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Warrant-Transmission, Defeaters and Disquotation

R.M. Sainsbury

Wright has brought to light an important feature of dialectics, and I am persuaded that there are significant arguments which can properly be accused of the subtle question-begging he describes in terms of failure of transmission of warrant.¹ However, I am not convinced that the two externalist arguments he mentions are good applications (one positive and the other negative) of his insight. The problems I detect with the externalist arguments relate, rather, to dubious assumptions about disquotation. My comments accordingly fall into two sections. In the first, I raise some doubts about the applicability to the externalist arguments of Wright's idea of failure of transmission of warrant; in the second I finger unrestricted use of disquotation as an alternative culprit.

1. Transmission

A valid argument satisfies the principle of transmission, according to Wright's initial characterization, iff "to acquire a warrant for the premises... and to recognize its validity is to acquire... a

warrant to accept the conclusion". A valid argument would fail to satisfy transmission if acquiring a warrant for the premises were to "presuppose" the conclusion, for then one would need a warrant for the conclusion independent of the argument. Wright gives examples in which it is plausible to think that a relevant notion of presupposition is operative: we cannot refute Russell's sceptical hypothesis that the world came into existence five minutes ago by standard historical methods, for these methods are acceptable only under the presupposition that Russell's hypothesis is false. The presupposition is correct, but the argument, precisely because it presupposes this conclusion, does nothing to warrant it.

For McKinsey's argument to generate a puzzle, we are supposed to be warranted in believing the premises, including

- (1) I think that water is wet,²

purely on the basis of reflection and without empirical enquiry. A rough indication of the central feature of Wright's response is that this warrant must, for one who accepts the externalist premise

- (2) Any thinker who thinks that water is wet has had encounters with water,

presuppose that a certain genuine possibility, that the subject is undergoing an illusion of content, is not actual; but that it is not actual is in effect what is affirmed by the desired conclusion:

- (3) I have had encounters with water.

So the argument does not satisfy transmission.

It is natural to read Wright's account of what it is for an argument to satisfy transmission (as quoted in the first paragraph of this section) as a conditional: if one acquires warrant for believing its premises and one recognizes its validity, then one acquires warrant for believing its conclusion. If this is correct, then there is an initial difficulty in understanding how the possibility of an illusion of content could show that transmission fails. Transmission should fail, presumably, if the antecedent of the conditional is true and the consequent is not. However, if there were an illusion of content, the antecedent of the conditional would not be true: one would not have a warranted belief that one thinks that water is wet, for one would not have any propositional attitude with a content involving the concept of water. We therefore need to get a better fix on how failure of transmission is to be demonstrated.

Wright helpfully gives a general schema for the relevant kind of transmission failure:

- (i) A entails B
- (ii) My warrant for A consists in being in a state subjectively indistinguishable from one in which C would be true
- (iii) C is incompatible with A
- (iv) C would be true if B were false.

In these cases, warrant for A does not transmit to B. As Wright says, one of his supposedly uncontroversial examples can be cast in this template:

- A = The animals before me are zebras
- B = The animals before me are not cleverly painted mules
- C = The animals before me are cleverly painted mules.

Wright suggests that whereas in normal circumstances I can be fully warranted in believing that certain clearly visible animals are zebras, yet although that they are zebras entails that they are not cleverly painted mules, “there is a strong intuition that” my warrant does not transmit to this conclusion. There is some unclarity about what we are supposed to intuit. It seems that the casual observation that warrants the belief in zebras is not sufficient to repudiate a serious *assertion* to the effect that the animals are mules. This is consistent with supposing that, in the absence of such an assertion in the context, the subject is in fact warranted in believing that the animals before him are not mules: if, perhaps merely exercising a playful interest in what can be inferred from his current beliefs, he were to come to believe that the animals are not mules, that belief would be warranted. The warrant would consist in the observations that warranted the belief that the animals are zebras, along with whatever warrant he has for thinking that zebras are not mules. It should be no surprise that warrant should be sensitive to what assertions are present in the context.

