pr(X) \leq 1 \). Furthermore, let \( Pr_s(X) \) provide the degree of rational credence of \( S \) in the truth of \( X \) upon her learning \( Z \). I take the updating procedure to be standard conditionalisation, according to which \( Pr_s(X) = Pr(X|Z) \) and \( Pr_s(Z) = 1 \).\(^{40}\) This says that for any propositions \( X \) and \( Z \) on which \( Pr \) is defined, as \( S \) learns \( Z \), \( S \)'s credence in \( X \) should equate to the conditional credence in \( X \) given \( Z \) that \( S \) had before learning \( Z \), and \( S \)'s credence in \( Z \) should become the highest possible. It is easy to prove that:

\[
(\text{ENT-P}) \text{ Whenever } X \text{ entails } Y, \text{ for any } Z, \; Pr_s(X) \leq Pr_s(Y). \quad \tag{41}
\]

This says that, if \( X \) entails \( Y \) (and \( S \) knows it), for any \( Z \), \( S \)'s credence in \( X \) upon \( S \)'s learning \( Z \) shouldn’t be higher than \( S \)'s credence in \( Y \) upon her learning \( Z \).\(^{42}\)

The term ‘risk’ is quite standardly interpreted as referring to *the probability of an unwanted event*, where ‘probability’ can be given a subjective interpretation (cf. Hansson 2014: §§1, 2).\(^{43}\) Accordingly, the degree of risk of accepting \( X \) for \( S \) can be identified with \( S \)'s degree of rational credence in the falsity of \( X \)—formally, with \( Pr(\neg X) \), where \( Pr(\neg X) \) equates to 1 minus \( Pr(X) \). This formal representation of epistemic risk proves intuitively adequate only if \( S \)'s degree of rational

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\(^{40}\) Where \( Pr(X|Z) =_{\text{def}} Pr(X \& Z)/Pr(Z) \), with \( Pr(Z) \neq 0 \).

\(^{41}\) Provided that \( Pr(Z) \neq 0 \). (\( \text{ENT-P} \)) follows from standard conditionalization and the basic theorem of the probability calculus that if \( X \) entails \( Y \), then for any \( Z \), \( Pr(X|Z) \leq Pr(Y|Z) \), provided \( Pr(Z) \neq 0 \).

\(^{42}\) Suppose one conceives of \( S \)'s justification for believing \( X \) as \( S \)'s high rational credence in \( X \)—say, higher than a certain threshold value \( c \). One might suspect that (\( \text{ENT-P} \)) entails that justification as high credence is unrestrictedly transmissive across entailment. However, the current literature on the topic (implicitly or explicitly) rejects this claim. Cf. Okasha (2004), White (2006), Chandler (2010), Moretti (2012), Moretti and Shogenji (Forthcoming). For instance, Moretti and Shogenji (Forthcoming: §2)—drawing from White (2006)—emphasize that (\( \text{ENT-P} \)) is *consistent* with the claim that \( Pr_s(X) < Pr(Y) \)—to the effect that \( Pr_s(X) > c \) only if \( Pr(Y) > c \)—which provides a formal translation of Wright’s condition for transmissivity failure considered above (according to which \( S \)'s acquiring justification for believing \( X \) from \( Z \) requires \( S \) to have independent justification for accepting \( Y \)). The effect is that whenever it is actually the case that \( Pr_s(X) < Pr(Y) \), \( S \)'s justification for \( X \) from \( Z \) will *not* be transmissive across the entailment from \( X \) to \( Y \) despite the truth of (\( \text{ENT-P} \)).

\(^{43}\) In this case it would perhaps be more appropriate to speak of *perceived* risk.
credence is conceived of as *evidentially constrained*, in the sense that the stronger S’s evidence for X’s truth is, the higher Pr(X) and so the lower Pr(~X) are, and *vice versa*.44

A simple measure of the risk of accepting X for S—indicated by Rs(X)—says that Rs(X) is identical to Pr(~X). My argument is easier to articulate, however, if we focus on Pr(X) rather than Pr(~X). The sought measure can thus be defined as follows:

(DEF1) \(Rs(X) = 1 - Pr(X)\).

(DEF1) says that the degree of the risk of accepting X for S is equal to 1 minus S’s degree of rational credence in X. Furthermore, a simple measure of the risk of accepting X upon learning Z for S—indicated by RsZ(X)—can be defined as follows:

(DEF2) \(RsZ(X) = 1 - PrZ(X)\).45

(DEF2) says that the degree of the risk of accepting X upon learning Z for S is equal to 1 minus S’s degree of rational credence in X upon her learning Z.

Note now that (ENT-P) and (DEF2) trivially imply:

(ENT-R) Whenever X entails Y, for any Z, \(RsZ(X) \geq RsZ(Y)\).46

This says that if X entails Y (and S knows it), for any Z, the degree of the risk of accepting X upon learning Z for S cannot be lower than the degree of the risk of accepting Y upon learning Z for S.

Recall that our goal is providing a ground for the truth of (R1). To achieve this goal we still need a formalization of the notion of *being risky*. The following formal translations appear to me rather straightforward:

(TR1) Accepting X (before learning Z) is risky for S if and only if \(Rs(X) > t\).

