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DOUBT, CIRCULARITY AND THE MOOREAN RESPONSE TO THE SCEPTIC.

Jessica Brown
University of Bristol

Abstract

1

Davies and Wright have recently diagnosed the felt inadequacy of Moore's response to the sceptic in terms of a failure of transmission of warrant. They argue that warrant fails to transmit across the following key inference: I have hands, if I have hands then I am not a BIV, so I am not a BIV, on the grounds that this inference cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion, and cannot strengthen one's epistemic position with respect to the conclusion. Here, for the sake of argument, I grant that the inference can neither rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion nor strengthen one's epistemic position with respect to the conclusion, and examine whether, and in what way, this undermines use of this inference in a reply to the sceptic.

1. Introduction

Sceptics argue that one lacks knowledge of ordinary propositions such as the claim that one has hands. A sample sceptical argument might run as follows. One does not know that one is not a handless brain in a vat (BIV); if one does not know that one is not a BIV, one does not know that one has hands; so, one does not know that one has hands. Moore famously offered the following style of response: one does know that one has hands, one knows that one has hands only if one knows that one is not a BIV, so one knows that one is not a BIV. (From now on, I will set aside the subtleties of Moore's historical position and focus on this response to the sceptic, calling it the M-response.)

There is widespread dissatisfaction with the M-response to the sceptic. Here I focus on one recent diagnosis of this dissatisfaction, offered in a series of papers by Davies and Wright. Since their views have undergone recent changes¹, I will focus on the views expressed in Davies 1998, 2000 and 2003, and Wright

2000, 2002, and 2003. Davies and Wright argue that there is a failure of transmission of warrant across the following key inference, (henceforth ‘the BIV inference’):

- BIV1) I have hands.
- BIV2) If I have hands then I am not a BIV.
- So, BIV3) I am not a BIV.

More specifically, they argue that warrant fails to transmit across the BIV inference on two grounds: that the inference cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about the conclusion and that it cannot be used to strengthen one’s epistemic position with respect to the conclusion.

One could dispute Davies’s and Wright’s diagnosis, attempting to argue that the BIV inference can be used to rationally overcome doubt about the conclusion, and can strengthen one’s epistemic position with respect to the conclusion. For instance, in their different ways, Pryor and Sillins have argued that the inference can strengthen one’s epistemic position with respect to the conclusion². That is not my project here. Instead, I will assume for the sake of argument that the inference can neither rationally overcome doubt nor strengthen one’s epistemic position with respect to the conclusion, and critically examine the consequences that Davies and Wright draw from these claims.

2. Transmission, Closure and Warrant

Widely differing definitions of ‘closure’ and ‘transmission’ can be found in the literature. Indeed, some define ‘closure’ to mean roughly what others mean by ‘transmission’.³ As a result, my use of these terms will be partly stipulative. However, my use will not be wholly stipulative. I am interested in trying to capture some of the ideas which Davies and Wright associate with what they call ‘transmission’.

Before exploring the notion of transmission further, we need to clarify the notion of warrant at issue. I use ‘warrant’ as a synonym for justification, allowing that warrant may be either evidential or non-evidential. Epistemologists standardly distinguish the notions of having a warrant to believe that *p* and warrantably believing that *p*. One may have a warrant to believe that *p* yet not believe that *p*. Further, even if one has a warrant to believe that *p* and believes that *p*, one’s belief might not be warranted if it is based on some other poor reason to believe that *p*. Davies and Wright do not explicitly state which notion they are concerned with. Both notions are interesting for different purposes. Here, I focus on the notion of having a warrant to believe that *p*. Throughout the paper we are examining the efficacy of the M-response to the sceptic. The most radical sceptic is not best characterised as holding that one lacks a warranted belief that one is not a BIV. That denial is compatible

with one's having warrant to believe that one is not a BIV but failing to believe it, or having such a warrant and believing that one is not a BIV but not on the basis of that warrant. Neither of these possibilities gets to the heart of the sceptic's argument. Rather, the sceptic is best understood as denying that one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Given this understanding of scepticism, it seems that the crucial question to ask of the M-response is whether one can have warrant to believe that one is not a BIV via the BIV inference. Of course, one would also like one's belief that one is not a BIV to constitute a warranted belief. But, the prior question is whether one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

With this background in place, we can start to distinguish the notion that warrant to believe transmits across a known entailment from the idea that warrant to believe is closed across such an entailment. I will take closure as the following claim:

Closure: if one has warrant to believe that *p*, and knows that *p* entails *q*, then one has warrant to believe that *q*.