The zebra example effectively revolves around whether one could refute, merely on the basis of casual observation, one who seriously *claimed* that some observable animals were not zebras but painted mules; it seems clear that one could not. In this case, as also contemplated in connection with McKinsey, we seem not to have a counterexample to transmission: in the presence of explicit scepticism to the effect that the animals are mules, one is not warranted, on the basis of casual observation alone, in believing

them to be zebras. It is not that we have a warrant which fails to cross the rails of entailment but rather that, in the envisaged circumstances, we do not have an undefeated warrant at all. The fudging of the distinction occurs as follows: we start with a belief which is warranted in the envisaged (normal) circumstances, and which (perhaps in the presence of other premises) has a certain consequence. When the consequence is explicitly contemplated, its negation is also made salient, and we envisage a sceptic asserting it. We then see that we cannot use our original warrant to refute the sceptic, so we represent this as a failure of transmission of the original warrant. However, an alternative description is that the altered context has actually defeated the original warrant, rather than leaving it in place but rooted to the spot and unable to transmit. This locates the phenomenon in a familiar arena: warrant is sensitive to context.

It would be foolish to lose interest in Wright's diagnosis of the externalist arguments under the influence of a mere technicality. Even if transmission-failure is not the best phrase for what goes wrong, it is still of interest to see if the A-B-C situation, perhaps with the addition that we are to suppose there to be explicit scepticism about B, identifies a structure in which warrant which would otherwise be present is missing. To start with, we can consider an example in which, Wright rather casually suggests, there is no failure of warrant:

If you were challenged to produce a reason for thinking that someone was capable of believing something...it wouldn't seem question-begging to point out that so much is entailed by your believing that water is wet.

However, the situation conforms, or can be made out to confirm, with the A-B-C structure in which warrant is supposedly lost.

A = I believe that water is wet
 B = Someone is capable of believing something
 C = No one is capable of believing anything.

The scepticism about B, we will suppose, is based on some kind of eliminativist thesis (perhaps based on the idea that beliefs would require a structure which cannot be implemented in neural nets). Then the four conditions appear to be satisfied. Only (ii) requires comment. It holds because even if there were no beliefs we would, according to the envisaged variety of eliminativism, still be in subjectively indistinguishable states (and only generations of fa-

miliarity with eliminativism could hope to unburden us of the error of describing some of these states as beliefs).

Either this is, after all, another case in which Wright's diagnosis of warrant failure applies, or else the A-B-C structure is too comprehensive. The former seems the more natural hypothesis, aligning this case with the attempt to refute Russell's scepticism about the past by ordinary historical methods, and Wright's contrary judgement may be attributed to his not having had in mind in any detail the kind of scepticism I have considered. However, by the same token, it may seem that a simpler diagnosis is available: an anti-sceptical argument fails if the scepticism in question, at least in the presence of some of the argument's premises, would defeat the envisaged warrant for at least one of the premises. This seems to fit the supposedly uncontroversial cases such as zebras and Russell's scepticism; and it also makes for a straightforward diagnosis of what is happening in the McKinsey case: scepticism about whether I have had encounters with water, in the presence of externalism, defeats my warrant for my claim that I think that water is wet: I could not even advance this claim if the sceptical possibility, that I have not encountered water, were realized. So to suppose I have a warrant for the claim is to suppose that scepticism is false, and thus to beg the question.

It may well be that this is not inconsistent with anything Wright says, and that a proper working out of the notion of defeat would require all of his apparatus, including the notion of subjective indistinguishability, and the testing of the force of arguments in this area by whether they can justifiably move forward from a "tentative disjunction" of the states of affairs consistent with the subjectively indistinguishable ones. However, there is an obstacle to this pacific suggestion: Wright believes that although McKinsey's argument is subject to transmission-failure, the same does not hold for Putnam's. Yet on the simplified view I have offered, Putnam's argument would be in the same boat. If the sceptical possibility about whether I am a brain in a vat were realized, then the thought actually expressed by Putnam's premise (ii) ("In BIV-ese, 'brain-in-a-vat' does not refer to brains-in-a-vat") would not be available for use in any argument, so to suppose that it is warranted would be to suppose that the relevant scepticism is false, and so to beg the question.

