

(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G. E. Moore and John McDowell*

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I Moore's 'Proof'

Wittgenstein apparently regarded G. E. Moore's "Proof of an External World" as one of his finest pieces of philosophical work.¹ That is an important clue for anyone who wants to understand what Wittgenstein thought a satisfactory treatment of knowledge-scepticism should accomplish.² I do not believe, though, that many of Moore's modern readers would share Wittgenstein's high regard. The greater part of the essay is devoted to exasperatingly slow ruminations on what it means to describe objects as "external", or "outside our minds" or "presented in space" or "to be met with in space". Nothing particularly consequential emerges. And the actual 'Proof'—which everyone on first reading feels blatantly begs the question—is confined to the last few pages.

Here is the essence of it:

Moore

II Here is a hand

III There is a material world

(since any hand is a material object existing in space)

* This essay, though self-contained, returns to some of the themes in my (1985). Prior to its presentation at the Rutgers Epistemology Conference in 2001, I had benefited from discussions of the main ideas at the Jowett Society and the Philosophical Society at Oxford, at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club, at departmental colloquia at Princeton, Yale, New York University, Berkeley, Edinburgh, and Ohio State, and at conferences at Aarhus and Bristol. Special thanks for comments to John Campbell, Brian McLaughlin, Jim Pryor and Timothy Williamson. The paper has been completed during my tenure of a Leverhulme Research Professorship; I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Leverhulme Trust.

¹ Reprinted in G. E. Moore (1959) at pp. 127-50.

² I discuss Wittgenstein's late attitude to scepticism in Wright (forthcoming).

—where *Moore II* is asserted in a context where Moore, as he supposes, is holding his hands up in front of his face, in good light, in a state of visual and cognitive lucidity, etc.³

Why is this so evidently unsatisfactory? Moore's concept of a proof is that of a valid argument from known or warranted premisses. That seems unexceptionable. And the argument is valid. Nor is the problem that Moore doesn't first prove his premise. He perfectly fairly points out that it cannot always be reasonable to demand proof of the premisses of a proof—sometimes we must claim knowledge without proof, or proof cannot get started. Moreover the premise—so Moore can plausibly contend—is probably more certain, in the relevant context, than the least certain premise in any sceptical argument.⁴ Still, Moore's 'Proof' surely doesn't achieve what one expects of a *proof*.

One interesting general issue this raises is under what circumstances a valid argument is indeed at the service of proof—i.e. of *cogent* argumentation. That question is the first general quarry of this essay. Another will be to explain how, so far from providing a buttress against sceptical doubt, reflection on Moore's 'Proof' may actually encourage a particularly virulent and general form of it. A third will be to argue that a recently canvassed and quite influential adjustment to the Lockean architecture of perception which is often viewed as the root and beginning of material world scepticism is dialectically quite ineffectual.

II

A distinction

As remarked, a proper proof should be cogent. And a cogent argument is one whereby someone could be moved to rational conviction of—or the rational overcoming of doubt about—the truth of its conclusion. So a chain of valid inferences cannot be cogent if only someone who already took themselves to be rationally persuaded of the conclusion could rationally receive whatever grounds purportedly warranted its premisses as doing just that. That's a key thought.

Say that a particular warrant *w* *transmits* across a valid argument just in case the argument is cogent when *w* is given as the warrant for its premisses. The distinction I want to note is between *transmission* of warrant, so characterised, and *closure* of warrant. Closure of warrant across (known) entailment has of course been very widely discussed.⁵ It is the weaker principle. Closure,

³ The point of the numbering will become clear below.

⁴ Cf. Moore's (1918) reprinted in his (1922). A relevant passage (about Moore's finger) comes at page 228 in the latter.

⁵ The initiation and *locus classicus* of the modern discussion is Fred Dretske's (1970). However Dretske missed the distinction between transmission and closure. The subsequent literature has largely followed suit.

says that whenever there is warrant for the premises of a (known) valid argument, there is warrant for the conclusion too. Transmission says more: roughly, that to acquire a warrant for the premisses of a valid argument and to recognise its validity is *thereby* to acquire—perhaps for the first time—a warrant to accept the conclusion. Our concern will be with counterexamples to transmission. Such cases need not be counter-examples to closure. Closure can hold, for instance, but transmission may fail in a case where there is warrant for the premises in the first place only because the conclusion is *antecedently* warranted. (I am, myself, sceptical whether there are any genuine counterexamples to closure but that issue is not on our agenda.)

