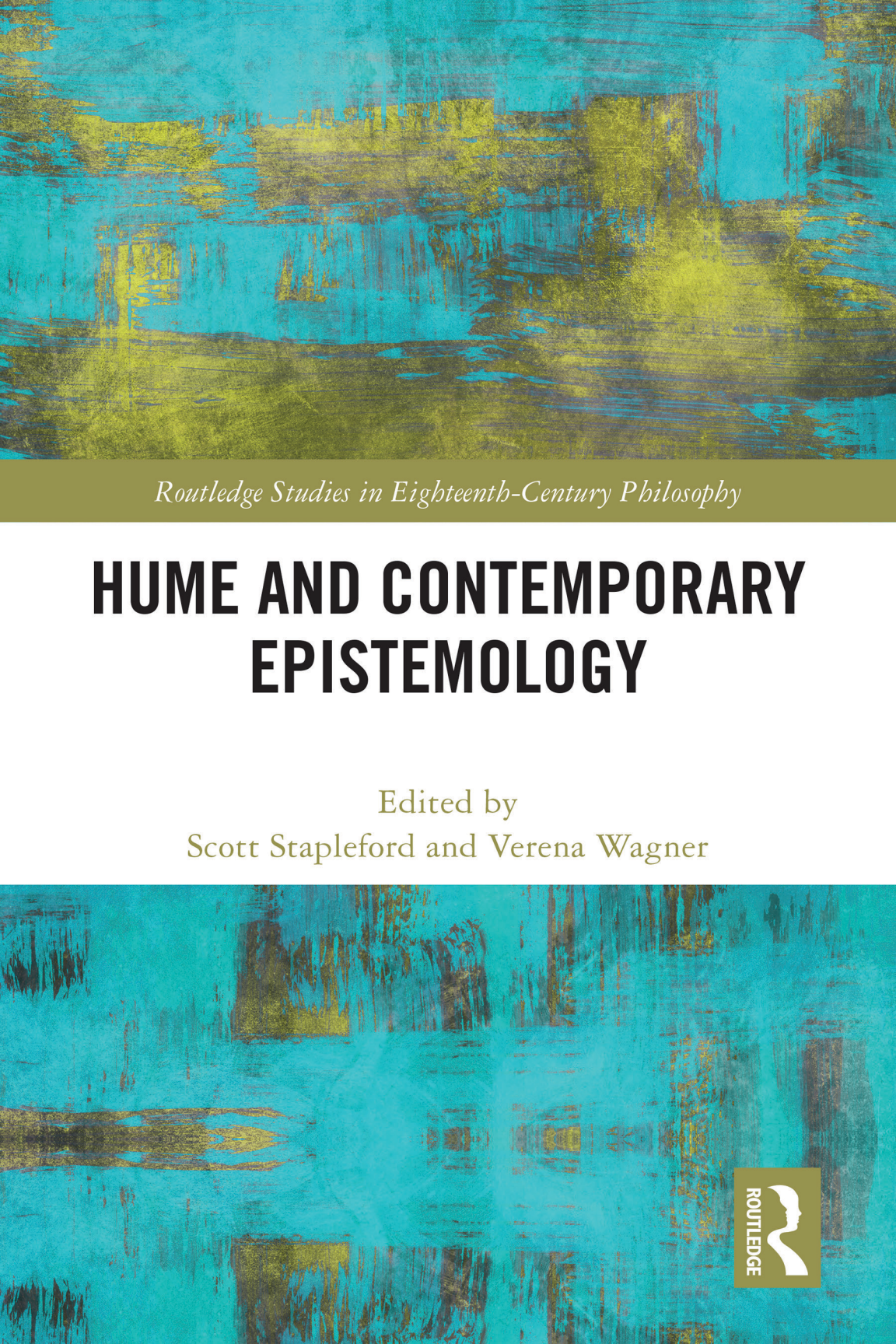




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HUME AND CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY

Edited by
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9 Humean Skepticism and Entitlement

Santiago Echeverri

Many philosophers have found in Hume's skeptical doubts concerning the operations of the understanding the roots of the problem of induction. Others have extracted from those doubts the materials for a skeptical argument that generalizes from induction to other domains, like our beliefs in the external world, other minds, and the past. While the problem of induction has featured prominently in philosophy of science, the skeptical argument has motivated the development of anti-skeptical strategies that can handle Humean skepticism in its full generality. This chapter is a contribution to the latter program.

The chapter falls into five sections. Section 9.1 offers a novel reconstruction of Humean skepticism. I identify several principles that enable that argument to reach a radical skeptical conclusion and compare its main steps with Hume's own doubts about 'reasonings' concerning matters of fact. Section 9.2 presents a classical interpretation of Hume's 'naturalist response' and explains why it does not avoid the skeptical conclusion. Section 9.3 offers an interpretation of Crispin Wright's entitlement theory as an attempt at avoiding the skeptical conclusion while retaining the key features of the classical, naturalist response. Section 9.4 suggests that entitlement theory relies on the truth of deeply contingent propositions that are not a priori rational, and that it does not manage to redefine the concept of epistemic rationality while offering an effective anti-skeptical response. Section 9.5 suggests that a better response to Humean skepticism might benefit from more recent, non-classical readings of Hume's positive views on induction.

9.1 Humean Skepticism

When contemporary philosophers engage with classical philosophers, they often overlook some assumptions and commitments that shaped the original claims and arguments. As a result, contemporary philosophers have

created fictional characters like the Cartesian skeptic about the external world (Stroud 1984), the Wittgensteinian skeptic about rules and private language (Kripke 1982), and the Humean skeptic about induction, the external world, other minds, and the past (Coliva 2015; Greco 2000; Wright 1985, 2004, 2014). Our topic is the Humean skeptic and his argument for Humean skepticism. In deference to Hume scholars, I will refer to that fictional character as ‘Hume*.’

Before we get started, let me mention two salient differences between Hume* and Hume. First, Hume* relies on Hume’s ideas to formulate a radical skeptical argument. By contrast, Hume insisted that only moderate forms of skepticism could be beneficial to our epistemic conduct (EHU 12). Second, Hume did not present his doubts concerning the operations of the understanding as a paradox but as the conclusion of an investigation into the nature of human ‘reasonings’ concerning matters of fact. Therefore, Hume’s goal was not to uncover a contradiction in our pre-theoretical commitments but to oppose prevalent, rationalist views of how humans come to discover matters of fact (EHU 4).