Notice that, so-defined, closure merely states that if one has warrant to believe that *p* and knows that *p* entails *q*, then one has warrant to believe that *q*; it is silent on how one has warrant to believe that *q*. Wright holds that transmission is a stronger notion than closure, saying 'Transmission...says more: roughly, that to acquire a warrant for the premises of a valid argument and to recognise its validity is *thereby* to acquire—possibly for the first time—a warrant to accept the conclusion' (2002: 332; see also 2000: 141, 2003: 57). Elsewhere, he says, 'a transmissible warrant should make for the possible advancement of knowledge, or warranted belief' (2002: 331–32; see also 2000: 140–41, 2003: 58). One of Wright's ideas, then, is that in having warrant to believe that *p* and knowing that *p* entails *q*, one thereby has warrant to believe that *q* (see also Davies 1998: 325 and 2000: 393–4). The force of the 'thereby' becomes apparent when we contrast closure and transmission. Closure states that if one has warrant to believe that *p* and knows that *p* entails *q*, then one has warrant to believe that *q*; it is silent on how one has warrant to believe that *q*. So an inference could satisfy closure if it is a condition for having warrant to believe the premises that one has a prior warrant to believe the conclusion which is independent of the inference. However, it does not follow, indeed Wright denies, that such an inference would satisfy transmission, which requires that one has warrant to believe the conclusion in one particular way, namely in virtue of one's warrant to believe the premises. Further, Wright holds that a transmissible warrant allows for the possible strengthening of one's epistemic position. One way in which an inference may strengthen one's epistemic position with respect to the conclusion is by providing one with warrant to believe it for the first time. However, it could also do so by strengthening an existing warrant to believe the conclusion. Thus, we can draw from Wright's remarks the two following notions of transmission of

warrant, which I will call first-time (or FT) transmission, and advancement (or A) transmission:

First-Time Transmission (FT): if one has warrant to believe that p, and knows that p entails q, then one thereby has warrant to believe that q, potentially for the first time.

Advancement Transmission (A): if one has warrant to believe that p, and knows that p entails q, then one thereby has warrant to believe that q, potentially strengthening one's warrant to believe that q (either by providing first-time warrant to believe that q, or by strengthening an existing warrant to believe that q).

FT and A-transmission clearly place distinguishable conditions on a transmissible warrant, that it potentially provide first-time warrant to believe that q, or that it potentially strengthen one's warrant to believe that q either by strengthening an existing warrant to believe that q, or by providing a first-time warrant to believe that q. Given the definitions, any inference which satisfies FT-transmission also satisfies A-transmission, for providing first-time warrant to believe that q is one way of strengthening one's warrant to believe that q.

Although FT and A-transmission place distinguishable conditions on a transmissible warrant, Wright does not explicitly distinguish them and his main focus is implicitly on the notion of FT-transmission. Wright uses the notion of a failure of transmission of warrant in his diagnosis of the felt dissatisfaction with the M-type response to the sceptic. Wright argues that there is a class of valid arguments, including the BIV inference, across which warrant fails to transmit, those which fit his so-called 'disjunctive template'.⁴ His key claim is that an argument fitting this template has the following property, one has warrant to believe one of the premises only if one has prior and independent warrant to believe its conclusion (2000:155, 2002: 343, 2003:63). If one has warrant to believe one of the premises of an argument only if one has prior and independent warrant to believe its conclusion, then the argument cannot provide one with warrant to believe the conclusion for the first time, and is a counterexample to FT-transmission. In the case of the BIV inference, Wright's claim is that one's sensory experience as of having hands constitutes warrant to believe that one has hands only if one has prior and independent warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. So, the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