Intuitively, a transmissible warrant should make for the possible advancement of knowledge, or warranted belief, and the overcoming of doubt or agnosticism. A warrant is transmissible when we may envisage a logically non-omniscient but otherwise perfectly rational subject coming to believe a proposition for the first time in a way which depends on their recognising *both* the validity of the inference in question *and* that they possess a warrant for its premises. So there is one immediate and very simple kind of counterexample to transmission which is not a counterexample to closure: that of simple *question-begging*—the case where the conclusion of a valid argument features explicitly among its premises. In that case, recognition of the validity of the inference will, obviously, have no part to play in a subject's recognition of their warrant for its stated conclusion. But there are more interesting ways of begging questions than that. Moore, depending on how we interpret his 'Proof', provides an example of two.

III

Transmission failure: some examples

Consider⁶:

Toadstool:

- I Three hours ago, Jones inadvertently consumed a large risotto of *Boletus Satana*.
 - II Jones has absorbed a lethal quantity of the toxins that toadstool contains.
- Therefore
- III Jones will shortly die.

Or

⁶ I stick, more or less, to the examples used in my (1985), though the reader may find it instructive to think of others.

Betrothal

- I Jones has just proposed marriage to a girl who would love to be his wife.
- II Jones' proposal of marriage will be accepted.
- Therefore
- III Jones will become engaged at some time in his life.

In both these examples the information described by the first proposition is good but *defeasible*—inconclusive—evidence for the truth of the second proposition.⁷ Further, in both cases the second proposition logically entails the third. But a key additional feature which these examples have is that the defeasible support afforded by the first proposition for the second is—in a normal context—*transmissible across the entailment from the second proposition to the third*—so that e.g. *Toadstool I*, because evidence for *Toadstool II*, is also evidence for *Toadstool III* and *Betrothal I*, because evidence for *Betrothal II*, is also evidence for *Betrothal III*.

That may seem the normal and expectable case. But now consider these two structurally similar examples. First:

Soccer

- I Jones has just kicked the ball between the white posts.
- II Jones has just scored a goal.
- Therefore
- III A game of soccer is taking place.

Compare

Election

- I Jones has just placed an X on a ballot paper
- II Jones has just voted.
- Therefore
- III An election is taking place.

Superficially, these examples seem like more of the same: cases where we have, in the first proposition, good but defeasible evidence for the second proposition, which in turn entails the third, and where the support afforded by

⁷ As I shall understand the notion, evidence for a proposition is *defeasible* just in case it is possible to envisage *adding to it* in such a way that the resulting enlarged body of evidence no longer supports the proposition in question. Suppose we learn, for instance, that Jones' girl is already married, or that he has taken an antidote which prevents his metabolising the toxin...Defeasibility thus contrasts with *fallibility*, in the sense associated with the possibility that evidence may prove defective.

the first proposition for the second is thereby transmissible to the third. But the last claim is wrong. Rather, in these examples, it is only because the first proposition would normally provide evidence *directly* for the truth of the third proposition that it is able to provide evidence for the second. To see this, suppose that the first proposition stops being direct evidence for the third. Suppose, for example, you live in a society which holds electoral drills—practice elections—rather as we now hold fire drills. And suppose that they are held pretty much as frequently as real elections, so that—unless you have some further relevant background information—it is as likely as not that Jones is participating in a drill rather than the real thing. Then in this situation, Jones' writing an X on a ballot paper stops being evidence—even defeasible evidence—for his voting. If all you know is that a drill is as likely as the real thing, and that Jones has written an X on the piece of paper, you have no better reason to suppose that he has voted than to suppose that he has not.

Thus: the tendency *Election I* has to support *Election II* is, in these circumstances, conditional on your possessing *independent* reason to accept *Election III*—reason provided by your background knowledge that the marking of X's on bits of paper in the sort of circumstances surrounding Jones is a reliable indicator that an election is in process. So the ground provided by *Election I* for believing *Election II* is *not* transmissible across the entailment from *Election II* to *Election III*. It is only if you already have grounds for *Election III*—either provided directly by *Election I* or in some other way—that *Election I* gives you reason to believe *Election II*.

It is the same with *Soccer*. Assuming—as we may—that it is only in the context of a genuine game of soccer that there is such a thing as scoring a soccer goal, *Soccer* is a valid inference. Let the evidence for *Soccer II* be what is described by *Soccer I* and more: the driving of the ball into the net, the apparent congratulations of team-mates, the referee's response, etc. Is any warrant supplied by all this for *Soccer II* transmissible across the entailment to *Soccer III*?