Those discrepancies notwithstanding, the study of paradoxes provides an excellent method to discover deep tensions or unclarities in the epistemic concepts that govern our epistemic practices. This point is particularly clear in Humean skepticism, which has played a central role in contemporary epistemology. My first goal is to offer a reconstruction of Humean skepticism that identifies the principles that are responsible for its generality. I will assume, as many contemporary philosophers do, that skepticism is not a live option. Given that assumption, the main philosophical task is to show where the skeptical argument goes wrong. We have two main options: either show that some step of the argument relies on a misunderstanding of our pre-theoretical commitments or reject some step by revising some of our pre-theoretical commitments. To keep the discussion manageable, I shall focus on Humean skepticism about enumerative induction (hereafter, ‘induction’).¹

Skepticism about Induction

Premise 1. The reasons for *S*’s beliefs in inductive generalizations are underdetermined.

Premise 2. If the reasons for *S*’s beliefs in inductive generalizations are underdetermined, then *S*’s beliefs in inductive generalizations are epistemically rational only if *S* has independent reasons for those inductive generalizations.

Premise 3. *S* lacks independent reasons for inductive generalizations.

Conclusion. So, *S*’s beliefs in inductive generalizations are not epistemically rational.

Before we explain the premises, some clarificatory remarks are in order. 'S' denotes any normal adult human. The argument targets 'epistemic rationality.' We will understand epistemic rationality as a *status* that attaches to a subject's beliefs. What it takes for a belief to be epistemically rational is a matter of some controversy, as will become clear later. Nevertheless, the following condition will do for our purposes: If S's belief in *p* is epistemically rational, then S's belief is appropriately based on sufficient epistemic reasons.

Premise 1 says that the reasons for S's beliefs in inductive generalizations are underdetermined. Underdetermination is a relation between S's reasons and pairs of contrary propositions (also known as 'alternatives'). Two propositions *p* and *q* are contraries just in case *p* and *q* cannot both be true. We can specify underdetermination with a principle:

UNDERDETERMINATION. For any subject, *S*, and pairs of contrary propositions *p* and *q*: S's reasons for believing *p* are underdetermined if and only if S's reasons do not favor *p* over *q*.

Hume* holds that the reasons for S's beliefs in inductive generalizations are underdetermined because S's reasons do not favor inductive generalizations over many alternatives. We will proceed with an intuitive understanding of the favoring relation. Hume* thinks that the reasons for human beliefs in inductive generalizations consist of present and past observations alone. Suppose that Carlos has a belief in the proposition <The sun will rise tomorrow>. So, the reasons for Carlos' belief consist of his present and past observations: <The sun rose today>, <The sun rose yesterday>, and so on. For Hume*, Carlos' reasons do not favor the proposition <The sun will rise tomorrow> over many alternatives, like the proposition: <A meteorite will slam the Earth while Carlos is sleeping, producing an acid rain that will prevent the sun from rising tomorrow>. The reason is straightforward: the latter proposition is consistent with all of Carlos' observations so far. That is why the reasons for Carlos' belief in <The sun will rise tomorrow> are underdetermined. Let us refer to Premise 1 as the 'Underdetermination step.'²

Premise 2 says that, whenever the reasons for S's belief in *p* are underdetermined, the rationality of S's belief in *p* requires that *S* has *independent* reasons for *p*. Suppose that the source of S's reasons is A. *S* has independent reasons for *p* just in case *S* has evidence from a source B other than A ($A \neq B$). Hume* motivates Premise 2 by citing a general principle that seems to govern our everyday epistemic practices:

INDEPENDENT REASONS. For any subject, *S*, and proposition *p*: if the reasons for S's belief in *p* are underdetermined, then: If S's belief in *p* is epistemically rational, *S* has independent reasons for *p*.

Imagine an archeologist who has been excavating the ruins of a hitherto unknown civilization. One of her most remarkable findings is a large monolith that seems to indicate the time of the day through the changing locations of its shadow during the day. Some weeks after the discovery, our archeologist sees the shadow of the monolith at some location. On that basis, she forms the belief in the proposition <It is 2:00 pm>. Suppose now that her belief is rational. It would be a mistake to assume that the rationality of that belief stems only from her observation of the location of the shadow. Indeed, (seeing) the location of the shadow does not seem to favor the proposition <It is 2:00 pm> over many alternatives. Since we have assumed that the target belief is rational, INDEPENDENT REASONS compels us to conclude that our archeologist has independent reasons that favor the proposition <It is 2:00 pm> over many alternatives. For example, our archeologist has independent evidence about the way that civilization divided time and about the principles that enable the monolith to indicate different periods of time as a function of the changing locations of the shadow.

Since INDEPENDENT REASONS holds without restriction, it applies to beliefs in inductive generalizations. If the reasons for Carlos' belief in <The sun will rise tomorrow> are underdetermined, then Carlos' belief in that proposition can be rational only if Carlos has independent reasons for <The sun will rise tomorrow>. There are different ways of fleshing out the independence requirement. After reading Hume's writings, Hume* comes up with a suggestion: one can only have independent reasons for inductive generalizations if one has independent reasons for the principle of the uniformity of nature (hereafter, UNIFORMITY):

UNIFORMITY. Future events tend to be similar to past events.

(EHU 4.30)³

If Carlos has independent reasons for UNIFORMITY, it is not unreasonable to think that Carlos' belief in <The sun will rise tomorrow> is rational. To be sure, Hume* is aware that UNIFORMITY might not suffice to yield that verdict. If Carlos' observations do not constitute a representative sample, his inductive beliefs won't qualify as rational. Nevertheless, Hume* insists that having independent reasons for UNIFORMITY is at least necessary to qualify Carlos' belief in <The sun will rise tomorrow> as rational. We shall dub Premise 2 the 'Independence step.'⁴

Premise 3 says that INDEPENDENT REASONS cannot be satisfied. Hume* argues by elimination. Sources of justification are of two types: empirical and a priori. Sadly, none of those sources provides Carlos with independent reasons for UNIFORMITY.

