

When Can Inquiry Come to an End?

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Abstract:

Explanatory inquiry seeks explanations for facts. I argue no amount of evidence can support an entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry. Yet, absent this entitlement, no inquirer can rationally close their inquiry, a result that is devastating for our practices, epistemic and otherwise. I show that avoiding this sceptical conclusion requires a non-evidential epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry. In particular, it requires that for any inquirer and any target of inquiry, the inquirer is epistemically entitled to the claim that their target has a knowable explanation, namely, one that is within her cognitive reach.

We seek to discover, to find out, to know why, what, where or how. Our inquiries are usually mundane: Where are my keys? What time is it? And who wrote *Middlemarch*? Yet sometimes our inquiries are more theoretical. Scientists ask: Why does salt dissolve in water? Historians ask: Why did the Roman Empire fall? And philosophers ask: What is knowledge? Other inquiries are neither mundane nor theoretical, but practical: Should I swim today? And is this grant really worth applying for?

We inquire when there is something that we want to discover. Thus, it might appear obvious that an inquirer cannot rationally engage in inquiry unless the question that drives their inquiry is genuinely unsettled for them. If, as a rational agent, I genuinely intend to inquire into who wrote *Middlemarch*, for example, I cannot already know the answer: knowing that George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch* precludes rational inquiry into who wrote *Middlemarch*.

The thought that one cannot inquire into what one already knows plays a central role in Plato's *Meno*. In the dialogue, Meno realizes that he cannot provide an adequate account of what excellence is. He states the challenge of providing such an account as follows in *Meno* 80d–81e:

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know?

To which Socrates replies:

I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

Plato takes the puzzle—now often referred to as ‘Meno’s Paradox’—quite seriously, for it motivates his doctrine of recollection, the view that all knowledge is mere recollection.¹ What appears to be the discovery of something wholly new is understood as the recollection of knowledge had by the soul prior to birth. The theory of recollection then explains how inquiry is possible: our capacity to make progress from seeming ignorance toward knowledge is partly grounded in knowledge previously had by the soul.

Depending on how one interprets Plato, the apparent paradox then dissolves in one of at least two ways. On one interpretation, the knowledge acquired prenatally remains present in the inquirer in an unconscious form and is progressively brought to consciousness through inquiry.² On another interpretation, only prenatal knowledge is required to dissolve the paradox.³ On this interpretation, the paradox dissolves because prenatal knowledge puts one in a position to acquire the same knowledge later, and so it is not the case that one already knows (even unconsciously) the answers to one’s inquiries.

Meno’s paradox is not the puzzle that interests me here. I will instead argue that an analogous puzzle arises for what I call *explanatory inquiry*. Explanatory inquiry is that whose aim is to find an explanation for some fact, entity or phenomenon. For convenience, I will henceforth speak only of explaining *facts*, where facts may be construed as states of affairs that obtain, though my argument will also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to *explananda* that belong to other ontological categories.

What distinguishes explanatory inquiry is that it seeks an explanation for why some state of affairs obtains, whether the explanation sought is metaphysical, causal, or of some other variety. One may ask what makes it the case that objects persist across time, or what made the bridge collapse, or why my coffee is always bitter. In each case, successful inquiry requires identifying something that explains the relevant *explanandum*. By contrast, asking who wrote *Middlemarch* does not initiate explanatory inquiry, for it does not demand an explanation as an answer. It demands only information: the name of the author of *Middlemarch*.

In what follows, I will argue first that evidential grounds can never entitle us to believe that our explanatory inquiries can ever be successful. Evidential grounds, for my purposes, include considerations that bear on the comparative standing of candidate hypotheses about some target of inquiry p , where those candidates include not only possible candidates for explaining p , but also the hypothesis that p is brute. I will then argue that unless the inquirer is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, the inquirer cannot rationally bring inquiry to a close. This latter conclusion generalizes to every case of explanatory inquiry closure: every scientific conclusion, every medical diagnosis, every historical or causal verdict any inquirer has ever settled on. Absent an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, no evidential grounds can license an inquirer’s decision to stop searching. Together, these conclusions entail that absent a non-evidential entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, no inquiry can ever be rationally brought to a close: every verdict anyone has ever reached—or will ever reach—on the basis of explanatory inquiry is rationally unmotivated.