Notice—to bring out a point implicit in what we just said about the election case—that the question is not quite: can we by acquiring such a warrant for *Soccer II* *thereby* acquire a warrant for *Soccer III*? If our collateral information includes, what is doubtless the actual case, that scenes of the kind witnessed seldom occur except in the context of real soccer matches, then our evidence certainly is evidence for *Soccer III*. But that's not to say that the warrant we have for *Soccer III* should be regarded as *transmitted* via the inference from *Soccer II*. On the contrary: we would have had *that* warrant for *Soccer III*, on the basis of the very same evidence, even if we had also noticed the referee's assistant's flag raised to mark an infringement—and reckoned it quite likely that the defending team would direct the referee's attention to that

fact in the next few seconds. In that case we'd have what is essentially the *same* warrant for *Soccer* III without, yet at least, having a warrant for *Soccer* II at all. So we should deny that there is genuine transmission of warrant from *Soccer* II to *Soccer* III even in the scenario where the official's flag remains down. Rather one has a body of evidence which is a warrant *simultaneously* for *Soccer* II and *Soccer* III, and it is not because it is a warrant for *Soccer* II that it is a warrant for *Soccer* III. So there is, arguably, a failure of transmission in this—plausibly the likely actual—case.

But now, to clinch the example, consider a different scenario. Suppose you are in the vicinity of a film studio, and know that it is just as likely that the witnessed scene is specially staged for the camera as that it is an event in a genuine game. Once you're equipped with *this* information, you will rightly regard the evidence as providing *no* warrant any longer for *Soccer* II. What you need, in order to restore its warranting power, is precisely some *independent* corroboration of *Soccer* III. You ask a bystander: is that a genuine game or a film take? When you learn the game is genuine, you once again have a warrant for the claim that a goal was just scored. But it would be absurd to regard that warrant as transmissible across the entailment to *Soccer* III. You don't get any *additional* reason for thinking that a game is in process by having the warrant for *Soccer* II. It remains that your *only* ground for *Soccer* III is the bystander's testimony and it is only because you have that ground that witnessing the scene provides a warrant for *Soccer* II. So that's a second, very clear case of transmission failure. (And interestingly, there is so far no case of failure of *closure*: in both scenarios, if one does have a warrant for *Soccer* II, one also has a warrant for *Soccer* III.)

IV

Generalisation: the information-dependence template

I remarked above that transmission of warrant might be expected to be the normal case. But reflection on these examples encourages the expectation that counterexamples will be by no means unusual, provided we accept that the holism of empirical confirmation famously emphasised by Quine in the last two sections of "Two Dogmas" is indeed pervasive—as it seemingly is. Suppose you bring a kettle to the boil on a camping stove: is that evidence that the liquid inside is at or close to 100° Celsius? It depends: yes, if you have it that the liquid is water and the atmospheric pressure is around that of sea level; no, if you know the liquid is glucose syrup or if you are making tea at Everest base camp. You hear a rustling and see a flash of grey in the trees above you: is that evidence of a squirrel? Yes, if you are knowingly in woodlands in the Eastern United States; no, if you are knowingly in a Scottish pine forest (where the squirrels are still red and it is much more likely to be a wood-pigeon.) Examples such as these suggest that what is normal is *information-dependence* of warrant. A body of evidence, *e*, is an information-

dependent warrant for a particular proposition P if regarding *e* as warranting P rationally requires certain kinds of collateral information, I. And such a relationship is always liable to generate examples of transmission-failure: it will do so just when the particular *e*, P and I have the feature that elements of the relevant I are themselves entailed by P (together perhaps with other warranted premises.) In that case, any warrant supplied by *e* for P will not be transmissible to those elements of I. Warrant is transmissible only if a thinker could rationally cite as her ground for accepting I the fact that she has warrant for P together with the entailment. No thinker can rationally do that if the warrant for P supplied by *e* depends in the first place on prior and independent warrant for I.

V

Moore's Proof as a case of transmission failure (I)

A Sceptic who holds that Moore has no warrant for the belief that there is an external material world has to make a case that Moore's *experience* provides no such warrant. The nub of that case has to be, familiarly, that the idea that there is a material world, whose characteristics are broadly in keeping with the way experience represents it, is a *hypothesis* whose truth is in the nature of the case experience-transcendent—that experience cannot rule against various uncongenial alternatives, all involving the idea that its source is something quite other than a world whose characteristics are broadly in line with the way experience represents them. It is, in other words, a presupposition of the relevant kind of sceptical doubt that Moore's certainty—in the right type of context—that he has a hand should be regarded as based on a species of defeasible evidence. Moore's experience assumes a certain character which defeasibly warrants the belief that he has a hand, the potential defeating factors all impinging in one way or another on the background assumption that the prevailing circumstances are cognitively advantageous. The key sceptical thought is, then, that some of the ways in which circumstances might be cognitively *disadvantageous* are potentially undetectable.