Let us start with empirical sources. UNIFORMITY specifies a similarity relation between past and future events. It seems impossible to acquire reasons for the obtaining of those similarity relations on the sole basis of *present* and *past* observations. Moreover, humans lack any empirical access to *future* events. The only remaining option is induction. However, Hume* had told us that inductive beliefs are based on present and past observations. Since the reasons provided by present and past observations are underdetermined, appealing to induction would launch us on an infinite regress.

Consider now a priori sources. Many contemporary philosophers accept that we can have a priori reasons to believe *some* contingent propositions (Kripke 1980; Kaplan 1977). Nevertheless, most of them deny that one can have a priori reasons to believe contingent propositions that describe *deep* features of the actual world (but see Hawthorne 2002). We can encapsulate this idea in a principle:

RESTRICTED A PRIORI. For any subject, *S*, and proposition *p*: If *S* has a priori reasons for *p*, then *p* is not a deeply contingent proposition.

<The sun will rise tomorrow> and <Future events tend to be similar to past events> are deeply contingent propositions. Given RESTRICTED A PRIORI, Carlos lacks any a priori reasons for those propositions.

Suppose now that the empirical/a priori distinction is exhaustive. Then, Carlos lacks independent reasons for <The sun will rise tomorrow>. Let us call Premise 3 the 'Unavailability step'.¹⁵

'Skepticism about induction' is a valid argument. If the three premises are true, a skeptical conclusion follows. In our case, Carlos' belief in <The sun will rise tomorrow> is not epistemically rational. Since we could have chosen any other adult human and any other inductive proposition, the prior argument yields a radical skeptical conclusion.

Our reconstruction of skepticism about induction has a pay-off: it makes explicit the principles that explain the capacity of Humean skepticism to generalize from induction to many other domains. The argument starts from a structural deficiency that can potentially affect human epistemic reasons in other domains, such as the external world, other minds, and the past (Underdetermination step). After that, the argument identifies an epistemic requirement that arises whenever one faces that structural deficiency (Independence step). Finally, the argument employs a seemingly exhaustive dichotomy of epistemic sources to conclude that humans are unable, as a matter of principle, to meet the epistemic requirement (Unavailability step). So, Humean skepticism provides the materials for a piecemeal strategy to motivate a global skepticism about epistemic rationality.

9.2 The Classical Humean Response as a Concessive Response

Responses to Humean skepticism come in two types. ‘Concessive responses’ accept the Underdetermination and Independence steps and try to limit their damage. ‘Non-concessive responses’ reject at least one of the initial steps.

According to a classical reading, Hume was attracted to a concessive response. Although he did not formulate the prior argument, he would have accepted the three premises and the skeptical conclusion. He would have then tried to mitigate the damage by delineating a psychological explanation of how someone like Carlos forms beliefs in inductive generalizations. On this view, the principle of ‘custom’ leads Carlos to unavoidably project his observations of past events to unobserved future events (EHU 5.36–38). That projection always results in a belief, i.e., a doxastic state that does not depend on the will and is accompanied by a feeling or sentiment that makes it a ‘vivid, lively, forcible, firm, and steady conception of an object’ (EHU 5.40). Even if Carlos lacks reasons for his beliefs in inductive generalizations, the situation is not as bad as it might initially appear. Perhaps beliefs in inductive generalizations are *exempt* from epistemic evaluation (Strawson 1985). Or, since nature compels humans to form beliefs in inductive generalizations, humans can be *excused* for forming those beliefs (Avnur 2016). Still, both reactions concede that beliefs in inductive generalizations are not epistemically rational.

Although the classical reading has had supporters (Kemp Smith 1941; Passmore 1980; Wilson 1997), it faces a coherence challenge (Kemp Smith 1941). If one endorses the premises and conclusion of the skeptical argument, it is unclear whether and how one could rationally motivate the classical response, which relies on inductive generalizations about how people acquire—by custom—dispositions to project past and present observations into the future.⁶ Still, the classical view remains popular in contemporary epistemology as a foil for other, anti-skeptical strategies. Indeed, many contemporary epistemologists have motivated their own anti-skeptical strategies as attempts at retaining some tenets of the classical response while trying to fare better from an anti-skeptical perspective. In the next section, I argue that Crispin Wright’s entitlement theory is a concessive response that shares many features of the classical reading of Hume’s response. Since I do not endorse the classical reading of Hume’s response, I attribute it to Hume*.⁷

9.3 Entitlement Theory as a Hinge Epistemology

In *On Certainty*, Ludwig Wittgenstein suggests that our epistemic practices take place within a framework that makes those practices possible. He

famously compares the components of that framework to the hinges of a door:

[T]he *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.

That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.

But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

(Wittgenstein 1969, §§341–3)

There has been a heated debate on what qualifies as a hinge. Wittgenstein (1969, §135, §481) seems to construe UNIFORMITY as a hinge. If one endorses that reading, one can compare Hume* to Wittgenstein. Hume* accepts that UNIFORMITY is an assumption that is necessary in order to have rational beliefs in inductive generalizations. Since we lack independent reasons for UNIFORMITY, skepticism follows. However, our psychological constitution leads us to form steady beliefs in inductive generalizations. So, Hume* is a hinge epistemologist of sorts. Contrary to Hume*, however, Wittgenstein insists that we rely on UNIFORMITY, not because of our psychological constitution but because of our upbringing within a community. This approach is known as the 'naturalist reading' of *On Certainty* (Coliva 2015; Strawson 1985).

Entitlement theory tries to overcome the skeptical implications of the naturalist reading. To see why, we must first introduce Wright's views on the extension, nature, and roles of hinges.

Extension. Wright distinguishes two types of hinges. On the one hand, there are 'hinges' properly so-called, i.e., propositions that stay put across contexts. UNIFORMITY is an example of a hinge in that sense (Wright 2004, 170). Other propositions only stay put in specific contexts. Wright dubs them 'cornerstones.' They include the proposition that my eyes are functioning properly *now*, that the things I am *currently* perceiving have not been extensively disguised to conceal their true nature, and so on (Wright 2004, 190; 2014, 215). For simplicity, I will use 'hinge' for both hinges and cornerstones.