This sceptical conclusion is not one we can endorse without a fight. It threatens one of our most ubiquitous and seemingly successful epistemic practices. We seem to routinely identify the causes of illnesses and find out why bridges collapse, and successfully intervene on the basis of our inquiries. Indeed, our very survival seems to depend upon the possibility of successful inquiry. Thus, we have a puzzle: many of our practices—epistemic and otherwise—seem to be built on our ability to bring our inquiries to a rational close. Yet, such closure is impossible for us, on the assumption that evidential grounds are the only grounds available to us. I will suggest that the way out of this puzzle is to reject the assumption that evidential grounds are exhaustive, namely that there are no epistemic grounds other than evidential grounds. In particular, I will argue that we need non-evidential epistemic grounds in order to secure an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, which can in

¹ I put aside the question of whether Meno’s paradox is a genuine *paradox*. For what it is worth, Meno’s paradox satisfies the characterization of ‘paradox’ given in Sainsbury (1988, p. 1): ‘This is what I understand by a paradox: an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises.’

² See Scott (2006, pp. 129–44) for a defence of this reading.

³ See Fine (2022, pp. 187–92) for a defence of this reading.

turn secure the possibility of bringing inquiry to a rational close. Securing an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry at minimum requires that for every inquirer *S* and every target of inquiry *p*, *S* is epistemically entitled to *p* having an explanation that is, in principle, within *S*'s cognitive reach. Let us call this an entitlement to *Explanatory Reach*, or ER.

An entitlement to ER is distinct from an entitlement to the early modern rationalist Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR), the principle according to which every fact has an explanation. An entitlement to the PSR is stronger than an entitlement to ER because it brings with it a commitment to any fact whatsoever—whether it figures as a target of inquiry or not—having an explanation. There is also a difference in scope between the claim that an agent has an entitlement to the PSR and that for any target of her inquiry, an agent is epistemically entitled to the claim that the target has an explanation she can know. The entitlement to the PSR has wide scope: the agent is entitled to the universal claim that every fact has an explanation. By contrast, with respect to ER the entitlement has narrow scope: for each target of the agent's inquiry, she is entitled to believe that the target has an explanation she can discover.⁴ Finally, ER says more than just that the target of the agent's inquiry has an explanation. It says that the target has an explanation the inquirer can *in principle* discover. An explanation lies beyond what an agent can know in principle if the agent could not come to know that explanation even under idealized epistemic conditions appropriate to the agent's cognitive capacities, where the idealization removes merely contingent practical limitations—such as access to technological resources or time and memory—without altering the agent's cognitive faculties. What sort of explanation might this be? It may, for example, be the sort of explanation for which an agent lacks the conceptual resources required to represent it, or of the sort which, even if the agent could represent it, could never be *known* by the agent.⁵ The notion of 'in-principle knowability' that I am interested in can be made more precise, but this gloss will suffice for present purposes.

I proceed as follows. In §I I argue that we cannot be epistemically entitled—on evidential grounds—to believe that it is possible for us to successfully engage in inquiry. In §II, I argue that absent an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, no inquirer can rationally bring any inquiry to a close. In §III, I use these two results to motivate rejecting the supposition that evidential grounds exhaust the kind of grounds available to an inquirer. Finally, in §IV, I discuss options for a non-evidential epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry.

I The Possibility of Successful Explanatory Inquiry Explanatory inquiry has a constitutive end: that of discovering an explanation for the target of inquiry. An explanatory inquiry may involve inquiries that are not themselves explanatory. For example, consider the research programme whose goal is to uncover the cause of cancer. A participating scientist engages in explanatory inquiry: she seeks to explain the cause of cancer. But the more specific tasks she pursues as part of her broader inquiry need not themselves qualify as explanatory inquiries. For example, the scientist may collect epidemiological data, sequence genomes, refine laboratory techniques, conduct statistical analyses, or replicate previous experiments. These activities all contribute to the programme's explanatory goal, but are not thereby themselves explanatory inquiries. What makes an inquiry an explanatory inquiry is therefore not merely that it belongs to a practice whose ultimate purpose is that of finding explanations. It is instead that the inquiry itself has the constitutive aim of discovering an explanation for the target of inquiry. When a subject discovers that *q* explains *p*, she comes to know that *q* obtains, and that *q* in fact explains *p*, and thus can conclude that *p* is not simply brute (i.e. unexplained). In addition, when we speak of an agent