However merely to point up potentially undetectable sources of error is not yet to put in jeopardy the defeasible warrants which we take the evidence of experience to supply—not, at least, if warrant is allowed to be based on inconclusive evidence at all. So how exactly should a sceptical challenge develop from there? The subtler form of scepticism which I want to use Moore's treatment to elicit will insist that Moore did not formulate his 'Proof' properly; that the correct formulation is rather something like

*MORE**

- I My experience is in all respects as of a hand held up in front of my face

II Here is a hand

Therefore

III There is a material world

(since any hand is a material object existing in space)

What Moore requires is that the defeasible warrant recorded by *MORE* I* for the belief in *MORE* II* is transmissible across the inference from that belief to the conclusion that there is a material world. The subtler Sceptic's point will then be that this argument exemplifies exactly the template for transmission failure latterly defined: that the status of Moore's experience as a warrant for the proposition that he is perceiving a hand is not unconditional but depends on certain ancillary information and that paramount among the hypotheses that need to be in place in order for the putative warrant for the premise—Moore's experience—to have the evidential force that Moore assumes is the hypothesis that there is indeed a material world whose characteristics are mostly, at least in the large, disclosed in routine sense experience. So the 'Proof' begs the question.

More specifically, the subtler sceptical point is that *MORE* II* stands to *MORE* III* as, e.g., *Soccer II* stands to *Soccer III*: that is, the evidence which purportedly warrants each type-II proposition has that status only in a conducive informational context. One type of conducive context was illustrated by the first soccer scenario we distinguished, in which it is given that evidence of the relevant kind—the ball entering the net, etc.—is unlikely even to be available unless the conclusion of the inference in question is true; in the second soccer scenario, by contrast, although one has no information of that kind, one does possess independent reason—the bystander's testimony—to think that the conclusion is true, which ensures or contributes towards an entitlement to regard the evidence in question as warranting the first proposition. But in order to assimilate his situation to the first scenario, Moore would need independent information that experience of the kind he is having is unlikely to occur unless there is a material world; while assimilation to the second scenario would require independent information—perhaps testimony from a by-standing benevolent demon!—that there is a material world. Moore cannot, in the dialectical setting which he has undertaken—one of trying to marshal a response to scepticism—take it for granted that he has either of those pieces of information. That is why his 'Proof' is indeed—like Dr. Johnston's before him—the episode of simple-minded *petitio* which it always seemed.

VI

The I-II-III argument

That there is a transmission failure involved in *Election* and *Soccer* does not itself invite scepticism about the existence of elections and soccer games. The

sceptical train of thought about the material world which issues from comparing Moore's argument with those two arguments involves *Five Claims* (generalisations in brackets)—

- (a) That there is no way of justifying particular beliefs about the material world save on the basis of the (inconclusive) evidence given by our senses.

(More generally: type-II propositions can only be justified on the evidence of type-I propositions.)

- (b) Sensory evidence for any particular proposition about the material world depends for its force on independent warrant for the belief that the material world so much as exists—it would not be warranted to treat our experience as evidence for claims about our immediate physical environment if we were antecedently agnostic about the existence of a material world.

(More generally: the evidence provided by type-I propositions for type-II propositions is information-dependent, requiring inter alia an independent warrant for a type-III proposition—a “hinge proposition” of sufficient generality to be entailed by any type-II proposition.)

Ergo

- (c) Our belief that there is a material world cannot without circularity be based on an accumulation of sensory evidence for the truth of particular type-II propositions about it.

(More generally: type-III propositions cannot be warranted by transmission of evidence provided by type-I propositions for type-II propositions across a type-II-to-type-III entailment.)

- (d) But there is nothing else on which a belief in the existence of the material world might be rationally based.

(More generally: type-III propositions cannot be warranted any other way.)

- (e) And that belief needs justification since it could, after all, be false.

(More generally: type-III propositions could be false.)

—and it is of course the analogues of claim (d) that—by ordinary standards of confirmation—fail for the case of *Soccer* and *Election*. However if each of (a)–(e) is accepted, then the upshot is that our entire “language game” of talk concerning the material world turns out to be based upon an assumption for which we have no ground whatever, can in principle get no ground whatever, and which could—for all we know—be false. That is about as strong a sceptical conclusion as one could wish for (or hope to avoid.)