Nature. Hinges are propositions that feature as the contents of *sui generis* doxastic attitudes that Wright calls 'acceptances.' In an everyday sense, one can accept a proposition that one takes to be false, as when someone accepts that *p* in the context of a *reductio ad absurdum*. For Wright, if a subject accepts a hinge, she finds herself in a state that is incompatible with doubt concerning its content (Wright 2004, 193). The incompatibility

with doubt has two meanings. In a logical sense, a subject cannot simultaneously accept a hinge and doubt that hinge (Wright 2004, 181). In a modal sense, if a subject accepts a hinge, that subject cannot easily come to doubt that hinge (Wright 2004, 226). Hence, Wright's conception of acceptance is reminiscent of Hume's conception of belief (Section 9.2). Yet, Wright's conception of acceptance differs from contemporary views of belief that analyze the latter as constitutively controlled by evidence. Wright tries to capture those similarities and differences with the concept of trust. Although trust is not constitutively controlled by evidence, it has the same psychological consequences of (Humean) belief (Wright 2004, 182).

Roles. Many Wittgenstein scholars think of hinges as grammatical rules of language games and, therefore, as determinants of meaning (Moyal-Sharrock 2004; Schönbaumsfeld 2016). Wright (1985) has flirted with this idea. However, his subsequent work depicts hinges solely as epistemic rules. Hinges regulate all cognitive activities and the achievements that result from those activities. For example, they help determine whether a subject has evidence for a proposition, whether one may rely on an epistemic source to answer a question, and whether a type of epistemic source should take precedence over another (Wright 2014, 242–3). Departing from the letter of Wittgenstein's remarks, Wright often suggests that hinges underwrite not only *scientific* investigations but *any* cognitive achievement, including Carlos' belief in the proposition <The sun will rise tomorrow>.⁸

With this framework on the table, we can explain the essentials of entitlement theory. Wright thinks that our trust in hinges can be epistemically rational even though it is neither the upshot of a cognitive achievement nor based on evidence (Wright 1985, 452; 2004, 174–5; 2012, 475; 2014, 214). He coins the term 'entitlement' to denote this kind of unearned, non-evidential epistemic rationality. So, while Hume* has managed to identify the essential limits of earned, evidential rationality, he has mistakenly assumed that rationality is a status that one can only enjoy by having evidence (Wright 2004, 191).

Wright's response is both concessive and non-skeptical. He grants the Underdetermination and Independence steps but rejects the Unavailability step. If a subject can enjoy an independent entitlement to trust hinges, and those hinges underwrite any cognitive achievement, it is not true that independent reasons are unavailable. Those independent reasons need not be grounded in evidence. Since Wright accepts both the Underdetermination and Independence steps, he cannot derive those independent reasons from experience. So, Wright is compelled to derive them from an a priori source. However, Wright also accepts RESTRICTED A PRIORI. So, he does not try to find a priori reasons that speak to the truth of hinges. Instead, Wright identifies one or more epistemic goals of human subjects and tries to show that

a subject's trustings of hinges promote her attainment of those epistemic goals. Let us summarize these ideas in a simple anti-skeptical response:

Entitlement response

Premise 1. *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals.

Premise 2. If *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals, *S* has epistemic reasons to trust hinges.

Conclusion. So, *S* has epistemic reasons to trust hinges.

Wright defends Premise 1 with a series of a priori considerations to show that a subject's trustings of hinges promote her attainment of her epistemic goals. Each consideration gives rise to a different kind of entitlement: strategic entitlement, entitlement of cognitive project, entitlement of rational deliberation, and entitlement of substance. In each case, Wright tries to show that a subject's trustings of hinges promote different epistemic goals, such as maximizing the formation of true beliefs, answering a question in a competent manner, and engaging in rational deliberation.

Wright defends Premise 2 by revising a traditional view of epistemic and pragmatic reasons. According to the traditional view, epistemic reasons are considerations that *consist in* or are *grounded in* evidence that indicates the truth of the target proposition. To illustrate, if you have read a statistical report that says that it is more likely for smokers than for non-smokers to suffer from cancer, then you have an *epistemic reason* to believe that smoking causes cancer. By contrast, pragmatic reasons are reasons that are grounded in the subject's goals. If you want to work for a tobacco company that only hires people who do not believe that smoking causes cancer, this might give you a *pragmatic reason* to believe that smoking does not cause cancer (Harman 1999). If one endorses the traditional view, however, it follows that entitlement theory provides, at best, pragmatic reasons. Sadly, Humean skepticism can be avoided only if one can avail oneself of epistemic reasons for beliefs in inductive generalizations (Jenkins 2007; Moretti and Pedersen 2021; Pritchard 2005).

Wright (2012, 484; 2014, 239) thinks that we should get rid of the traditional view of epistemic and pragmatic reasons. In his picture, there is no special genre of pragmatic reasons that contrasts with epistemic reasons. One can derive epistemic reasons for *S*'s trusting hinge *h* if one can show that *S*'s trusting *h* promotes the attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals (Wright 2012, 484; 2014, 239). So, Wright invites us to think of the epistemic rationality of hinges on the model of a practical syllogism that makes an ineliminable reference to the subject's epistemic goals (Wright 2004, 182; 2014, 238). Promotion of a subject's epistemic goals can be all it takes for trust in a hinge to count as epistemically rational.

Before we move forward, I would like to alert the reader to an ambiguity in the entitlement response. In some passages, Wright seems to think that entitlements are relevant to characterize the epistemic rationality of *ordinary* subjects' trustings and beliefs (Wright 2004, 169–70). In other passages, he seems to think that entitlements are only relevant to characterize the epistemic rationality of *reflective* subjects' trustings and beliefs (Wright 2012, 466). By 'reflective subjects' I mean subjects who have engaged in an investigation of skepticism. This ambiguity will become important as we proceed.