(TR2) Accepting X upon learning Z is risky for S if and only if \(RsZ(X) > t\).

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44 Therefore, though Pr is interpreted here subjectively, we should exclude forms of *extreme* subjectivism such as De Finetti (1937), which would imply that S is entitled to set Pr(X) as *she likes* provided this value is probabilistically coherent.

45 Given that PrZ(~X) is equal to 1 minus PrZ(X).

46 Provided that Pr(Z) ≠ 0.
Here \( t \) is a sufficiently high value of epistemic risk—intuitively, one that, if exceeded, would rationally debar \( S \) from believing \( X \). Note that (ENT-R) implies that:

Whenever \( X \) entails \( Y \), for any \( Z \), if \( Rs_2(Y) > t \), then \( Rs_2(X) > t \).

From this, through (TR2), we get:

Whenever \( X \) entails \( Y \), for any \( Z \), if accepting \( Y \) upon learning \( Z \) is risky for \( S \), then accepting \( X \) upon learning \( Z \) is risky for \( S \).

I we replace \( Y \) with \( C \), \( X \) with \( P \), and \( Z \) with \( E \) in the above statement, and we consider that \( P \) actually entails \( C \), we derive:

\[(R1) \text{ If accepting } C \text{ upon learning } E \text{ is risky for } S, \text{ then accepting } P \text{ upon learning } E \text{ is also risky for } S.\]

Thus, as announced initially, (R1)’s truth simply rests on a natural interpretation of the notion of risk in terms of subjective probability.

Let’s turn to (R2). Let me show that one instance of (R2) is true.\(^{47}\) Suppose \( E \) is the description of \( S \)’s all apparent memories at a given time \( t \).\(^ {48}\) Also suppose that \( P \) is the conjunction of the contents of \( S \)’s all apparent memories. A cornerstone for \( P \) is the logical negation \( (C) \) of the Russellian conjecture \( (R) \) according to which the world was created together with all of \( S \)’s apparent memories just before \( t \). Note that \( E \) is a logical consequence of \( R \), and that \( E \)’s truth would actually be explained to some extent by the truth of \( R \). Accordingly, it is quite intuitive that \( S \)’s learning \( E \) should increase—at least a tiny bit—her credence in \( R \) to the effect that:

\[Pr_E(R) > Pr(R).\]

Since \( C \) is just the logical negation of \( R \), it is easy to show that a consequence of the above inequality is:

\(^{47}\) My proof is a simple variant of one provided in White (2006) according to which \( Pr_E(P) < Pr(C) \). Where \( E \), \( P \) and \( C \) are given an interpretation similar to the present one.

\(^{48}\) Let’s assume they are consistent with one another.
that is to say, S’s learning E should decrease S’s credence in C.\footnote{This follows from two things: (1) the theorem of the probability calculus that if C is the logical negation of R and}$\Pr_{E}(C) < \Pr(C)$.\footnote{ (2) standard conditionalization.}\footnote{It is also worth stressing that E is not a consequence of C, and that E’s truth would not be explained by the truth of C. Thus it is not intuitive that S’s learning E should increase her credence in C.} From (DEF1), (DEF2) and the last inequality, it follows that:

$$Rs_{E}(C) > Rs(C).$$

That is to say, S’s learning E should make accepting C more risky for S. Consider now the instance of (ENT-R) according to which:

Whenever $P$ entails $C$, for any $E$, $Rs_{E}(P) \geq Rs_{E}(C)$.

Given that $P$ actually entails $C$, we obtain:

$$Rs_{E}(P) \geq Rs_{E}(C).$$

The above inequality and $Rs_{E}(C) > Rs(C)$ trivially entail:

$$Rs_{E}(P) > Rs(C).$$

Note that this in turn entails that:

If $Rs(C) > t$, then $Rs_{E}(P) > t$.

By applying (TR1) and (TR2) to the above conditional, we finally get:

(R2) If accepting $C$ prior to learning $E$ was risky for $S$, then accepting $P$ upon learning $E$ is also risky for $S$. 

This follows from two things: (1) the theorem of the probability calculus that if $C$ is the logical negation of $R$ and $Pr(R|E) > Pr(R)$, then $Pr(C|E) < Pr(C)$, and (2) standard conditionalization.
It would be easy to find true instances (R2) for some other interpretation of $E$, $P$ and $C$, where $E$ is an evidential proposition for $P$, and $C$ a relevant cornerstone.

6. Conclusions

In this paper 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 many other propositions. I have considered Wright’s important notion strategic entitlement and shown that whether or not strategic entitlement is genuinely epistemic, it is very dubious that there are cornerstones we are strategically entitled to trust. As strategic entitlement is only one of the different types of entitlement described by Wright, this cannot be taken to be a lethal objection to his entitlement theory. Nevertheless, I have also raised a more general objection capable of striking all forms of epistemic entitlement introduced by Wright at once. By relying on elementary probabilistic regimentations of the so-called leaching problem, I have shown that in no case non-evidential justification for accepting cornerstones could secure evidential justification for believing other propositions. Although I cannot exclude that Wright might successfully respond to my objections, entitlement theory appears to be in a quite poor shape presently.

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