As the parenthetical generalisations suggest, this form of sceptical argument is very widely applicable. It may be used to provide a simple crystallisation of each of scepticism about other minds, scepticism about the past, and scepticism about inductive inference. Consider, for instance, the following reasoning by a subject who is a bystander at a sporting injury:

Pain

- I Jones’ shin bone is visibly shattered and he is thrashing about on the turf. His face is contorted and he is yelling and screaming.
- II Jones is in pain.
- Therefore
- III There are other minds.

The sceptical argument is structurally just as before. It will assert that it is only if we have independent warrant for *Pain* III (and that Jones is very probably “minded”) that *Pain* I may be taken to confirm *Pain* II. The evidential bearing of *Pain* I on *Pain* II is not something which is appreciable from a standpoint which starts out agnostic about the existence of other minds. So, like “There is a material world”, the role of the proposition “There are other minds” seems to be, as it were, institutional. And that, sceptically construed, is just a polite way of saying that there is no prospect of any kind of independent justification for it, nor therefore for *bona fide* justification of the particular beliefs about others’ mental states which it mediates.

It will be superfluous to run through the parallel considerations concerning

Seaweed

- I There is a line of fresh seaweed on the beach some fifty yards above the ocean
- II The seaweed was washed up by the tide some hours ago
- Therefore
- III The world did not come into being ten seconds ago replete with apparent traces of a much more extended history

and

Basic Induction

I All observed As have been Bs

II All As are Bs

Therefore

III Some properties are invariably co-instantiated with others (Nature is Uniform—at least to some extent)

Notice that in no case is any claim being advanced that the relevant type-III proposition provides information *sufficient* to justify the relevant I-to-II transition. The suggestion is rather that collateral information encompassing that proposition is at least *necessary* if the type-I proposition is to support the type-II proposition; and that the opportunities for acquiring that necessary collateral information are limited in the manner indicated by the generalised versions of the first four of the Five Claims.

VII

A Direct Realist response

The I-II-III argument summarises a predicament which—according to sceptical thought—we are always in when one whole genre of our beliefs seems to be based upon another whose members do not logically entail the former—in the way in which beliefs about experience seem to provide the whole basis for but do not strictly entail beliefs about the material world, beliefs about others' behaviour and physical condition seem to provide the whole basis for but do not strictly entail beliefs about their mental states, and so on.⁸ It is this generality, and the fact that none of its premises, (a)-(e), is obviously false in the relevant cases that gives the argument its interest, together with the fact that an awful lot of familiar epistemological moves can be seen as addressed to the denial of one or more of those premises. Our immediate concern, however, is just with a recently re-popularised way of rejecting claim (a) in the case of I-II-III scepticism concerning the warrant for our beliefs about the perceptible material environment.

⁸ Thus it is tailor-made to attack warrant based on defeasible inference. By contrast, the Dreaming argument, in its best formulation, exemplifies a shape of sceptical attack appropriate to warrant which we think of as acquired courtesy of the operation of some non-inferential faculty—perception or memory (on direct realist construals) or mathematical intuition, for instance. Put the two arguments in alliance and just about everything comes under sceptical attack. But I shall argue below that the I-II-III argument extends to the non-inferential case as well.

For consideration of how best to formulate the Dreaming argument, see Wright (1991) and Pryor (2000).

The proposal in question has been conspicuous in John McDowell's writings,⁹ though it is original to earlier work by J. M. Hinton¹⁰ and is also developed by Paul Snowdon.¹¹ It is the repudiation of what McDowell terms the "highest common factor" idea of sense experience and its replacement by a *disjunctive* conception. According to the highest common factor idea—essentially just the Lockean conception of experience as a kind of veil, draped between the subject and the external world—it is all the same as far as the nature of the occurrent states of the experiencing subject are concerned whether they take place in the course of veridical perception, or in a dream, or as part of a delusion in waking life. Experience is experience, and these further distinctions have merely to do with the way it *originates* in particular cases. In McDowell's view, by contrast, these are distinctions which contribute towards individuating the intrinsic *type* of state of consciousness which a subject is in: genuine sense perception constitutes a direct apprehension of the 'layout of reality' and there is no component of such a state (except, I believe he must and does allow, at least some kinds of content¹²) which could have been present had the subject been dreaming, or hallucinating instead.