In the next section, I criticize the two premises of the entitlement response. Along the way, I formulate a second version of the entitlement response and show that it fails as an anti-skeptical response.⁹

9.4 A Critique of Entitlement

In Section 9.4.1, I argue that Wright's defense of Premise 1 fails because one cannot show that a subject's trustings of hinges promote her attainment of her epistemic goals without relying on the truth of some deeply contingent propositions. And, by Wright's own admission, we lack a priori reasons to believe deeply contingent propositions. In Section 9.4.2, I argue that the dependence of trustings on a subject's goals, combined with that subject's lack of any evidence in favor of the relevant hinges, prevents entitlement theory from offering an epistemic response to Humean skepticism.

9.4.1 *Against Premise 1*

Premise 1. *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals.

What does it take for *S*'s trusting to promote the attainment of *S*' epistemic goals? A natural view appeals to objective probabilities: *S*'s trusting of hinge *h* promotes the attainment of *S*'s epistemic goal *e* only if *S*'s trusting of *h* increases the objective probability that *S* attains *e*.¹⁰ Given this natural view, I will show that Wright's two key defenses of entitlement—strategic entitlement and entitlement of cognitive project—rely on the truth of deeply contingent propositions that are not grounded in a priori reasons.¹¹

9.4.1.1 *Strategic Entitlement*

Strategic entitlement holds that placing trust in hinges is epistemically rational because that attitude promotes some epistemic goals, like forming

many true beliefs. Wright defends this claim with a game-theoretic argument.

Suppose that one's sole epistemic goal is to form many true beliefs. Then, trusting hinges is the dominant strategy in a game-theoretic sense. For any epistemic goal, a range of strategies $s_1, \dots, s_n$ for attaining that goal, and possible scenarios $w_1, \dots, w_k$, a strategy s_i ($1 \leq i \leq n$) is a dominant strategy if and only if it does at least as well as every other strategy for any scenario and, for at least one scenario, it does better.¹² So, in a scenario where UNIFORMITY holds, Carlos will acquire many true beliefs in inductive generalizations by trusting UNIFORMITY and reasoning inductively. In all the other scenarios, Carlos will acquire a few true beliefs. If Carlos' sole epistemic goal is to form true beliefs, trusting UNIFORMITY and reasoning inductively is the dominant strategy.

	Nature is uniform	Nature is haphazard
Trust and inductive reasoning	Many true beliefs	Few true beliefs
No trust and inductive reasoning	Few true beliefs	Few true beliefs

Unfortunately, trusting UNIFORMITY and reasoning inductively can be the dominant strategy *and* not promote Carlos' epistemic goal of forming many true beliefs. That will happen if Carlos lives in a world where nature is haphazard (Wright 2004, 186). Interestingly, Wright does not see this concession as a decisive *objection*. Perhaps the game-theoretic argument still works if it is appropriately limited: If Carlos lives in a world where nature is uniform, trusting UNIFORMITY and reasoning inductively will promote Carlos' epistemic goal of forming many true beliefs. Alas, this assessment hides a deeper problem.

For Wright, the epistemic rationality of Carlos' trust in UNIFORMITY is conditional on Carlos being in a world where he gets many true beliefs by trusting UNIFORMITY. Since that only happens in a world where nature is uniform, it follows that the epistemic rationality of Carlos' trust in UNIFORMITY is conditional on Carlos being in a world where UNIFORMITY is true. So, the epistemic rationality of Carlos' trust in UNIFORMITY depends on the truth of a self-locating proposition: <In my world, UNIFORMITY is true>. If Carlos lacks a priori reasons for UNIFORMITY because UNIFORMITY is a deeply contingent proposition, it is unclear why Carlos could have a priori reasons for a self-locating proposition with UNIFORMITY as a constituent. The same point applies if we take a more theoretical perspective. It is unclear why a theorist who has followed the argument for Humean skepticism could have a priori reasons for the proposition <In Carlos' world, UNIFORMITY is true>. In both cases, the only remaining option is to get those reasons from experience. If Hume* is right, however,

our empirical reasons are underdetermined because they do not favor <In my world, UNIFORMITY is true> or <In Carlos' world, UNIFORMITY is true> over many alternatives. Therefore, strategic entitlement relies on the truth of a deeply contingent proposition that is neither a priori, nor empirically rational.

9.4.1.2 *Entitlement of Cognitive Project*

Entitlement of cognitive project purports to show that *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s competent execution of *S*'s cognitive projects. A cognitive project can be defined as an ordered pair of a question (Q) and a method one might competently employ to answer that question: <Q, M> (Wright 2012, 466). I will argue that a subject's trustings of hinges alone do not promote her competent execution of cognitive projects concerning the world, including inductive generalizations. Promotion requires the truth of some deeply contingent propositions. Given RESTRICTED A PRIORI, we lack a priori reasons to believe those deeply contingent propositions. Given the Underdetermination step, we lack empirical reasons to believe those deeply contingent propositions too. My argument relies on an example from everyday life that relies on a cornerstone. However, it should not be difficult to generalize that example to context-invariant hinges.

While visiting Mexico City, Sara has a craving for tacos. Sara's craving gives rise to a question: Where is a good taqueria? Happily, Sara has a method she can competently employ to answer that question: a map that Diego gave her before she traveled to Mexico City. To competently execute her cognitive project, Sara must trust several hinges, including ACCURACY:

ACCURACY. My map accurately represents Mexico City.

Suppose now that Sara does not trust ACCURACY. Hence, Sara cannot answer her question by competently using her map. Nevertheless, this observation is insufficient to offer a good explanation of how Sara's trusting of ACCURACY promotes the attainment of her epistemic goal. Let us say that Sara's cognitive project is successful in a *strong sense* if and only if, by competently using her map, Sara manages to find a good taqueria in a non-lucky manner.¹³ I will argue that Sara's trusting of ACCURACY is insufficient to account for the strong success of her cognitive project. More specifically, it is insufficient to explain how she manages to find a good taqueria in a non-lucky manner.

