

The Shadow of Skepticism about Epistemic Rationality: *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project*
and Stepping Out From Under the Shade

Abstract: Crispin Wright has contended that the force of many skeptical arguments is that we can never *claim* to have knowledge due to (a) the failure of warrant transmission and (b) the inability to *claim* warrant for cornerstone propositions. Wright shows that skeptical arguments of this sort bear a common underlying structure and offers *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* as a way to claim warrant for cornerstone propositions. I will show that if sound, the **I-II-III** skeptical argument not only leads to the inability to claim warrant for cornerstone propositions but also to skepticism about rational acceptance. I will also show that Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* may be put to use to block the outcome of skepticism about rational acceptance.

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The Shadow of Skepticism about Epistemic Rationality: *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* and Stepping Out From Under the Shade

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I. Introduction

Many influential epistemologists have turned their attention toward the resolution of skeptical paradoxes. While their motivations have differed, their general aim has been to preserve and to defend the possibility, plausibility and rationality of ordinary knowledge. Much of the attention has been centered on a few well known paradoxes and skeptical arguments involving such exotic fare as lotteries, zebras, prefaces and epistemic luck. These cases have revealed the intimate interconnection of warrant transmission, knowledge closure principles, justification and rational acceptance.

Crispin Wright has contended that the force of many skeptical arguments is that we can never *claim* to have knowledge due to (a) the failure of warrant transmission and (b) the inability to *claim* warrant for cornerstone propositions. Wright shows that skeptical arguments of this sort bear a common underlying structure and offers *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* as a way to claim warrant for cornerstone propositions. I will focus my attention on three key concepts in this paper: (1) **I- II-III** skeptical arguments (2) the widely-assumed necessary conditions required for rational acceptance and (3) Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project*. I will show that if sound, the **I-II-III** skeptical argument not only leads to the inability to claim warrant for cornerstone propositions but also to skepticism about rational acceptance. I will also show that Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* may be put to use to block the outcome of skepticism about rational acceptance.

In order to get clear on how these concepts are connected I will spend some time clarifying the commonly held distinction between acceptance and belief and the relationship between justification and warrant.

II. Epistemic Rationality and Knowledge

Before turning to the stated clarification project, it would be prudent to elucidate the term 'epistemic rationality.' In doing so, it should be made clear how rational acceptance is

intimately connected to the general concept of epistemic rationality and how skepticism about rational acceptance would leave the project of epistemic rationality nugatory.

The term '*rationality*' has been employed in many ways and in many fields but the operative use, here, is that which has been employed by epistemologists. Thomas Kelley puts it best when he says, "by *epistemic* rationality, I mean, roughly, the kind of rationality which one displays when one believes propositions that are strongly supported by one's evidence and refrains from believing propositions that are improbable given one's evidence."¹ Thus, I take it that epistemic rationality roughly covers the spectrum of rational belief. We have often understood rational belief in the following way: it is rational for a subject *S* to believe that *p* *only if* *S* is justified in their belief that *p* or *S*'s belief that *p* is justified. As we shall soon see many have taken belief to be a species of acceptance and justification as a species of warrant. For the present it should suffice to note that if it is true that belief is a species of acceptance then skepticism about rational acceptance amounts to skepticism about epistemic rationality.

It is important to observe the centrality of 'rationality' to philosophy. As Richard Foley has pointed out "among philosophers it is often taken for granted that the worst charge that we [philosophers] can make against others is that they are irrational."² To epistemologists then, the charge of epistemic irrationality must be regarded as the greatest insult. Even the skeptic about knowledge has conceded, as in the case of the New Evil Demon Argument, that epistemic rationality is attainable and possible. Thus, skepticism about epistemic rationality will come as a blow to even the skeptic about knowledge. If skepticism about epistemic rationality were to be shown true, then no epistemologist could claim epistemic rationality and all epistemologists would be epistemically irrational - the sacred cow would be dead. Consideration of this greatly undesirable consequence reveals the importance of blocking skeptical arguments which purport to show the impossibility of epistemic rationality.