⁴ An agent can move from narrow- to wide-scope entitlement only if she has grounds for aggregating her target-specific entitlements into a universal entitlement. She would need to be entitled to believe both that every fact is a possible target of her inquiry and that her entitlement concerning any such target holds uniformly, rather than arising only when she actually undertakes a specific inquiry.

⁵ Hofweber (2023, p. 65) draws a related distinction between two kinds of effability. I use 'cognitive reach' in a stronger sense than Hofweber's notion of effability: Hofweber's notion of effability concerns the limits of conceptual representation, whereas my notion of cognitive reach concerns the limits of possible explanatory knowledge. My notion of cognitive reach is closer to the one at play in Kant's discussion of unknowable—though not unthinkable—things in themselves (see Kant 1999, A235-60/B294-315).

discovering an explanation, we mean something more demanding than her merely coming to know some state of affairs obtains, where, unbeknownst to her, that state of affairs just happens to be an explanation of a fact she is inquiring into. Discovery, therefore, has at least two distinct components, each of which must be satisfied for successful explanatory inquiry: knowledge of the *explanans* and knowledge of its explanatory connection to the *explanandum*. Finally, I take discovery to be an ‘evidential’ notion in the sense that to discover that *q* explains *p* is to arrive at knowledge that *q* explains *p* on the basis of evidence (empirical or not) that bears on whether *q* explains *p*.

My concern lies with a narrow *telic* notion of successful inquiry: success that concerns satisfying the constitutive aim of explanatory inquiry. On this conception, an explanatory inquiry succeeds only if the inquirer discovers an *explanans* for the *explanandum* that is the target of inquiry. Let us distinguish discovering a *possible explanation* for some fact *p* from discovering *what actually explains p*. Explanatory inquiry is not merely a search for possible explanations for some fact *p*, but a search for what actually explains *p*.

Nevertheless, explanatory inquiry often proceeds first by discovery of mere candidate explanations. Suppose, for example, an agent wants to find out why a bridge collapsed. Then the agent has a particular goal: that of finding out why the bridge collapsed. Her inquiry cannot qualify as successful until this goal has been met. Here, then, is how the agent might be said to discover an explanation for why the bridge collapsed. Suppose that, after inspecting the site, she concludes that the collapse might have been caused by fatigue in a critical support beam, or by a design flaw, or by an overloaded truck crossing the bridge, or by an act of sabotage. At this stage, the agent has certainly made epistemic progress: several candidate explanations have been identified. But she has not yet discovered why the bridge collapsed. We decide between candidate explanations all the time. Standard criteria used to evaluate competing explanations are familiar from both science and everyday reasoning. With respect to the collapse of the bridge, one explanation may better fit the available evidence, explain a wider range of facts about the collapse, possess greater explanatory power, cohere better with established engineering principles, posit fewer unnecessary assumptions, identify a more plausible causal mechanism, successfully predict further evidence, or remain robust in light of additional investigation. These considerations may justify judging one candidate explanation superior to its rivals. But insofar as these considerations merely discriminate among candidate explanations, they do not by themselves warrant treating the best candidate as an actual explanation. They identify which candidate is best supported, while leaving open whether there is an actual explanation among the candidates. To come up with a shortlist of candidate answers to one’s inquiry is genuine progress, but only because it narrows the search, and typically brings the inquirer closer to discovering the right answer, even if an initial search for merely candidate explanations is indispensable to how explanatory inquiry is carried out.