It seems that Wright thinks that arguments fitting his disjunctive template are also counterexamples to A-transmission. For instance, he says of the goal argument that 'you don't get any additional reason for thinking a game is in process [the conclusion] by having the warrant for [premise] i)...'. Regarding another putative example of a failure of transmission, Wright says that warrant for the premise is not to be reckoned as among the subject's reasons for accepting the conclusion, 'either as bestowing a first such reason, or as

enhancing reasons already possessed (2000: 142–43). However, it is not clear whether an inference's being a counterexample to FT-transmission entails that it is a counterexample to A-transmission. To examine the issue, let us consider an inference which is a counterexample to FT-transmission. Suppose, then, that a warrant, *w*, to believe that *p* does not FT-transmit across the known entailment to *q* for Wright-style reasons, namely it is a condition of having warrant to believe that *p* that one already have prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*. Would it follow that *w* cannot potentially strengthen one's warrant to believe that *q*? Someone might defend a positive response by arguing that if it is a condition of having warrant to believe that *p* that one already have prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*, then one's warrant to believe that *p* cannot be stronger than one's prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*. But, it may be said, if one's warrant to believe that *p* cannot be stronger than one's prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*, then one cannot strengthen that prior warrant to believe that *q* by appeal to one's warrant that *p* and one's knowledge that *p* entails *q*. This line of thought may tempt some. Still, the crucial conditional claim needs defending, namely that if it is a condition of one's having warrant to believe that *p* that one already have prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*, then one's warrant to believe that *p* cannot be stronger than one's prior and independent warrant to believe that *q*. The issue is complicated by the fact that, at least on Wright's view, in the relevant cases, the prior and independent warrant to believe that *q* takes the form of a non-evidential entitlement, whereas the warrant to believe that *p* is evidential.⁵ For instance, in the case of the BIV inference, Wright holds that one's sensory experience as of hands constitutes warrant to believe the premise that one has hands only if one has prior and independent non-evidential entitlement to believe the conclusion that one is not a BIV. Given that the warrant to believe the premise and conclusion are of such different types—evidential and non-evidential—it is not clear that the former cannot be stronger than the latter. I will not attempt to settle the issue of whether an argument's being a counterexample to FT-transmission entails that it is a counterexample to A-transmission, although the issue turns out to be important in section 4.

Many have rejected Wright's claim about the class of arguments across which warrant fails to transmit, arguing that inferences fitting the disjunctive template can provide first-time warrant to believe the conclusion (e.g., Brown 2003, McLaughlin 2003, Pryor 2004).⁶ Since my aim is to examine the consequences of Wright's view, I will not address the issue of whether he's correct to think that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion. I will grant both that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe the conclusion, and the further claim that it cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe the conclusion. My focus will be on the consequences Wright draws from these claims. Before doing so, we will examine Davies' rather different diagnosis of the M-type response to the sceptic.

3. Davies and Doubt

In a series of papers, Davies suggests that warrant fails to transmit across the BIV inference because it cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion (see Davies 1998, 2000, and 2003; but see 2004 for a change of view)⁷. Davies adopts Jackson's account of when an inference is unable to rationally overcome doubt about the conclusion, namely when it is such that 'anyone—or anyone sane—who doubted the conclusion would have background beliefs relative to which the evidence for the premises would be no evidence' (Jackson 1987:111). More specifically, Davies's idea is that if one were to doubt the conclusion of the BIV inference and think one were a BIV, one would not take one's sensory experiences as of hands to warrant the first premise of the inference, namely that one has hands. In fact, I'll suggest that an inference's inability to rationally overcome doubt is not best thought of as a failure of transmission. To see this, it is useful to consider the relation between doubt about the conclusion of the BIV inference, that one is not a BIV, and one's having warrant to believe its first premise, that one has hands. There are two possibilities to consider: 1) one's doubt that one is not a BIV prevents one's sensory experience as of having hands from constituting warrant to believe that one has hands; and 2) one's doubt that one is not a BIV is compatible with one's sensory experience as of having hands constituting warrant to believe that one has hands. I will argue that, on either option, the fact that the BIV inference cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion is not best thought of as a failure of transmission of warrant.