III. A Few Terminological Points

It is of great use to clarify the distinction between *belief* and *acceptance* and the relationship between *justification* and *warrant*. On the distinction between belief and

¹ (Kelley, 612)

² (Foley, 324)

acceptance, D.S Clarke notes that *acceptance* is taken to be "a kind of mental act directed toward a proposition"³ and to *accept p* "implies a commitment to a policy of premising that *p*."⁴ Jonathan Cohen has observed that the "conditions for the rationality of believing that *p*, and conditions for the rationality of accepting that *p*, have been treated indistinguishably in much of the recent philosophical literature about rationality."⁵ That the conditions for the rationality of believing that *p* and the conditions for the rationality of accepting that *p* have been treated as indistinguishable appears to be premised on the basis that belief is the *only* kind of acceptance. Part of the response to the **I-II-III** skeptical argument turns on this assumption but for the present it shall suffice to assume the following two equivalence schemes:

[Belief1] S accepts that $p \Leftrightarrow S$ believes that p .

[Belief2] S is justified in believing that $p \Leftrightarrow S$ is justified in accepting that p .

On the relationship between *justification* and *warrant*, the term 'warrant', as it shall be put to use in this paper, is intended to denote the concept under which justification falls. Hence, the kinds of things which can justify a belief are the kinds of things that can warrant belief. Indeed, in most of the literature 'justification' is used interchangeably with 'warrant' without apparent loss or addition of meaning. That 'justification' and 'warrant' are used interchangeably appears to be premised on the basis that justification is the *only* "species" of warrant. Importantly, **I-II-III** skeptical arguments turn on this assumption. Nevertheless, for the immediate present we shall assume that the following two equivalence schemes holds:

[Warrant1] S is justified in believing that $p \Leftrightarrow S$ is warranted in believing that p .

[Warrant2] S is justified in accepting that $p \Leftrightarrow S$ is warranted in accepting that p .⁶

IV. Necessary Conditions for Rational Acceptance

Briefly, Mark Kaplan notes that there are "two apparently innocent and credible claims about the canons of rational acceptance."⁷ The first is that a rational person must

³ (Clarke, 149)

⁴ (Cohen, 368)

⁵ (Cohen, 367)

⁶ The reader is invited to take issue with the four equivalence schemes **[Belief1]**, **[Belief2]**, **[Warrant1]** and **[Warrant2]**. The author notes that there is simply not enough space here to raise issues or difficulties that commitment to such principles carry.

have warrant, justification or a certain degree of confidence for accepting a proposition as true. The second is that “when it comes to accepting propositions, a rational person is subject to certain consistency constraints.”⁸ For the purposes of this paper the necessary conditions for rational acceptance will be formulated in the following way:

[Rational Acceptance] A subject S rationally accepts that p *only if*:

- (1) S is warranted in accepting that p .
- (2) S accepts no contradictions.
- (3) If S accepts that p and S competently deduces q from p , then S accepts that q .
- (4) If S accepts that p and S accepts that q , then S accepts that p and q .
- (5) S accepts that p .

V. I-II-III Skeptical Arguments and Skepticism about Epistemic Rationality

Nikolaj Pedersen correctly observes that a proposition is a *cornerstone proposition* for a given region of thought just in case the proposition is such that, if we had no warrant for it, we could not rationally claim warrant for any belief in a proposition of that region of thought.⁹ Crispin Wright notes that many skeptical arguments capitalize on our inability to supply warrant for cornerstone propositions and calls these **I-II-III** skeptical arguments.

Before turning to the structure of **I-II-III** skeptical arguments it would be prudent to clarify a bit of terminology - A *Type I* proposition p is a proposition, about an experience or perception, which is taken to be the best evidence for a corresponding *Type II* proposition. A *Type II* proposition q , is a proposition or belief which is evidenced by a corresponding *Type I* proposition p . The relationship between a *Type I* proposition p , which is taken to be the best evidence for a corresponding *Type II* proposition q , and q is such that if p cannot evidence q , then no other *Type I* proposition r can evidence q . So, if p cannot evidence q , then q cannot be evidenced. For our purposes it will suffice to define *Type III* propositions as the cornerstone propositions for a given region of thought.