How, then, can we ever be rationally entitled to the claim that discovery of an explanation—the constitutive aim of explanatory inquiry—is possible for us? This question is distinct from one that asks whether discovery of any explanation is possible for us. Our answer to the first question may be ‘no’, even if our answer to the latter question is ‘yes’: an explanation for some fact *p* might lie within an agent S’s cognitive reach, and thus, be such that S could discover it, even if S has no grounds that entitle S to take its discovery to be possible. It is clear that an agent’s identifying what she takes to be the best candidate explanation does not suffice for her to be epistemically entitled to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry.⁶ What she takes to be the best explanation need not in fact be the best explanation. Moreover, it could be that the actual explanation is not on her list of candidate explanations at all; perhaps it even lies outside her cognitive reach in principle. Finally, it is possible, even if unlikely, that for all she knows, there is *no explanation at all* for the relevant fact. Compiling a list of candidate explanations for some fact, and even isolating the best candidate explanation for it, is *compatible* with there being no explanation whatsoever for the relevant *explanandum*. Thus, evidence that discriminates among candidate explanations leaves a further epistemic question unanswered: what puts an agent in a

⁶ It may suffice, however, at least on an externalist account of justification, for her discovery of an explanation for the target fact.

position to treat the best candidate as an actual explanation, rather than merely as the best among the candidates considered? In particular, such evidence does not itself provide her with warrant for excluding the possibilities that some fact p is brute (i.e. unexplained) or that its actual explanation lies beyond her cognitive reach, at least in principle. So, if an agent must rely on evidential grounds alone, she cannot be epistemically entitled to the claim that successful explanatory inquiry (i.e. the discovery of an actual explanation for a target fact) is possible for her.

Now, the possibilities that seemingly block this epistemic entitlement need not threaten the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry itself. For example, on an externalist account of justification such as reliabilism, a belief may be justified through the reliable operation of a process even when the inquirer has no access to the fact that the process is reliable. For example, suppose a physicist uses a properly calibrated instrument to measure the mass of an object and forms the belief that it has a given mass. The reliability of the measurement process may contribute to the justification for this belief even if the physicist—and indeed no one—has any evidence for the fact that the process is reliable. On a reliabilist account, this fact about the process can nevertheless provide justification for the belief. Likewise in the case of explanatory inquiry: an inquirer may discover an explanation for her target fact in virtue of a reliable process. But if the inquirer lacks access to the process or its reliability, then the inquirer is not epistemically entitled to the claim that her inquiry could succeed.

I have argued that one cannot be epistemically entitled solely on evidential grounds to the claim that it is possible for one to successfully engage in explanatory inquiry. In the next section, I will argue that absent an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, no inquiry can ever be rationally brought to a close—a result that is devastating for the rationality of any practice that depends on the results of inquiry.

II Entitlement and the Problem of Closure I will argue that an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry is indispensable for rationally bringing inquiry to a close. Explanatory inquiry, as I have characterized it, is a practice that an inquirer herself directs. For the results of successful explanatory inquiry to become rationally available to the inquirer—to be treated as settled and used as a basis for further belief, inquiry, and action—she must at some point rationally bring her inquiry to a close. This act then is what licenses everything that follows from it: the inquirer's asserting the explanation, teaching it, intervening on its basis, or building further inquiry on top of it.

Yet, what epistemically licenses the inquirer to stop searching for further candidate explanations and settle on one of the candidates before her as the explanation of her target? The decision to close an inquiry is not forced on the inquirer in the way that a valid conclusion is forced by its premises. Inquiry into the cause of a bridge collapse, or into the cause of a disease, could in principle continue indefinitely: further candidates could always be generated, and further comparative evidence could always be gathered bearing on their relative merits. As I argued in the previous section, evidence that discriminates *within* a fixed set of candidates—no matter how much of it we accumulate—cannot support the conclusion that the best-supported candidate explanation is the actual explanation, for (again), the *explanandum* may be brute, or its explanation may be beyond our cognitive reach in principle.

An epistemic externalist may object that no further warrant for closure is needed: if an inquirer's process is in fact reliable, her closing belief is justified simply in virtue of that reliability, whether or not she can say anything on her own behalf about why she stopped when she did. But this objection overlooks a distinction between the justification of a belief and the rationality of an act. Closing an inquiry is something an inquirer does: it is a first-personal, practice-guiding decision to stop searching and proceed on the assumption that she has found what she was looking for. This distinguishes closing an inquiry from merely ceasing to inquire because an inquirer runs out of time, becomes bored, or is interrupted. In each case the inquirer stops searching, but only in the first does she stop because she takes herself to have found the answer. Closure is therefore an intentional act, and its rationality must be assessed, at least in part, from the standpoint of the considerations on which the inquirer acts.