Notwithstanding an official refusal to take scepticism seriously,¹³ McDowell does claim of this disjunctive conception that it has the advantage of removing a prop on which sceptical doubt—and what he calls "traditional epistemology"—depends.¹⁴ His point may seem to be nicely illustrated by the I-II-II argument. For that argument does appear to depend squarely on a *broadly inferential* conception of the justification of perceptual claims: particular experiences take place anyway, and whether they may be treated as evidence for claims about the material world, or call for explanation in some other terms, is then made out to depend upon the collateral beliefs that are in play. So if it is wrong to represent simple material world beliefs as grounded in experience in this way in the first place—if experience consists, rather, in a *direct* apprehension of the 'layout of reality'—then is not the I-II-III argument short-circuited just as, in general terms, McDowell suggested sceptical doubt would be? I shall argue that the subtler sceptic should be undisturbed.

⁹ It is most developed in his (1982). See also McDowell (1994) lecture VI, part 3.

¹⁰ See J. M. Hinton (1973) and the various earlier articles of his to which he there refers.

¹¹ Paul Snowdon (1981).

¹² As Michael Williams observed to me in conversation, exception would have to be allowed for certain kinds of contents. A dream could not carry a genuinely demonstrative content, for instance, if such contents are regarded—as they plausibly are—as object-involving. But it would be bad news for the disjunctive view if it had the effect that I could not dream that it was Christmas or that my mother was visiting.

¹³ A typical passage is McDowell (1994) pp. 112-13. The reader may be surprised by the crude—almost caricatured—conception of sceptical arguments which McDowell betrays there. In effect, they are treated as merely a sort of unreconstructed obsession with our fallibility.

¹⁴ See McDowell (1982) pp. 388 and 393-94, concluding paragraph.

VIII

Transmission failure: the disjunctive template

Here are two famous examples.¹⁵ You go to the zoo, see several zebras in a pen, and opine that those animals are zebras. Well, you know what zebras look like, and these animals look just like that. Surely you are fully warranted in your belief. But if the animals are zebras, then it follows that they are not mules painstakingly and skilfully disguised as zebras. Does your warrant transmit to the latter claim? There is a strong intuition that it does not. Did you examine the animals closely enough to detect such a fraud? Almost certainly not. The grounds you have for "Those animals are zebras"—essentially, the look of the beasts—have no bearing on this possibility.

Again: you look at a wall and see that it is painted red. So you have acquired a warrant for thinking that it is red. But its being red entails that it is not a white wall cleverly illuminated by concealed lighting to look as if it is red. So have you thereby acquired a warrant for thinking *that*? Again, the strong intuition is not. Your warrant was acquired just by looking at the wall—no doubt you did enough to verify that it is red if indeed it is, but what you did simply didn't reckon with the possibility of deceptive concealed illumination.

When, in the contexts described, you form your beliefs about the zebras and the colour of the wall, there are external preconditions for the effectiveness of your method—casual observation—whose satisfaction you will very likely have done nothing special to ensure. Made-up mules and tricky lighting involve the frustration of those preconditions. Can the warrants you acquire licitly be transmitted to the claim that those preconditions *are* met,—or at least that they are not frustrated in those specific respects? It should seem obvious that they cannot. While you have—no doubt quite justifiably—taken it for granted that the conditions were generally suitable for the acquisition of reliable information by casual perceptual means, it would be absurd to pretend that you had *gained a reason for thinking so*—at least in the specific respects that you didn't have to reckon with disguised mules or deceptive lighting—just by dint of the fact that those specific untoward possibilities are logically excluded by the beliefs which, courtesy of your background assumption, you have now confirmed.

To generalise. Suppose I take myself to have achieved a non-inferential warrant—by some cognitive faculties or other—for a proposition A. And let the question be whether this warrant transmits to a certain consequence, B, of A. However let C be a proposition depicting particular circumstances under which the reliable function of the faculties in question would be frustrated

¹⁵ I borrow, of course, from Dretske (1970). But as remarked, I am demurring from Dretske's own account of these examples, which presents them as failures of closure.

and which would be true, moreover, in certain circumstances *subjectively indistinguishable* from those in which I actually find myself; and suppose C does not entail B, but would be true if B were false. The set-up is thus (*the disjunctive template*)

- (i) that A entails B;
- (ii) that my warrant for A consists in my being in a state which is subjectively indistinguishable from a state in which the relevant C would be true;
- (iii) that C depicts a situation of a general kind incompatible with the reliable operation of the cognitive capacities involved in generating the putative warrant for A;¹⁶ and
- (iv) that C would be true if B were false.