To get the required explanation, we need an additional assumption, namely, that Sara's map is indeed accurate. To see why, suppose that we are not allowed to make this additional assumption. Hence, our explanation should range over scenarios in which Sara retains the attitude of

trust in ACCURACY while she has a fake map fabricated by a prankster. In those scenarios, Sara's attitude of trust could at best explain why she started the search for a good taqueria in a certain direction. However, it is very unlikely that Sara could find a good taqueria by using a fake map fabricated by a prankster. And were Sara to find a good taqueria while using a fake map fabricated by a prankster, the success of Sara's project would be a matter of luck. In the prankster scenario, if we wanted to explain how Sara managed to attain her epistemic goal (i.e., find a good taqueria), it would be misleading to *merely* cite Sara's trust in ACCURACY. We should rather say that Sara's project was successful *in spite of* her placing trust in ACCURACY. In sum, if we understand the success of Sara's cognitive project in a strong sense, her attitude of trust only promotes the success of her project if the relevant hinge is true.

Unfortunately, <My map accurately represents Mexico City> is a deeply contingent proposition. Given RESTRICTED A PRIORI, we lack a priori reasons for deeply contingent propositions. Hence, if Wright wants to explain the success of a cognitive project, he must rely on the truth of a deeply contingent proposition that he lacks any a priori reason to rely on. Given the Underdetermination step, experience cannot justify that deeply contingent proposition either.¹⁴

Wright sometimes flirts with a weaker claim. On the alternative view, entitlements of cognitive project merely explain how we can avoid cognitive paralysis (Wright 2004, 191). This point is reminiscent of various passages from Hume, where he argues—against the Pyrrhonist—that ‘all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence’ (EHU 12.128). Trusting hinges enables us to *start* cognitive projects. Sara's trust in ACCURACY enables her to transition from feeling hungry to starting the search for a good taqueria with the help of her map (whether she ends up finding a good taqueria or not).¹⁵

Unfortunately, even this modest explanatory project relies on the truth of a deeply contingent proposition:

PSYCHOLOGICAL NECESSITATION. For any subject, *S*, proposition *p*, and desire *F*: If a subject, *S*, trusts *h*, *S* wants to *F*, and *S* has the means to initiate a project to satisfy *F*, *S* will be set in motion to satisfy *F*.

Imagine a world where an evil demon has decided to manipulate Sara's brain. Each time Sara wants to know the location of a good taqueria and has the means to initiate a search for a taqueria, the evil demon blocks the brain processes responsible for transforming Sara's desire into the appropriate intention and that intention into appropriate motion. Similarly, each

time Sara wants to undertake more intellectual projects, like calculating the probability of rain for next week on behalf of a statistical model, the evil demon blocks the process responsible for transforming Sara's desire into an intention to make the calculation and that intention into calculating activity. Perhaps Sara does not live in that world. Nevertheless, if that world is metaphysically possible, PSYCHOLOGICAL NECESSITATION is a contingent proposition. Since that proposition describes deep features of the connection among Sara's desires, intentions, and actions, we are faced with a deeply contingent proposition. Given RESTRICTED A PRIORI, we lack a priori reasons for deeply contingent propositions. So, Wright must rely on empirical sources. Yet, by Wright's own admission, those empirical sources are underdetermined.

9.4.1.3 *Summing Up*

Strategic entitlement and entitlement of cognitive project provide cogent arguments only if they rely on the truth of deeply contingent propositions. If we lack a priori reasons for deeply contingent propositions, the two forms of entitlement fail to show that placing trust in hinges promotes a subject's epistemic goals. Perhaps there are other forms of entitlement, or other choices of epistemic goals, that are not prey to these objections. In my view, the whole project is hopeless. If one introduces forms of entitlement that do not promote truth-related goals, the result won't be very different from the skeptical conclusion, which says that adult humans lack *epistemic* reasons to believe inductive generalizations. If one introduces forms of entitlement that do promote truth-related goals concerning deeply contingent propositions, like inductive generalizations, we will implicitly rely on the truth of other, deeply contingent propositions.

9.4.2 *Against Premise 2*

Premise 2. If *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals, *S* has epistemic reasons to trust hinges.

For Wright, trusting *h* is incompatible with doubt about *h* (Section 9.3). Let us say that, whenever a doxastic attitude displays this form of incompatibility, it is a doxastically closed attitude.

Wright's view is puzzling. Consider the deeply contingent proposition <The number of planets in the universe is even>. In the absence of any evidence whatsoever, trusting that the number of planets in the universe is even seems to go too far. The traditional view of epistemic rationality offers a neat explanation of this intuition. One may bear a doxastically closed attitude toward that proposition only if one has sufficient evidence

for that proposition. Otherwise, it is not epistemically rational to trust that the number of planets in the universe is even.

Perhaps the problem will vanish if one construes epistemic entitlement on a 'welfare model.' On that model,

an agent does not need to know her rights in order to have them. Indeed, she may have no conception of a right. And 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 or, though aware, unable to make out a cogent case that they are.

(Wright 2014, 221–2)

So, the puzzlement articulated above rests on a misconception of how entitlements feature in a subject's mental life.

Unfortunately, this reply only exacerbates the original problem. Wright thinks that we need a response to Humean skepticism that enables a reflective subject to *rationaly appreciate* that she is epistemically rational in believing propositions in the target domain and *claim* that belief in those propositions is epistemically rational (Wright 2004, 167; 2012, 466, 471). Entitlement theory does not put a reflective subject in any of those desirable positions.

Suppose that you find Wright's arguments in favor of Premise 1 persuasive. Still, those arguments are insufficient to generate in you any rational conviction in UNIFORMITY. This verdict is explained by a simple observation: none of Wright's arguments suffices to enable you to rationally enter a doxastically closed attitude toward UNIFORMITY.

Suppose that Carlos accepts Wright's strategic entitlement. When Carlos contemplates Wright's four-cell matrix, he concludes that trusting UNIFORMITY and reasoning inductively will give him many true beliefs in one scenario and few true beliefs in the other three scenarios. Sadly, that realization is not sufficient for Carlos to enter a doxastically closed attitude toward UNIFORMITY or, for that matter, to back up his doxastically closed attitude in <The sun will rise tomorrow>. Indeed, while contemplating the matrix, it will seem appropriate for Carlos to say: 'For all I know, I might be in a scenario where nature is haphazard and most of my inductive beliefs are false'. To get a doxastically closed attitude, Carlos would still need evidence that indicates that he is in a world where UNIFORMITY is true.