The mere reliability of the inquirer's process cannot by itself play this role. By the externalist's own lights, the inquirer need have no access to the fact that her process is reliable, so that fact need not figure among the considerations in light of which she decides to close her inquiry. Reliability may explain why the belief she forms upon closure is justified, but it does not yet explain what makes her act of closing the inquiry rational.

The requirement that closure be assessable from an inquirer's cognitive position is, moreover, already implicit in a constraint on intention widely accepted by cognitivists and non-cognitivists alike. According to cognitivists about intention, intending to φ constitutively involves some cognitive attitude toward one's φ -ing. Strong cognitivists hold that intending to φ involves believing that one will φ , while weaker cognitivists may endorse a less demanding requirement, such as the belief that one can φ . These are typically proposed as constraints on intention simpliciter rather than specifically on rational intention. Non-cognitivists, by contrast, deny that intention is subject to such a positive constitutive cognitive requirement. Nevertheless, members of both parties tend to accept that one cannot rationally intend to do what one believes to be impossible. Bratman (1987), for example, holds that rational intentions must be consistent with an agent's beliefs:

...there will normally be irrationality in intending to A and believing one will not A; for there is a defeasible demand that one's intentions be consistent with one's beliefs...intention-belief inconsistency is closer to criticizable irrationality than is intention-belief incompleteness.
(Bratman 1987, p. 38)

Let us call the relevant constraint *Intention-Belief Consistency* (IBC):

IBC: If S rationally intends to φ , S does not believe that S cannot φ .

IBC is not a constraint imposed by the reliability of S's intention-forming mechanism. It concerns the rational coherence between S's intentions and her beliefs. Closure, as the intentional act of bringing inquiry to a close and proceeding on the assumption that one has found the explanation, is subject to a similar constraint: S cannot rationally bring inquiry to a close on grounds that she has found the relevant explanation, without an entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry. For in bringing inquiry to a rational close, S must be entitled to treat it as possible that her inquiry has achieved its aim. Absent such an entitlement, S has no rational basis for treating her inquiry as successful. An externalist may therefore maintain that the belief resulting from closure can be epistemically justified by facts unavailable to S. But it does not follow that the rationality of S's decision to close the inquiry can likewise be detached from S's cognitive position. To insist otherwise would undermine the very conception of rational intention on which IBC depends.

How does an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry secure the possibility of rational closure? Successful explanatory inquiry into a fact p presupposes that p has an explanation within the inquirer's cognitive reach in principle. Suppose, then, that an inquirer has considered the candidate explanations available to her and identified the best one. If she is epistemically entitled to the claim that her target has an explanation within her cognitive reach (because she is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry), then she is entitled to regard her inquiry as capable, in principle, of reaching a point at which the explanatory search can rationally end. This does not guarantee that she has reached that point in any particular inquiry: she may have overlooked a candidate explanation, or contingent limitations may prevent her from finding it. The entitlement secures something weaker but crucial: namely, that rational closure is possible for her, even when it is not yet achievable here and now.

I end this section by asking why rational closure matters for us. Rational closure is the hinge between inquiry and what comes after it. Everything an inquirer does with the result of an inquiry—asserting it, teaching it, treating it as a premise in further inquiry, or intervening in the world on its basis—presupposes that the inquiry has concluded and that the inquirer is rationally entitled to proceed

on the basis of the answer she has reached. If closure itself lacks rational standing, then these downstream activities inherit the defect: assertion becomes the assertion of what remains, by the inquirer's own lights, an unsettled candidate; further inquiry builds upon a premise she has not rationally settled on, and intervention becomes action on the basis of an answer she lacks sufficient grounds to treat as established. The rationality of what an inquirer does with an explanation thus depends, at least in part, on the rationality of her decision to stop looking for one.