Wright's reason for thinking that Putnam's argument is unlike McKinsey's is that whereas in the latter case we can formulate a tentative disjunction of the ways things might be objectively, consistent with what is available to us subjectively, we cannot do so

for Putnam's argument. For McKinsey, the appropriate disjunction is

- (0)^M Either I think that water is wet *or* the seeming-thought which I attempt to express by "I think that water is wet" is content-defective owing to the reference-failure of the purported natural kind term, "water", in my language.

Here "A *or* B" is true if either disjunct is true, no matter whether the other is false or content-defective. For Putnam, we cannot, according to Wright, offer the following:

- (0)^P Either I have the concept of what it would be to be a brain-in-a-vat or [*or*?—MS] the seeming-thoughts which I attempt to express by tokenings of "brain-in-a-vat" are content-defective owing to the reference-failure of the term "brain-in-a-vat" in my language.

For in Putnam's scenario, the envatted possibility is not one in which the term lacks content, but one in which it has a different content (gestured at by Putnam by such phrases as "brain-in-a-vat-in-the-image"). But there is no neutral description of this content. If I say: the content the expression would have were I a brain-in-a-vat, then I am committed to having a concept not available to a brain-in-a-vat.

By this stage of the discussion, Wright has identified transmission-failure with susceptibility to the representation of a crucial premise as a tentative disjunction, so his conclusion that Putnam's argument is not so representable leads at once to the further conclusion that it is not a victim of transmission failure.

I find two things problematic with this part of the discussion. The first is that a sentence like (0)^M does not express something which I could believe, if its second disjunct* is true. This means that, for neutrality, Wright must no longer talk about believing this premise, but only about believing that this sentence is true; so the argument has undergone a radical change. In McKinsey's formulation, an argument was offered, and the question was whether warrant for believing the premises could confer warrant upon belief in the conclusion. In the reformulation, the question becomes whether warrant for believing the premises to be true could confer warrant upon belief in the conclusion.³

The second problem is this. Wright suggests, that, in the presence of externalism, there is no "*thinkable* possibility" for the brain-in-a-vat scenario analogous to the possibility that my "water"-

concept is without content. But this seems to say that there is no thinkable possibility of my being a brain-in-a-vat, which is surely too strong. Wright at this juncture advances, in the service of his point, the remark “That’s just a use of disquotation”, as if an application of this principle were always uncontroversial. Rather than try to find a better interpretation of what Wright had in mind about thinkable possibilities, I will instead show that disquotation cannot always be relied upon in contexts of the kind under discussion, and that, whatever other dissimilarities, both McKinsey’s and Putnam’s arguments place inappropriate reliance upon it.

2. Disquotation

Instances of the disquotation principle under a meaning-affecting supposition may not be true. Suppose “pigs” means what “birds” actually means. Then “pigs fly” would be true. But one is not supposing anything that entails that pigs fly. Our supposition is precisely that “pigs fly” is true iff birds fly; though it is also part of our supposition that

- (a) “‘pigs fly’ is true iff pigs fly” is true.

However, (a) does not enable us to derive, as part of our supposition, that pigs fly. Such a derivation would require us to disquote, applying

- (b) (“‘pigs fly’ is true iff pigs fly”) is true iff (“pigs fly” is true iff pigs fly)

which, together with (a), would get us to

- (c) “pigs fly” is true iff pigs fly,

and thus to the conclusion that pigs fly. It is easy to see that something has gone wrong; indeed, (c) would be inconsistent with our supposition that “pigs fly” is true iff birds fly. The issue here is not dialectical, in a sense connected with the transmission of warrant, but is rather that the argument, thus represented, is unsound: (b), despite being an instance of disquotation, is false (under the supposition).

An externalist would, I presume, argue for (2) (“Any thinker who thinks that water is wet has had encounters with water”) on the grounds that for some class of concepts, their possession re-

quires encounters with things that fall under them. Applying this to the “water”-concept (by which I mean, not the concept which applies to water (there is no such unique concept), but the concept labelled “water”) involves the lemma that the concept belongs to the relevant class, a lemma whose apriori status may well be in doubt. Setting this aside, the upshot is:

Anyone who possesses the “water”-concept has encountered things which fall under this concept.