Wright thinks that the mediation of a want in the psychological architecture of trust is irrelevant to assess the resulting attitude as epistemically rational (Wright 2014, 238–9). That seems wrong. Imagine that Carlos is convinced that he lacks any evidence whatsoever for UNIFORMITY. Imagine also that Carlos has accepted Wright's arguments for Premise 1. If

Carlos wanted to use Wright's arguments to rationally appreciate that he is rational in trusting UNIFORMITY and claim that trusting UNIFORMITY is rational, the best he could do is put all these propositions together into a desperate practical syllogism:

Premise 1. I have no evidence whatsoever for UNIFORMITY.

Premise 2. Nevertheless, I want to get many true inductive beliefs and avoid cognitive paralysis.

Premise 3. In order to get many true inductive beliefs and avoid cognitive paralysis, I must trust UNIFORMITY.

Conclusion. So, I trust UNIFORMITY.

In the absence of evidence for hinges, practical syllogisms of this sort constitute the only rational routes available to a reflective subject. Nevertheless, these practical syllogisms strike most of us as epistemically irrational. That is probably why it is so hard to assess wishful thinking as epistemically rational. Practical syllogisms do not provide rational paths to enter a doxastically closed attitude toward UNIFORMITY. The only way of mitigating the irrationality of these syllogisms is to read their conclusions as expressing merely strategic attitudes. However, merely strategic attitudes are consistent with doubt about UNIFORMITY.

Wright has an answer to this problem. In his view, it would be a mistake to read entitlement theory as enabling someone to regulate her own doxastic attitudes. However, 'it is still appropriate to assess the attitudes in which we find ourselves entrenched by the very same standards of rationality that we would apply to those of our imaginary doxastic free agent' (Wright 2014, 228). So, entitlement theory merely provides an 'external' characterization of the epistemic rationality of a subject's trustings of hinges.

This response is unpersuasive. Ethologists can use decision-theoretic models to show that seals' foraging behavior maximizes expected utility and, therefore, that seals' foraging behavior is 'rational' in a broad sense. It would be a stretch to conclude, however, that seals' foraging behavior is rational in the same sense that features in the debate on Humean skepticism.

Let us distinguish cases where someone *has* epistemic reasons from cases where *there are* epistemic reasons. If successful, entitlement theory uncovers the *existence* of epistemic reasons to trust hinges that do not automatically qualify as reasons that—ordinary or reflective—subjects *have*. This reformulation suggests a second version of the entitlement response:

Entitlement response (II)

Premise 1. *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals.

Premise 2*. If *S*'s trustings of hinges promote *S*'s attainment of *S*'s epistemic goals, there are epistemic reasons to trust hinges.
 Conclusion. So, there are epistemic reasons to trust hinges.

This modified response is fully consistent with a skeptical appraisal of the human epistemic situation. Imagine that Oscar woke up believing that a certain theorem can be proved from a set of axioms Δ —provided that he has good reasons to accept an obscure rule of inference. Suppose further that believing that that theorem can be proved from Δ will promote Oscar's epistemic goals. Imagine now that an unknown mathematician has found good reasons to accept the obscure rule of inference that Oscar needs to prove the theorem from Δ . In that scenario, Oscar surely lacks epistemic reasons to believe that that theorem can be proved from Δ . Even if *there are* good reasons to accept the obscure rule of inference, the existence of those reasons is insufficient to assess Oscar's attitude toward the provability of the theorem as epistemically rational. After all, Oscar *does not have* any good reasons in favor of the obscure rule of inference.

Wright's considerations in favor of epistemic entitlement bear the same type of relation to subjects' everyday beliefs in inductive generalizations as the good reasons found by the unknown mathematician bear to Oscar's belief that a theorem can be proved from Δ . Even if Wright has managed to identify genuine epistemic reasons, those are not reasons that an ordinary subject has. Sadly, Wright has provided no indication of how a reflective subject could rationally take possession of those reasons. Hence, Wright's reasons are irrelevant to assessing the rationality of ordinary and reflective subjects' beliefs in inductive generalizations.

9.5 A Humean Way Forward

Entitlement theory promises what Hume* could not dream of: a response that is both concessive and non-skeptical. Entitlement theory is a chimera. If one grants the Underdetermination step, one thereby accepts that one lacks empirical reasons that speak to the truth of inductive generalizations. If one grants the Independence step, one thereby accepts a stringent requirement of INDEPENDENT REASONS. If one also grants RESTRICTED A PRIORI, one thereby accepts that epistemic rationality must satisfy an unsatisfiable requirement. If one wants to escape that predicament, three options are open: reject the Underdetermination step, reject the Independence step, or reject RESTRICTED A PRIORI. Any of these moves will make entitlement theory obsolete as an anti-skeptical strategy.

Interestingly, Hume's texts have the materials for a non-concessive response. One can read Hume as arguing for a restricted claim, namely, that (our most basic) inductive beliefs are not the result of reasoning.

That leaves open the possibility that (our most basic) inductive beliefs result from more primitive, intuitive or animal processes (EHU 5.45; T 1.4.2.9). If those primitive processes can be sources of a-rational justification, then (our most basic) inductive beliefs are not within the purview of the Underdetermination and Independence steps. Perhaps (our most basic) inductive beliefs do not withstand rational scrutiny because they are rationally underdetermined. However, there is an a-rational level where they are not underdetermined.

Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas; and though the powers and forces, by which the former is governed, be wholly unknown to us; yet our thoughts and conceptions have still, we find, gone on in the same train with the other works of nature. Custom is that principle, by which this correspondence has been effected; so necessary to the subsistence of our species, and the regulation of our conduct, in every circumstance and occurrence of human life.

(EHU 5.44)

If the powers underlying human custom are the same as the powers underlying the course of nature, then our current inductive dispositions can favor our natural expectations about the course of nature over alternatives. Indeed, having our current inductive dispositions will increase the objective probability that our expectations will come out true over alternatives.