This matters both intrinsically and instrumentally. Rational closure has intrinsic epistemic value because it enables inquiry to build upon inquiry: settled explanatory conclusions can themselves become premises from which further questions are investigated and further explanatory knowledge acquired. If explanatory knowledge is an intrinsic epistemic good, then the capacity to close inquiry rationally is part of what makes the cumulative pursuit of that good possible.⁷

What about instrumental value? Successful intervention does not seem to require the discovery of an explanation, and so, *a fortiori*, does not require the rational closure of explanatory inquiry. Suppose a gardener notices that one tomato plant has withered, hypothesizes that it received insufficient water, and waters the remaining plants more regularly. The fact that they flourish does not show that insufficient water explains why the first plant withered: successful intervention may depend only on a reliable correlation between watering and flourishing. Practical success alone does not therefore secure the instrumental value of rational closure. The instrumental value of rational closure lies elsewhere. First, rational closure makes the results of explanatory inquiry available for further epistemic use. Once an inquiry is rationally brought to a close, its result can be asserted, taught, used as a premise in reasoning, and made the starting point for further inquiry. In this way, rational closure enables inquiry to build upon inquiry.

Second, even if successful intervention as such does not require the discovery of an explanation for the target fact, rational action on the basis of explanatory inquiry does seem to require rational closure. Consider a physician who concludes that a patient's symptoms are explained by a bacterial infection and administers an antibiotic on that basis. If she acts because she takes the bacterial infection to explain the symptoms, the rationality of her intervention depends not merely on having identified it as a candidate explanation, but on being rationally entitled to end the diagnostic search and proceed on the assumption that it is the explanation. Rational closure can therefore matter instrumentally both by enabling further epistemic activity and by making the results of explanatory inquiry available as a rational basis for action.

I have argued that the rational closure of inquiry requires an entitlement that licenses an inquirer in treating her target as having an actual, discoverable explanation, so that arriving at the best candidate can rationally count for her, in principle, as arriving at the explanation. More evidence in support of one candidate over others cannot supply this entitlement, and nor can the reliability of the inquiry process. Neither can account for the rationality of the inquirer's decision to stop searching. The question that now arises is this: what *could* permit an inquirer to rationally bring inquiry to a close? I will argue that it would have to be a non-evidential epistemic entitlement to her target having an explanation that is within her cognitive reach.

III Against Exhaustion In §I, I argued that no inquirer can ever be epistemically entitled—on evidential grounds alone—to the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry. In §II, I argued that unless an inquirer is epistemically entitled to the possibility that her inquiry can succeed, she cannot rationally bring her inquiry to a close. While the rational closure of inquiry may not be necessary for discovering an explanation, it is required for an inquirer to be in a position to build on, as well as act on, the results of her previous inquiries. Let us now suppose for *reductio* that evidential grounds are the only grounds on which one might acquire an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successful inquiry. Let us call this claim *Exhaustion*. Again, evidential grounds may include empirical evidence, calculations, as well as

⁷ I take it to be uncontroversial for present purposes that knowledge and understanding are epistemic goods. See Pritchard and Turri (2022) for more discussion.

theoretical virtues that might help one decide between competing explanations. Consider now the following argument:

P1. Evidential grounds exhaust the possible grounds on which an inquirer S is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . [Supposition for *reductio*: Exhaustion]

P2. Evidential grounds cannot secure an epistemic entitlement to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . [From Argument in §I]

P3. There are no grounds on which S is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . [From P1, P2]

P4. S is not epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . [From P3]

P5. S cannot rationally bring inquiry into p to a close unless S is epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . [Rational Closure]

P6. S cannot rationally bring inquiry into p to a close. [From P4, P5]

Yet:

P7. S can rationally bring inquiry into p to a close. [Anti-sceptical Premise]

C. P1 is false. [From inconsistency of P6 and P7]

It follows that evidential grounds do not exhaust the possible grounds on which an inquirer may be epistemically entitled to the possibility of successfully inquiring into p . Why accept the move from P3 to P4? An entitlement without any entitling ground would be a 'brute entitlement'. That there can be no brute entitlement is exceedingly plausible, and hardly worth stating. But more can be said: the possibility of brute entitlement is a double-edged sword. Although it leaves open a brute route by which an inquirer might rationally close an inquiry, it implies that even when grounds are present, nothing requires an agent's entitlement (to anything) to arise in virtue of them. The manoeuvre of endorsing the possibility of brute entitlement thus appears to sever the connection between grounds and entitlement more generally. Yet, successful explanatory inquiry requires that an inquirer discover an explanation *on the basis of her inquiry*.