Suppose I know all this. The key question is what, in the circumstances, can justify me in taking it that I have a warrant for A? Why not just reserve judgement and stay with the more tentative disjunction, Either (I have a warrant for) A, or C?—for it is all the same which disjunct is true as far as what is subjectively apparent to me is concerned. The answer has to be, it would seem: that I am somehow *additionally* entitled to discount disjunct C. It may be that I have collateral information telling against C. Or it may be that, for one reason or another, I am not required to bother about C. But either way, in order for me to be entitled to discount C, and so move past the disjunction to A, I have to be entitled to discount the negation of B, and therefore entitled to accept B; for by hypothesis, if not-B were true, so would C be.¹⁷ So it would seem that I must have some sort of appreciable entitlement to affirm B *already*, independent and prior to my recognition of its entailment by A, if I am to claim to be warranted in accepting A in the first place. The inference from A to B is thus not at the service of cogently generating a conviction that B, and my warrant does not transmit.

It is straightforward to cast the zoo and red wall examples into this template. Let A be the proposition that the animals in question are zebras; B is accordingly the entailed proposition that they are not mules painstakingly and skilfully disguised as zebras; while for a suitable C we need look no

¹⁶ In earlier work—for instance in my (2000)—I had a precursor of this condition which involved C's incompatibility not with the reliable operation of the cognitive capacities involved in generating the warrant for A but with A itself. This leads, as Brian McLaughlin observed (just take C as not-A) to the template's blocking the transmission—no matter what B is—of any non-inferential warrant for A the subjective aspects of possessing which are consistent with A's falsity.

¹⁷ This is of course a *closure* step.

further than a generalisation of the negation of B: say, the animals in question are not zebras but just look that way. C, so selected, meets condition (iv). It also meets condition (iii): clearly, if we are having to deal with circumstances in which animals' appearances are deceptive, then conditions are unsuitable for the reliable operation of the relevant cognitive capacities—those involved in the identification of animal species by casual observation of their appearance. Or again, let A be the proposition that the wall is red, B the entailed proposition that the wall is not a white wall cleverly illuminated by concealed lighting to look as if it is red and C the proposition that it is not a red wall but looks just like one. C meets condition (iv). It also meets condition (iii): again, if we are having to deal with circumstances in which things' apparent colours are deceptive, then conditions are unsuitable for the reliable operation of the relevant cognitive capacities—those involved in the identification of colour by casual observation of an item's appearance. However—condition (ii)—the experiences of seeing zebras and seeing mere zebra-lookalikes are relevantly subjectively indistinguishable; as are the experiences of seeing a red wall and seeing a mere red-looking wall. So in treating my state as being a perception of zebras or a red wall respectively, I implicitly discount the uncongenial, deceptive alternatives C. And now, whatever my warrant for doing so, it has to be there *already*; and it must provide warrant for the respective choices for B independently of any consideration of their entailment by the corresponding choices for A.

IX

Moore's Proof as a case of transmission failure (II)

Armed with this template, then, imagine that we have to deal with a McDowellian version of G. E. Moore who rejects the highest common factor conception of experience, conceives of perception as a 'direct acquaintance with the layout of reality', and insists that his warrant for the claim that he is perceiving a hand—in the appropriate context—is non-inferential. May this warrant now be transmitted to the conclusion that there is a material world? The subtler Sceptic should claim that it still may not—only now the transmission is blocked by dint of the 'Proof' exemplifying the second transmission-failure template. Explicitly: take A as 'Here is a hand', B as its consequence: 'There is a material world', and C as 'I am the victim of a delusional state'. A delusion of a hand can be subjectively indistinguishable from a perception of one—condition (ii). Delusion is a state incompatible with the reliable operation of one's perceptual faculties—condition (iii). And of course—condition (iv)—if there were no material world, then a delusional state is exactly what I would have to be in.

In general terms, even if perception is conceived as a mode of direct acquaintance, the fact does not go away that a perceptual state may be subjec-

tively indistinguishable from a dream state or an hallucination.¹⁸ (That's why it's possible to learn, as we ordinarily think, of a state which one took to be perceptual that it was in one way or another delusional.) So a *tentative disjunction* is always available for someone cautious about such radical possibilities. If circumstances seem to merit caution, then I may, rather than venturing a perceptual claim about my immediate environment, offer instead a disjunction: e.g., either here is a hand in front of me or I'm in some kind of delusional state. However it is clear that the ordinary, day-to-day conception of warrant for a perceptual claim simply *goes past* the second type of disjunct; save in special circumstances, it's considered something which we are entitled to dismiss. *A fortiori* we are not required to bother about certain large sceptical thoughts—for instance that there is no material world as ordinarily conceived at all!—which would, in any particular case, entail that it is indeed the uncongenial disjunct which is realised. If that is right, then since the conditions for the possession of warrant for a perceptual claim which apply in ordinary circumstances—and which Moore was implicitly assuming—*presuppose* an entitlement to dismiss the sceptical possibility, there should be no question of a warrant provided under their auspices being transmissible to the denial that the sceptical possibility obtains.