Suppose that one doubts the conclusion of the BIV inference, namely that one is not a BIV. This may prevent one's sensory experience as of having hands from constituting warrant to believe that one has hands. This would happen if one has good grounds to doubt that one is not a BIV, say if one were given plausible evidence that many ordinary people have recently been envatted. In this case, one's sensory evidence as of having hands cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about the conclusion; rather, it ceases to constitute warrant to believe the premise that one has hands. But if one's doubt about the conclusion prevents one's sensory evidence from constituting warrant for the first premise, then this cannot be a case in which one has a warrant to believe the premise but one which fails to transmit to the conclusion. Given that our two transmission principles are conditional claims whose antecedents state that one has warrant to believe that *p*, a case in which one lacks warrant cannot constitute a counterexample to either claim. For instance, FT-transmission states that if one has warrant to believe that *p*, and knows that *p* entails *q*, then one thereby has warrant to believe that *q*, potentially for the first time. A case in which one lacks warrant to believe that *p* cannot provide a counterexample to this principle. (See Beebe 2001, Pryor 2004.)

Now consider the possibility that one's doubt about the conclusion does not prevent one's sensory evidence from constituting warrant to believe that one has

hands. This may occur if one's doubt that one is not a BIV is groundless and one has no reason to think that one is a BIV. In a case in which one's doubt about the conclusion is compatible with one's sensory experience as of hands constituting warrant to believe that one has hands, there seems no reason to suppose that the BIV inference is a counterexample to either of our two transmission principles. One does have warrant to believe the premise that one has hands, and one knows that one's having hands entails that one is not a BIV. So, it seems that nothing prevents one from thereby having warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, potentially strengthening one's warrant to believe the conclusion, or providing first-time warrant to believe it. Of course, one's warrant to believe that one has hands would be ineffective in overcoming one's doubt that one is not a BIV. Given that one doubts that one is not a BIV, one would not take one's sensory experience as of hands to constitute warrant to believe that one has hands. Further, although one's doubt is groundless, it seems that given that one thinks one may well be a BIV, it would be irrational for one to take one's sensory experience to constitute warrant to believe that one has hands. Since one's doubt is groundless it could be classed as irrational. Still, as Pryor puts it, one's groundless doubt 'rationally obstructs' one from taking one's experiences as of hands to constitute warrant to believe that one has hands.

It seems, then, that even if the BIV inference cannot rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion, this is not best thought of as a counterexample to the transmission of warrant. Despite this, it might still be suggested that the felt dissatisfaction with the M-type response to the sceptic stems from the fact that the BIV inference cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion. From now on, I will assume that the BIV inference cannot be used to rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion and, in the next section, consider whether that undermines its use in an anti-sceptical response.

4. Scepticism and transmission

It is a controversial matter what constraints an adequate response to scepticism should meet. However, many of the most influential responses to scepticism deny that an adequate response should answer sceptical doubts or use only principles which the sceptic would accept. If this view is correct, then that the BIV inference cannot rationally overcome doubt does not show that it cannot be part of an adequate anti-sceptical response. A variety of reliabilist and contextualist views respond to scepticism by providing accounts of how one can have knowledge where these accounts rely on the truth of the claim that the BIV possibility is a far away, or irrelevant, possibility. One's belief that one has hands would not meet Nozick's tracking conditions for knowledge if there were a nearby world in which one is a BIV. DeRose, Sosa, and Williamson claim that one's belief that one has hands and one's belief that one is not a BIV constitute knowledge because these beliefs are safe, i.e. in the actual and nearby worlds one