Why accept P7? If there were targets of explanatory inquiry for which rational closure was impossible in principle, then with respect to those targets we could never rationally proceed on the basis of inquiring into them, whether by believing or asserting their results, using them as premises in further inquiry, or acting upon them. If P1 is false, then rational closure might perhaps be secured on non-evidential grounds. What sort of grounds might these be?

Rational closure does not require that every inquiry terminate with the discovery of an explanation. In principle, inquiry might instead close with the discovery that its target is brute, namely that it has no explanation. But, as I have argued, evidential grounds cannot establish that a particular fact is brute. And nor can a non-evidential entitlement to the bruteness of some particular fact do the work of securing rational closure. Such an entitlement would have to discriminate between facts that have explanations and facts that do not. Yet, there is nothing available to us (independent of any result of explanatory inquiry) on the basis of which we could rationally discriminate facts with explanations. Thus, if we are epistemically entitled (on non-evidential grounds) to the possibility of rational closure for any target p , that entitlement must be to p 's having an explanation that is within our cognitive reach. It must be an entitlement to ER.

IV Whence Entitlement? In this final section I explore candidate grounds for an epistemic entitlement that might secure that for every inquirer S and every target of inquiry p , S is epistemically entitled to p having an explanation that is, in principle, within S's cognitive reach (i.e. an entitlement to ER).

The discussion that follows draws heavily on Crispin Wright's work on epistemic entitlement.⁸ Wright's central insight, for my purposes, is that certain commitments on which our epistemic practices depend may be such that we are epistemically entitled to them even if they cannot be vindicated by those practices.⁹ Wright argues that sceptical arguments (and in particular, Cartesian scepticism about an external world and Humean scepticism about induction) share a common structure. Each identifies a certain proposition as a 'cornerstone' for the possibility of some practice, a proposition whose rejection would undermine our justification for all beliefs within that domain. The sceptic then attempts to show that we have no justification for believing the relevant cornerstone proposition. Wright argues that these sceptical arguments establish, at most, that evidence for such cornerstone propositions cannot be acquired through the very forms of inquiry that presuppose them. Importantly, they do not establish the stronger conclusion that we lack any epistemic warrant whatsoever for 'accepting' these cornerstone propositions. For Wright, to 'accept' p is to rationally trust that p : to take p for granted in one's inquiry in a way that excludes doubt and permits one to form beliefs whose justification depends on p , without having any evidence for p . Why speak of acceptance rather than belief? Wright takes seriously the worry that it may be constitutive of belief (but not acceptance) that it is sensitive to evidence.¹⁰ However, I will bracket this worry and talk in terms of belief.

Let us begin by ruling out an obviously bad candidate for securing epistemic entitlement, namely unavoidability. Certain practices may simply be unavoidable for us, in the sense that we cannot help but engage in them. However, many practices seem unavoidable for creatures like us without this unavoidability conferring any epistemic entitlement on the beliefs or attitudes that go with them. For example, beings like us may be unable to avoid experiencing and thinking of colours as properties that belong to external objects. We automatically think the apple is red or the grass is green. But the psychological unavoidability of representing the world this way does not itself confer epistemic entitlement on the belief that colours are mind-independent, intrinsic properties of external objects. Such unavoidability carries no normative weight. To argue for an epistemic entitlement on such a basis is to move illegitimately from an 'is' to an 'ought'.

According to another candidate ground for epistemic entitlement—one Wright calls *strategic entitlement*—an entitlement can arise because proceeding on a certain assumption constitutes a 'dominant strategy' relative to some important practical or cognitive end.¹¹ A dominant strategy is a course of action that does at least as well as any alternative regardless of how things turn out. Take, for example, the Reichenbachian response to inductive scepticism: if nature is uniform, the inductive strategy is best for forming reliable expectations about the future; if nature is not uniform, no alternative works better. Thus, induction qualifies as a dominant strategy given the end of reliably predicting future outcomes. Wright suggests that this type of argument may generate an absolute strategic entitlement to trust that nature is uniform.