A **I-II-III** *skeptical* argument is paired with a corresponding **I-II-III** argument. The structure of any **I-II-III** argument is given in the following:

⁷ (Kaplan, 132)

⁸ (Kaplan, 132)

⁹ (Pedersen, 58)

- I. (p) My current evidence is in all respects as if q .
- So: II. q .
- $q \rightarrow C$.
- So: III. C .

It is easy enough to observe that the line number for each step corresponds to the listed proposition's type (e.g. 'My current evidence is in all respects as if q ' is a *Type I* proposition, q is a *Type II* proposition and C is a *Type III, cornerstone*, proposition). Nikolaj Pedersen notes that in **I-II-III** arguments "the step from I to II is defeasible, and the conditional part of II is supposed to be a piece of philosophical theorizing – a conditional that gets in place due to a conceptual connection between q and C ."¹⁰

A corresponding **I-II-III** *skeptical* argument challenges the attempt to supply a warrant for cornerstone beliefs and purports to show that that the corresponding **I-II-III** argument fails exactly because the warrant for one of the premises is conditional on an antecedent and independent warrant for the conclusion which, the **I-II-III** skeptic contends, cannot be offered. The general argument structure of **I-II-III** skeptical argument¹¹ for a corresponding **I-II-III** argument as follows:

- [1] p warrants q only if there is warrant for C .
- [2] There is warrant for C if and only if (p warrants C or there is independent warrant for C).
- [3] p cannot warrant C .
- [4] There is no independent warrant for C .
- [5] So, there is no warrant for C
- [C] So, p does not warrant q .

¹⁰ (Pedersen, 61)

¹¹ It's important to note that **I-II-III** skeptical arguments are not restricted to empirical regions of thought. Consider the following I-II-III argument:

- I. (p) My current evidence is in all respects as if the statements of arithmetic are true.
- II. (q) The statements of arithmetic are true.
- If the statements of arithmetic are true, then the axioms of ZFC set theory are true.
- III. (C) The Axioms of ZFC set theory are true.

Here C is a cornerstone of a given region of thought (mathematics). Given that ZFC set theory is the language and set of axioms that warrant the warranted belief that the statements of arithmetic are true, the absence of warrant for the belief that ZFC set theory, which the corresponding **I-II-III** skeptical argument purports to show, would render the move from premise **I** to **II** illegitimate.

Premises one and three are uncontroversially defended by the fact that p defeasibly warrants q and that in such cases warrant fails to transmit from premises to conclusion. Premise two is analytically true. The upshot of this argument is, given that q is an arbitrary ordinary proposition in a given region of thought, that the **I-II-III** skeptic proceeds to deny the possibility of claiming knowledge for any **Type II** proposition in the given a region of thought.

To help illustrate the relation of **I-II-III** arguments and their corresponding skeptical arguments consider the paradigm "Here is a Hand" argument which takes the form:

- I. (p) My current evidence is in all respects as if I have a hand.
 So: II. (q) I have a hand.
 If I have a hand then there is an external world.
 So: III. (C) There is an external world.

We observe that C is a cornerstone proposition for empirical investigation. The skeptic argues that p cannot possible warrant belief in C . Here, the skeptic argues, the warrant p confers to q does not transmit to C on the grounds that p is compatible with there not being an external world. The skeptic then argues that there is no other independent way to warrant belief in C on the grounds that any purported warrant the empiricist might supply would beg the question with respect to the warranted belief in C . The skeptic then concludes that belief in C is unwarranted and therefore all empirical *Type II* propositions in the entertained region of thought also fail to be warranted.

It does not take much to see that, granted the standardly assumed principles outlined in section three and the manner in which the necessary conditions for rational acceptance have been formulated in section four, the **I-II-III** skeptical argument threatens to prevent the rational acceptance of any proposition. Let us get clear on why this result occurs. Consider again the **I-II-III** argument structure (with correct substitution):

- I. (p) Subject S perceives r .
 So: II. (q) Subject S believes that r .
 $q \rightarrow C$.
 So: III. C .