has these beliefs only if they are true. But, that requires that there is no nearby world in which one is a BIV. Similarly, relevant alternative theories have the consequence that one knows that one has hands only if the BIV world is not relevant (e.g., Dretske 1970 and Stine 1976). None of these theorists attempt to justify the assumption that the BIV world is far away or irrelevant. Rather, they aim to show how, given the truth of this assumption, one can have knowledge. Thus, these accounts do not attempt to resolve doubt about whether one is a BIV or convince someone who doubts this that she has knowledge. Rather, they attempt to use part of our conception of the world to show how, despite the sceptical argument, we can have knowledge. As Nozick says

Our task here is to explain how knowledge is possible... In doing this, we need not convince the sceptic, and we may introduce explanatory hypotheses that he would reject. What is important for our task of explanation and understanding is that *we* find those hypotheses acceptable or plausible... (1981: 197–98.)

Of course, sceptics are likely to regard these responses as question begging. In reply, non-sceptics point out that they aim to counter the sceptical claim that scepticism follows from our own intuitions and assumptions. In answering this sceptical challenge, it is entirely legitimate to draw on some of our assumptions to show that scepticism does not follow from our intuitive world view. As DeRose says, ‘if the sceptic is marshalling deeply felt intuitions of ours in an attempt to give us good reasons for accepting his scepticism, it’s legitimate to point out that other of our beliefs militate against his position, and ask why we should give credence to just those that favour him.’ (1995: 215. For similar remarks, see Cohen 1988: 113.)

It seems, then, that many influential responses to scepticism deny that an adequate response to scepticism must answer sceptical doubt about whether one is a BIV. If this denial is correct, then whether the BIV inference can rationally overcome doubt is irrelevant to whether a non-sceptic can use the inference as part of an adequate reply to the sceptic.

Now consider Wright’s claim that the M-type response to scepticism is inadequate because the BIV inference fails to provide first-time warrant to believe the conclusion, or strengthen one’s warrant to believe the conclusion. It seems that it would be preferable if an anti-sceptical response showed that one had warrant to believe that one is not a BIV all along rather than providing one with first-time warrant to believe it. If a reply to the sceptic provides warrant to believe that one is not a BIV for the first time, then prior to that response being given, no one had warrant to believe that he is not a BIV and, assuming that knowledge requires warrant to believe, no one knew that he is not a BIV. Further, even after the response has been given, those who are ignorant of the response would still lack warrant to believe and so knowledge. This would be a deeply damaging conclusion if the response to scepticism involves complex philosophical arguments known by only a few. Assuming closure for warrant

to believe, these problems also extend to ordinary propositions, such as that one has hands. Given closure for warrant to believe, if a response to scepticism provides first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, it also provides first-time warrant to believe such ordinary claims as that one has hands. So, before the reply to scepticism is given, or if one is ignorant of that reply, one lacks warrant to believe, and so knowledge of, such ordinary claims. Similar points hold for the notion of strengthening one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. If the reply to the sceptic strengthens one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, then it is compatible with that reply that, prior to that reply being given, or if one is ignorant of that reply, one has a very weak warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, perhaps so weak that one does not know that claim. (For analogous points concerning knowledge, see DeRose 2000.)⁸

It seems, then, that it would be preferable if a reply to the sceptic showed that, all along, we were in a good epistemic position with respect to the denial of the BIV hypothesis, rather than providing first-time warrant to believe it or strengthening our warrant to believe it. An analogous point about knowledge is implicitly accepted by a wide range of responses to scepticism, including contextualist and reliabilist responses. For example, Stine (1976) argues that one can know that sceptical hypotheses are false without evidence since they are not normally relevant. Plausibly, if sceptical hypotheses are normally irrelevant then this has always been the case and, thus, the account shows how one always knew their falsity. (It is logically possible that a sceptical hypothesis, such as the BIV hypothesis, could be irrelevant now but used to be relevant, say because there used to be lots of BIVs around. But, this hardly seems likely.) DeRose, Sosa and Williamson argue that one knows that one is not a BIV since one's belief is safe (it is safe because it is true at the actual world and nearby possible worlds). But, plausibly, if one's belief that one is not a BIV is safe, then this has always been the case. Indeed, DeRose (2000) explicitly denies that the anti-sceptic need develop a 'heroic' response which provides first-time knowledge that sceptical hypotheses are false, and instead recommends a 'non-heroic' response which attempts 'not to show how to gain knowledge in the face of the sceptical argument, but rather to show how the sceptical argument never worked in the first place' (p.129).