An analogous argument in the case of explanatory inquiry may go as follows. An explanatory inquirer is strategically entitled to believe that her target has an explanation that she can in principle come to know because, for any inquirer S and any target of inquiry:

P1. The possibility of bringing inquiry to a rational close is an important end for S.

⁸ See, for example, Wright (2013), and Wright and Davies (2004).

⁹ While Wright is not concerned with establishing the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry, my discussion explores whether and how Wright's insight can be extended to the explanatory case.

¹⁰ See Wright and Davies (2004, p. 176): 'The idea of a non-evidential warrant to *believe* a proposition can easily impress as a kind of conceptual solecism.'

¹¹ See Wright and Davies (2004).

P2. If the target of inquiry has a knowable explanation, then S's assumption that it does enables S to satisfy a necessary condition for rationally closing her inquiry into that target.

P3. If the target of inquiry does not have a knowable explanation, then nothing else can enable S to secure the relevant necessary condition for rationally closing her inquiry into that target.

C1. Whether or not the target in fact has an explanation, assuming that it does is at least as conducive to rationally closing inquiry as any alternative assumption. (From P2 and P3)

P4. S has no sufficient ground to believe that the target lacks a knowable explanation.

P5. If assuming a proposition is at least as conducive as any alternative assumption to achieving an important end, and S has no sufficient ground to believe that proposition false, then S is strategically entitled to assume it.

C2. Therefore, S is strategically entitled to assume that the target of her inquiry has a knowable explanation. (From C1, P1, P4, and P5)

Notice what P2 and P3 license: *assuming* that the target of inquiry has a knowable explanation is a dominant strategy relative to the end specified in P1. A dominance argument of this shape is, by its very structure, indifferent to the truth of what is assumed. That is exactly what makes the resulting entitlement *strategic* rather than *epistemic*: it entitles S to *proceed as if* her target has a knowable explanation. Yet, the possibility of rational closure requires an epistemic entitlement to the claim that the target of inquiry *really* has an explanation, and not merely a methodological entitlement to proceed as if it does. This is because we want the epistemic entitlement to secure the possibility of rational closure, namely the possibility of rationally concluding that an explanation for the target has been found. A merely strategic entitlement cannot do this: it may rationalize proceeding *as if* inquiry can succeed, but it cannot rationalize the epistemic verdict that the explanation has in fact been found.¹²

I have argued that strategic entitlement fails to provide us with the kind of epistemic entitlement we need in order to secure the possibility of successful explanatory inquiry for any *p*. Nevertheless, it seems that we have in our hands an argument for the claim that for any fact we inquire into, we are strategically entitled to treat that fact as having an explanation we can in principle come to know—an interesting result in its own right.

If neither unavoidability nor strategic entitlement can provide the warrant required for rational closure, what can? Wright's broader framework suggests a way forward. For Wright, epistemic entitlement is ultimately a form of *rational trust*: a warrant to take a proposition for granted in inquiry even where one lacks evidence for its truth (Wright and Davies 2004, p. 193). Wright argues that where rational engagement in a valuable cognitive project requires certain presuppositions, and where attempting to vindicate those presuppositions through that project would merely generate further presuppositions of no more secure a status, we may be rationally entitled to trust the original presuppositions without any particular evidence in their favour. This suggests the following: given that inquiry and its downstream practices are cognitively valuable projects, and if rationally engaging in them requires S to have an epistemic entitlement to *p* that cannot otherwise be acquired, then, absent specific grounds for doubting *p*, S is *prima facie* entitled to trust *p*. I have not argued here in detail for this particular species of Wrightian entitlement. But if we are to avoid the sceptical conclusion that no explanatory inquiry can ever be rationally brought to a close, some such entitlement is required. The question ultimately is not whether we need a non-evidential entitlement, but what could ground it.

¹² Wright explicitly acknowledges that strategic entitlement does not 'extend to matters of ontology' (Wright and Davies 2004, p. 197).

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