What things are these? To get the answer, and so move to something like (2), requires a disquotation:

(D-W) Something falls under the “water”-concept iff it is water.

This is certainly environment-involving, for the externalist. Whether or not it is knowable apriori is another matter, for one should not rush to identify the apriori with the environment-independent. On one interpretation, something can be known apriori if what it takes to grasp the thought enables one to know its truth. The more demanding and environment-involving understanding is, the greater the scope for apriori knowledge. Grasp of (D-W), that is, of the thought expressed by the sentence so labelled, is available only to those who have the concept *water*, and, for an externalist, is thus available only to those who have encountered water. However, this grasp is obviously also available to those who, like monolingual Italians, do not know that the *water*-concept is labelled “the ‘water’-concept”. That there is an issue here can be concealed by describing both by the ambiguous phrase “the concept of water”. But in reality, one who knows (D-W) has to connect a given concept (*water*) with some way of referring to it (e.g. “the concept expressed in English by ‘water’”), and it is not obvious that this connection is available apriori. Likewise for language: it is not apriori that “acqua” refers to water, even if an Italian, carried away by parochial features of his way of labelling concepts, were to think otherwise.

By contrast it is arguable that the following is knowable apriori:

(D-W)* “Something falls under the ‘water’-concept iff it is water” is true.

This is because the connection between what is referred to by “water” and what is referred to by “the ‘water’-concept” is conventionally guaranteed in (D-W)*. However, that (D-W)* is knowable apriori would not guarantee that (D-W) is, for disquotation,

as we have seen, is not to be relied upon in all contexts. If, as this discussion suggests, a McKinsey premise is not available apriori (or, more generally, by mere reflection) then the puzzle dissolves; for it would not be surprising if a combination of first-person knowledge of the concept-labels one confronts in thought, together with knowledge, which for an externalist must be substantive and non-apriori, of how concept-labels connect with concepts, and thus with the world, would enable one to extract some substantive knowledge of the world.

Putnam's argument purports to *prove* something like (D-W), viz. that in my language, "brain-in-a-vat" refers to brains-in-a-vat, from apriori, or at least uncontentious, premises. Success in this project would restore the puzzling character of McKinsey's argument. Putnam's first premise is:

(Pi) In my language, any meaningful expression may be used disquotationally to specify its own reference.

It is hard to understand this except as saying that every disquotation sentence of my language is true. So it entails

(D-B) In my language, if "BIV" is a meaningful expression, then "“BIV” refers to BIVs" is true.

The question is how one might get from this to something more pertinent, for progress requires disquotation. If a BIV can know anything, it can know the fact expressed by (D-B); and a person can know the same fact (modulo the indexicality). But when either disquotes, he gets to a different fact. A BIV gets to the fact that in his language, if "BIV" is meaningful, then "BIV" refers to BIVs-in-the-image (so to speak—though this is not how he would or could put it), whereas a person gets to the fact that in his language, if "BIV" is meaningful, then "BIV" refers to BIVs. To read the disquotation as if it took one just to the latter is to presuppose that the disquoter is a person and not a BIV. This makes the remainder of Putnam's argument redundant. It does not escape some form of the charge of begging the question. Analogously for McKinsey: (D-W) presupposes that the disquoter is one who has the concept *water*, and so, by externalist lights, has encountered water. This makes the remainder of the McKinsey argument redundant, and shows that it does not escape essentially the same form of the charge of begging the question.⁴

NOTES

1. "Cogency and Question-Begging: Some Reflections on McKinsey's Paradox and Putnam's Proof," this volume.
2. I have replaced Wright's "believe" by "think" here and throughout, since whether or not one believes something (really *believes* it) seems to me a question upon which it is quite doubtful whether one has any special authority. This issue is not one which features in the present discussion.
3. Wright envisages a "metalinguistic formulation of the first disjunct" as an alternative; but it seems to me there is just a single option.
4. Thanks to David Wiggins for telling me about pigs and birds some 20 years ago, and to Keith Hossack for more recent discussions of closely related issues.