It seems, then, that an adequate response to the sceptic need not provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, or strengthen one's warrant to believe that claim. This initially suggests that even if the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe the conclusion, this is no objection to the idea that, as part of an anti-sceptical response, one can argue that one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV via the BIV-inference. However, in fact matters are more complex for, as I'll now argue, if the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant nor strengthen one's warrant to believe the conclusion, this may prevent the inference from meeting a certain desideratum for an adequate reply to the sceptic, namely that it provide an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

The sceptic claims that one lacks warrant to believe various ordinary claims since, she says, one lacks warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Given this, an anti-sceptical reply would not be adequate if it merely asserted that one does have such warrant. Rather, an adequate response should provide an account of how one has warrant to believe. The analogous point about knowledge is widely accepted: an adequate reply to the sceptic should provide an account of how one has knowledge, rather than merely asserting that one has knowledge (e.g. Stroud 1984, ch. 3). Even though the examples of relevant alternatives and safety-based views considered above are not best thought of as providing first-time knowledge that one is not a BIV, they do provide an account of how one knows that one is not a BIV. However, I'll now argue that, if the BIV inference neither provides first-time warrant nor strengthens one's warrant to believe the conclusion, then it cannot provide an account of how one has warrant to believe that conclusion.

Suppose that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV for Wright-style reasons, namely, that one has warrant to believe the premise that one has hands only if one has prior and independent warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. On this view, one can provide an account of how one has warrant to believe the premises of the inference only by providing an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV independent of the inference. This would be compatible with the BIV inference playing a non-redundant role in the account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV if it could at least strengthen one's prior and independent warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Earlier we saw that it is unclear whether an argument that cannot provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion can strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion. Wright's main claim is that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion. It is not obvious whether it follows from this that the BIV inference cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion. Still, it seems that Wright holds that the BIV inference cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion. If the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion, it seems to follow that the inference cannot play a non-redundant part in an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. For one could show how one has warrant to believe its premises only by providing an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV which is independent of the inference. Further, even if one had such an account, the inference would not strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

It seems, then, that the question of whether the BIV inference can be used as part of a response to the sceptic is rather more complex than initially appeared. While the BIV inference cannot rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion, an adequate response to scepticism need not answer the sceptic's doubts. Wright claims that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe its conclusion. By itself, this claim does not undermine the use of the BIV inference

in a reply to the sceptic. For, an adequate response to the sceptic is not required to provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Further, if the BIV inference's inability to provide first-time warrant is compatible with its being able to strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, then the BIV inference may be a non-redundant part of the account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Wright further claims that the BIV inference cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. If Wright is correct in thinking that the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe the conclusion, then this would undermine the use of the BIV inference in a reply to the sceptic. This is not because an adequate response to the sceptic need strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV or provide first-time warrant to believe it; an adequate response need do neither. However, an adequate response should provide an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. I have argued that if the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, then it is redundant in an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