Some might complain that this view is unavailable, for it requires speculation about final causes. If Humean skepticism is a paradoxical argument, however, that objection loses much of its force. Paradoxical arguments cite only our putative pre-theoretical commitments to show that our beliefs in inductive generalizations cannot have some positive epistemic status. If our pre-theoretical commitments do not rule out the possibility that our inductive dispositions march in step with the course of nature, our pre-theoretical commitments do not stop us from endorsing Hume's suggestion.

Alternatively, Hume could accept that there are rational processes responsible for inductive beliefs that are underdetermined. He might insist, however, that rational inductive beliefs are not subject to the requirement imposed by INDEPENDENT REASONS. Consider Hume's example of a billiard ball that is supposed to cause another billiard ball to move. Hume rejects the hypothesis that the two moving balls are connected by an *a priori* relation of ideas by rehearsing considerations that come close to UNDERDETERMINATION:

May I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference.

(EHU 4.25)

One can read Hume as claiming that only *a priori* reasonings about necessary truths are subject to an unrestricted form of UNDERDETERMINATION. By contrast, rational beliefs in inductive generalizations are subject to a restricted form of UNDERDETERMINATION that does not range over *all* the contraries of expected generalizations. Hence, beliefs in inductive generalizations can be epistemically rational in a way that is consistent with (relative) underdetermination.

I suspect that these two threads complement one another. While our most primitive inductive beliefs are not underdetermined, our most sophisticated inductive beliefs are rational despite their (relative) underdetermination. Of course, it remains to be seen whether this solution is compatible with Hume's own assumptions and commitments. Even if the answer is negative, the exercise will help us improve our understanding of the relations among reasoning, reasons, and epistemic justification.¹⁶

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Notes

- 1 Earlier attempts at reconstructing Humean skepticism can be found in Greco (2000), Wright (1985, 2004, 2014), and Coliva (2015). Some key elements of this type of argument can be found in Pryor (2000), Stroud (1984), and Vogel (2004).
- 2 Hume's doubts concerning the operations of the understanding do not start from an Underdetermination step, but from a contrast between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Hume emphasizes that matters of fact enable humans

to go beyond the testimony of the senses and the records of memory. He also points out that matters of fact are less certain and evident than relations of ideas. These two features seem sufficient to awake Hume's curiosity; he then starts an inquiry into how humans discover matters of fact. Assuming that the discovery of matters of fact is grounded in the relation of cause and effect, Hume proceeds to argue that we do not discover those relations of cause and effect by engaging in any form of reasoning (EHU 4.12).

- 3 Hume does not introduce UNIFORMITY to satisfy INDEPENDENT REASONS. His main goal is to explain how, given our lack of access to the secret powers of objects, a process of reasoning could connect present and past observations with future courses of events.
- 4 Hume*'s Independence step reminds us of a non-circularity requirement that features in Hume's discussion. Nevertheless, Hume does not motivate his circularity worries by pointing to the underdetermination of our reasons for inductive beliefs. Instead, circularity emerges as a problem in his attempt at understanding in what sense, if any, beliefs about matters of fact are the product of a probable argument (EHU 4.30). Suppose that 'reasonings' about matters of fact are founded in the relation of cause and effect. Suppose also that we discover those relations by experience. For Hume, experience necessarily relies on UNIFORMITY. If we try to prove UNIFORMITY via a probable argument, we go in a circle.
- 5 The Unavailability step is inspired by Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact (EHU 4), also known as 'Hume's fork.' There are several differences, though. Hume seems to think that reasonings about relations of ideas always yield infallible and indefeasible conclusions. By contrast, Hume* does not assume that a priori sources always yield infallible and indefeasible conclusions. Hume seems to think that one can only reason a priori about necessary truths. Hume* accepts that we can have a priori reasons for *some* superficially contingent truths.
- 6 Qu (2019) offers a useful overview of various attempts at solving this problem.
- 7 Qu (2018) thinks that Hume's anti-skeptical remarks in EHU 12 are congenial to Wright's entitlement theory. Qu's interpretation is consistent with my claim that entitlement theory is a reaction to a classical reading of Hume.
- 8 In more recent work, Wright (2014) restricts the operation of hinges to 'reflective' epistemic practices.
- 9 Wright's approach is reminiscent of instrumentalist accounts of epistemic rationality (Wright 2012, 484), which invoke epistemic values to elucidate the force of evidential considerations. Wright (2014) insists, however, that his entitlement project is confined to the rationality of *trust*. Thus, Wright remains neutral on the question of whether the rational force of reasons for *belief* is grounded in some instrumental value. He also rejects pictures according to which the motivating power of evidence depends on the contingent goals of the subject.
- 10 Wright (2014, 239) describes entitlement as 'in the service of epistemic values—the maximizing of true and useful belief'. He also characterizes expected

epistemic utility as ‘the expectation that we thereby enhance our chances of believing the truth and avoiding error’ (2014, 241).

- 11 Williams (2012) argues that Wright’s entitlements are viciously circular because they are contingent on human epistemic aims and values, and it is an empirical question what those epistemic aims and values are. My objection is different. Even if we take for granted Wright’s epistemic aims and values, his defenses of entitlement must rely on the truth of deeply contingent propositions. Given RESTRICTED A PRIORI, we lack a priori reasons for those propositions.
- 12 This formulation is slightly modified from Moretti and Pedersen (2021, 9–10). Pedersen (2009) and Moretti (2021) argue that Wright’s strategic entitlement fails if one introduces a second epistemic goal, namely, the goal of avoiding having false beliefs.
- 13 This reading is suggested by Wright’s view of cognitive projects as projects defined by a method one might *competently* execute in order to answer a question. From a virtue-theoretic perspective, the concept of competence bears a constitutive relation to non-lucky success in a select class of favorable circumstances (Sosa 2007).
- 14 ACCURACY seems to be supported by the inductive generalization that fake maps are a rare exception, not the rule.
- 15 If one pursues the weak explanatory project, the resulting account will have trouble explaining how knowledge is possible, for knowledge involves an anti-luck condition. If what explains Sara’s finding a true answer to her question is indifferent to the truth-conducive character of her method, the resulting explanation won’t discriminate between lucky true answers and non-lucky true answers.
- 16 In Echeverri (2023), I argue that much of our knowledge of the external world might have a-rational albeit truth-conducive grounds.

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