By **[Belief1]** q is mutually entailed by the proposition that Subject S accepts that r . Now consider again the corresponding **I-II-III** skeptical argument structure. With the stipulation

that if the best warrant p for q cannot warrant q , then no *Type I* proposition in the entertained region of thought can warrant q , it follows that if sound, the **I-II-III** skeptical argument shows that there is no warrant for the proposition that Subject S accepts that r , or in other words, that Subject S cannot be warranted in accepting that r - failing a necessary condition for rational acceptance. The upshot of this result is that the **I-II-III** skeptic proceeds to deny that a subject S can rationally accept any *Type II* proposition in a given region of thought leading to local skepticism about rational acceptance.

Now, consider that this same sort of result can be derived from any **I-II-III** skeptical argument. That is to say any **I-II-III** argument, for a given region of thought, has a corresponding **I-II-III** skeptical argument that shows the impossibility of rationally accepting any *Type II* proposition in that given region of thought. Given that **I-II-III** arguments are, or can be, made in support of all relevant regions of thought, it follows that a corresponding **I-II-III** skeptical argument shows the impossibility of rationally accepting any *Type II* proposition in any relevant regions of thought. I observed, in Section II, that epistemic rationality covers the spectrum of rational belief.¹² From the transitivity of the biconditionals **[Belief2]** and **[Warrant2]**¹³ and the observation that **I-II-III** skeptical arguments, taken in tandem with **[Belief1]**, entail local skepticism about rational acceptance, it follows that skepticism about epistemic rationality results in all relevant regions of thought.¹⁴

VI. *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project*

The devastating results of **I-II-III** skeptical arguments have led Crispin Wright to formulate a response to block knowledge claim skepticism: *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project*. On this matter it is prudent to quote Wright in full:

"Suppose there were a type of rational warrant which one does not have to *do any specific evidential work* to earn: better, a type of rational warrant whose possession does not require the existence of evidence – in the broadest sense, encompassing both *a priori* and empirical considerations – for the truth of the warranted proposition. Call it *entitlement*. If I am entitled to accept P , then my doing so is beyond rational reproach even though I can point to no cognitive

¹² Where again rational belief is understood in terms of justifiably believing that p .

¹³ Which derives the equivalence **[*]** S is justified in believing that $p \Leftrightarrow S$ is warranted in accepting that p .

¹⁴ Even logic falls prey to the skeptical line. Consider that a **I-II-III** skeptical argument may be formulated within a logic₂ regarding the tenability of a logic₁. Logic₂ then falls prey to **I-II-III** skeptical argument formulated within a logic₃ *ad infinitum*.

accomplishment in my life, whether empirical or *a priori*, inferential or non-inferential, whose upshot could reasonably be contended to be that I had come to know that *P*, or had succeeded in getting evidence justifying *P*."¹⁵

Thus, Wright's response to the **I-II-III** skeptic comprises two essential components. First, Pedersen observes that, "Wright distinguishes between belief and acceptance. They are both kinds of propositional attitudes, belief being a species of acceptance. Trust is also a kind of acceptance, but contrasts with belief by not being evidentially controlled."¹⁶ Here, acceptance is a broad category in which both trust and belief fall. Belief is controlled through justification and trust through non-evidential warrant. Wright's view on the relationship between trust, belief and acceptance is expressed in the following two theses:

[Trust] If a subject *S* trusts that *p*, then *S* accepts that *p*.

[Belief3] If a subject *S* believes that *p*, then *S* accepts that *p*.

Wright, therefore, rejects the commonly-assumed equivalence schemes **[Belief1]**¹⁷ and **[Belief2]**.¹⁸

A similar, and intimately connected, move is made with respect to the relationship between justification and warrant. Wright contends that justification is an evidential species of warrant but that there are non-evidential species of warrant which control non-belief acceptances. This reformulated thesis amounts to a rejection of the equivalence schemes **[Warrant1]**¹⁹ and **[Warrant2]**.²⁰ Wright's view on the relationship between justification and warrant is expressed as follows:

[Warrant3] If a subject *S* is justified in accepting that *p*, then *S* is warranted in accepting that *p*.

In support of his claim that there exists a species of non-evidential warrant, Wright offers *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project*. *Cognitive projects* are projects whose successful execution can be regarded as a cognitive achievement. We may roughly characterize an entitlement by

¹⁵ (Wright and Davies, 174-175)

¹⁶ (Pedersen, 68)

¹⁷ **[Belief1]** *S* accepts that *p* \Leftrightarrow *S* believes that *p*.