The two transmission-failure templates are, indeed, unified at a deeper level. The unifying thought is that warrants—both inferential and non-inferential—are characteristically *conditional*: inferential empirical warrants are characteristically conditional on collateral information—Quine's point—and non-inferential warrants, presumed acquired by the direct operation of some germane cognitive faculties, are conditional on such an operation's genuinely taking place (contrast: the occurrence of some subjectively indistinguishable *ersatz*) and on the circumstances being conducive to the reliable operation of the faculties in question. In neither case can a warrant for a belief transmit to a consequence which enters into the relevant conditions—a consequence for which one would have to credit oneself with prior warrant in order rationally to claim the original warrant in the first place. Very simply, a warrant, *w*, for a belief, *A*, cannot transmit to any of its consequences, *B*, if—in context—one would need an entitlement (earned or standing) to *B* in order to defend the claim that conditions for the acquisition of *w* were satisfied. That is the common pattern of all our examples.

¹⁸ McDowell (1982 section 3) acknowledges this, of course, but thinks the point is harmless, since it cannot be used to reinstate the 'highest common factor' conception. But the point I am about to make is that the sceptical argument—I mean specifically the I-II-III argument—has no need for the 'highest common factor' conception.

X

I-II-III Scepticism restored

So: a disjunctive conception of perceptual experience doesn't help restore transmission in Moore's 'Proof'. Again, the point is not sceptical *per se*. But now we can easily move to reinstate the sceptical argument.

The key point is that the disjunctivist makes a tendentious assumption in supposing that to conceive of perceptual experience as a form of direct acquaintance with reality is automatically to eliminate the idea that in the justification of perceptual statements, there is any role for claims weaker than perceptual statements. So long as it is granted that perception and delusion can be subjectively indistinguishable, there *is* a weaker claim which is justified whenever, as one would ordinarily suppose, the corresponding perceptual claim is justified, viz. precisely the disjunction:

Either I am perceiving thus-and-such or I am in some kind of delusional state.

Sure, that a disjunction is considered justified whenever one of its disjuncts is, is hardly remarkable. What is relevant is rather that in this case it is our practice to treat one in particular of the disjuncts as justified—the left-hand one—whenever the disjunction as a whole is justified and there is, merely, *no evidence for* the other disjunct! That's a manifest fallacy unless the case is one where we have a *standing reason* to regard the lack of any salient justification for a disjunct of the second type as reason to discount it. And—the sceptical thought will be—it's hard to see what could count as such a standing reason except a prior entitlement to the belief that delusions are rare. But that's just tantamount to the belief that there is a material world which, at least on the surfaces of things, is pretty much revealed for what it is in what we take to be normal waking experience. So, the Sceptic will contend, that broad conception once again emerges as a rational precondition of our practice, even after the disjunctive adjustment to the concept of perception; and on its warrantedness depends whatever warrant can be given for our proceeding in the way we do. Since it cannot be warranted by appeal to the warrant for specific perceptual claims—Moore's proof being no better in this setting than before—the Sceptic may now focus on the apparent impossibility of any kind of direct warrant for it, and the dialectic can proceed essentially as before.

In brief: whether our perceptual faculties engage the material world directly is one issue and whether the canonical justification of perceptual claims proceeds through a defeasible inferential base is another. One is, so far, at liberty to take a positive view of *both* issues. And when we do, the I-II-III pattern re-emerges along these lines:

- I *Either* I am perceiving a hand in front of my face *or* I am in some kind of delusional state
- II Here is a hand
- Therefore
- III There is a material world
(since any hand is a material object existing in space)

with III arguably, as before, an informational precondition of the warrant for treating evidence of the kind illustrated by I as a ground for the kind of proposition about local perceptibles illustrated by II. A Sceptic, then, can be perfectly hospitable to the disjunctive re-conception of experience—which may indeed, for all I intend to suggest here, be quite correct.¹⁹

The moral is that, until we have refuted the justificational architecture of perceptual claims so schematised, the disjunctive re-conception does nothing at all to deconstruct “traditional epistemology”²⁰ or to “cause a sea of philosophy to subside”.²¹

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¹⁹ —though one would have to do better than merely canvass the allegedly “non-compulsory” nature (McDowell (1994) p. 113) of the Lockean view to be assured of it.

²⁰ McDowell (1994) pp. 112-13.

²¹ McDowell (1982) p. 389.

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