5. Conclusion

A Moorean style response to the sceptic employs what I have called the BIV inference, BIV1) I have hands, and BIV2) If I have hands, then I am not a BIV, so BIV3) I am not a BIV. Davies and Wright argue that this style of reply to the sceptic is unsatisfactory because warrant fails to transmit across the BIV inference. In more detail, they claim that the BIV inference cannot rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion and cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion. For the purposes of this paper, I have assumed with Davies and Wright that the BIV inference can neither rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe its conclusion, and examined the consequences of this assumption for the use of the BIV inference in a reply to the sceptic. I have argued that even if the BIV inference cannot rationally overcome doubt about its conclusion, on an influential and plausible view, an adequate response to the sceptic is not required to answer sceptical doubts. So, this first motivation provides no reason to think that the BIV inference cannot be used as part of an adequate response to scepticism. Wright argues that the BIV inference cannot provide first-time warrant to believe the conclusion. By itself, this does not undermine the use of the BIV inference in a reply to the sceptic. For, an adequate response to the sceptic is not required to provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. Further, if the inference's inability to provide first-time warrant is compatible with its being able to strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, then it may be a non-redundant part of the account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.

Wright further claims that the BIV inference cannot strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. If Wright is correct in thinking that the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe the conclusion, then this would undermine the use of the BIV inference in a reply to the sceptic. However, the reason for this is not immediately apparent. An adequate response to the sceptic need not strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, nor provide first-time warrant to believe that. However, an adequate reply to the sceptic should provide an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV. I have argued that if the BIV inference can neither provide first-time warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, nor strengthen one's warrant to believe that one is not a BIV, then it is redundant in an account of how one has warrant to believe that one is not a BIV.⁹

Notes

1. See especially Davies 2004.
2. Pryor (2004) argues that the inference can yield warrant to believe the conclusion, whereas Sillins (forthcoming) argues that it can yield warranted belief in the conclusion.
3. Williamson (2000) and Hawthorne (2004) seem to define 'closure' to mean roughly what Davies and Wright mean by 'transmission'. Pryor (2004) defines transmission in terms of the notion of warrant to believe whereas Sillins (forthcoming) defines it in terms of the notion of warranted belief.
4. An argument of form [A, (if A then B), B] fits the disjunctive template if 1) A entails B; 2) there is a proposition C incompatible with A; 3) my warrant for A consists in my being in a state which is subjectively indistinguishable from a state in which C would be true; 4) C would be true if B were false (Wright 2000: 155). The BIV inference fits Wright's template with A = I have hands; B = I am not a BIV; and C = I am a BIV. In particular, condition iii) holds: what initially seems to warrant claim A (I have hands) is my experience as of hands, but I could be in an indistinguishable state were C true: I am a BIV.
5. Cohen (1999) considers the view that one has evidential warrant for BIV1) only if one has prior and independent non-evidential entitlement for BIV3). Interestingly, he suggests that even though the prior entitlement for the conclusion is not sufficient for knowledge of it, the warrant yielded by the inference is so sufficient. This suggests that, at least in that paper, Cohen was tempted by the view that an inference could satisfy A but not FT-transmission. However, Cohen has not defended this view in his later papers.
6. McLaughlin (2003) objects that Wright's view has the result that warrant fails to transmit across an absurdly wide class of arguments. Sillins (forthcoming) argues that arguments meeting the disjunctive template can provide first-time warranted belief in the conclusion.
7. In commenting on Moore's famous proof of the external world, Davies says that 'anyone sane who doubted the conclusion Moore(3), [An external world exists]

would have background beliefs relative to which the perceptual evidence for Moore(1) [Here is one hand and here is another] that is offered for borrowing would be no evidence' (2000: 401). Wright argues that 'a transmissible warrant should make for the possible advancement of knowledge, or warranted belief and the overcoming of doubt or agnosticism' (2003: 331–32).

8. My focus is on warrant to believe, not warranted belief. However the strongest anti-sceptical reply would not only show that, all along, one had warrant to believe that one is not a BIV but also that, all along, one's belief that one is not a BIV constituted a warranted belief. If a reply to the sceptic provided warranted belief for the first time then, prior to that reply being given or for those ignorant of the reply, one lacked warranted belief that one is not a BIV. Assuming that knowledge requires warranted belief, one also lacked knowledge that one is not a BIV.
9. I have given versions of this paper at a number of places including Bristol, Glasgow, Oxford and Stirling. Thanks to audiences on these occasions for their useful comments. Thanks too to Duncan Pritchard for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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