¹⁸ **[Belief2]** *S* is justified in believing that *p* \Leftrightarrow *S* is justified in accepting that *p*.

¹⁹ **[Warrant1]** *S* is justified in believing that *p* \Leftrightarrow *S* is warranted in believing that *p*.

²⁰ **[Warrant2]** *S* is justified in accepting that *p* \Leftrightarrow *S* is warranted in accepting that *p*.

specifying the necessary conditions for a proposition to be an entitlement of a cognitive project:

- [Entitlement1]** A subject S with a given cognitive project is entitled to accept p *only if*:
- (1) " p is a *presupposition* of the project";
 - (2) "there is no sufficient reason to believe that p is untrue"; and
 - (3) "the attempt to justify p would involve further presuppositions ... and so on without limit."²¹

On Wright's view "where p is a proposition to which we have an entitlement, we are [warranted] to *accept* p "²² It is clear though that if entitlement of a cognitive project is a kind of warrant then it is a non-evidential kind of warrant. Consequently, the relationship between entitlement and warrant can be expressed as follows:

- [Entitlement2]** If p is an entitlement of a subject S 's cognitive project, then S is warranted in accepting that p (even though S may not have any justification for accepting that p).

Thus, Wright contends, cornerstone propositions that satisfy the conditions for entitlement, are warranted in virtue of their being a rational presupposition, for which we have no sufficient reason to doubt the truth, of a given cognitive project. When taken together, Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* blocks the **I-II-III** skeptical argument by showing the premise "There is no independent warrant for C false, rendering the **I-II-III** skeptical argument unsound thereby preserving the possibility of claiming knowledge.

It is simple enough to show that Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* also offers a way to prevent the outcome of skepticism about epistemic rationality for all relevant regions of thought. First, the proponent of epistemic rationality need not accept the soundness of the **I-II-III** skeptical argument. The proponent of epistemic rationality may agree with Wright that cornerstone propositions are warranted in virtue of being a presupposition of a given cognitive project and hence, may reject the truth of the premise "There is no independent warrant for C .' Second, in drawing a clear distinction between belief and acceptance, Wright offers a way for the proponent of epistemic rationality to deny that **I-II-**

²¹ (Pedersen, 444)

²² (Altschul)

III skeptical arguments are necessarily connected with rational acceptability. Recollect that the derivation from the **I-II-III** skeptical argument against knowledge claims to the skeptical outcome against epistemic rationality involved the crucial step where belief and acceptance were taken to be interchangeable via **[Belief1]**, **[Belief2]** and **[Warrant2]**. In drawing a clear distinction between belief and acceptance, the proponent of epistemic rationality may resist the skeptical outcome of one argument as showing a skeptical outcome in the other by denying the truth of **[Belief1]**, **[Belief2]** and **[Warrant2]**. The proponent of epistemic rationality may either do this by explicitly embracing **[Trust]**, **[Belief3]**, **[Warrant3]** and the necessary conditions for a proposition to be an entitlement of a cognitive project or by offering some other alternative to the standardly assumed equivalence schemes **[Belief1]**, **[Belief2]** and **[Warrant2]**. Either way, the skeptic is denied the ability to derive the skeptical outcome against rational acceptance from the **I-II-III** skeptical argument against the possibility of claiming knowledge.

VII. Closing Remarks

I have reminded the reader that epistemic rationality is central to epistemology. I have shown how, if sound, the **I-II-III** skeptical argument not only succeeds in showing the impossibility of claiming knowledge but also the impossibility of epistemic rationality. I have shown how Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* may be to use by the proponent of epistemic rationality in order to show the **I-II-III** skeptical argument unsound. An elongated critical assessment of Wright's *Entitlement of a Cognitive Project* cannot be offered here, but it should be noted that the success or failure of Wright's project need not engender skepticism about epistemic rationality. Wright's route has shown that clearly distinguishing between belief and acceptance in a way that shows belief as merely one species of acceptance and that clearly distinguishing between justification and other kinds of warrant, provides a tractable avenue to show the skeptic wrong.

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