

Moore's Proof and Martin Davies's epistemic projects*

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Abstract

In the recent literature on Moore's Proof of an external world, it has emerged that different diagnoses of the argument's failure are *prima facie* defensible. As a result, there is a sense that the appropriateness of the different verdicts on it may depend on variation in the kinds of context in which the argument is taken to be a move, with different characteristic aims. In this spirit Martin Davies has recently explored the use of the argument within two different epistemic projects called respectively 'deciding what to believe' and 'settling the question'. Depending on which project is in hand, according to Davies, the diagnosis of its failure—if indeed it fails—will differ. I believe that, by introducing the idea that the effectiveness of a valid argument may be epistemic project-relative, Davies has pointed the way to an important reorientation of the debates about Moore's Proof. But I wish to take issue with much of the detail of his proposals. I argue that Davies's characterisation of his two projects is misleading (§1), and his account of their distinction defective (§2). I then canvass some suggestions about how it may be improved upon and about how further relevant kinds of epistemic projects in which Moore's argument may be taken to be a move can be characterised, bringing out how each of these projects impinges differently on the issue of the Proof's failure and of its diagnosis (§§3 and 4). In conclusion (§5) I offer a summary of the resulting terrain.

Here's an argument, which, on the face of it, is perfectly in order:

- (I) Here's a hand;
- (II) If there is a hand here, there is an external world;
- (III) There is an external world

After all, it is just an instance of *modus ponens* and the premises, given only a very ordinary and commonplace set of circumstances, are surely unexceptionable. Still, the argument remains

puzzling when directed at the philosophical purpose—some form of response to scepticism—that its author is usually supposed to have intended.¹ But why?

In the recent literature on the topic, it has emerged that radically different diagnoses of the argument's failure are *prima facie* defensible.² Partly as a result, there is a growing sense that the appropriateness of the different verdicts on it may depend on variation in the kinds of context in which the argument is taken to be a move, with different characteristic aims. It is in this spirit that Martin Davies has recently explored the use of the argument within two different epistemic projects, which he terms respectively 'deciding what to believe' and 'settling the question'. Depending on which project is in hand, Davies contends, the diagnosis of its failure—if indeed it fails—will differ [Davies 2008, but also 2004].

I believe that, by introducing the idea that the success or otherwise of a valid argument may in a sense be epistemic project-relative, Davies has pointed the way to an important reorientation of the debates about Moore's Proof, with potentially more general insights in prospect about the differential demands placed on an acknowledgedly valid argument if it is to service, for instance, the exploration of commitments, a change of mind, the overcoming of agnosticism, or the removal of doubt. But I wish to take issue nevertheless with much of the detail of Davies's proposals. In the sequel, I will argue that Davies's characterisation of his two distinguished projects is misleading (§1), and his account of their distinction defective (§2). Then I will canvass some suggestions about how it may be improved upon and about how further relevant kinds of epistemic projects in which Moore's argument may be taken to be a move can be characterised, bringing out how each of these projects impinges differently on the issue of the Proof's failure and of its diagnosis (§§3 and 4). The resulting terrain is somewhat complex, and in conclusion (§5) I offer a summary of it.

I. Davies's two epistemic projects

Following Frank Jackson [1987: ch. 6], Davies distinguishes between two purposes of *arguing*—one where the aim is 'teasing out' and the other where it is 'convincing a doubter' [Davies 2004:

241; 2008: 6-7, 15, 17, 25]. When engaged in the former, one will simply be drawing out the consequences of a (set of) belief(s), whether or not they are justified. For instance, if a subject robustly believes that there is a hand in front of him and that a hand is an instance of the category of physical objects, then he ought to believe that there is an external world because he is *committed* to believing that the category of physical objects, of which a hand is an instance, isn't empty. In this spirit, either the subject himself, or someone else, might use an inference such as the one exemplified by Moore's Proof simply to draw out the consequence—(III) that there is an external world—of the beliefs (I) and (II), that there is a hand here, and that it is a physical object, to which he is already committed.

In contrast, we sometimes propound arguments to convince someone (perhaps ourselves), who doesn't already believe the conclusion of an inference, and who in fact *doubts* that it holds [Davies 2008: 6-7], that they ought to believe the conclusion, because, in effect, there are *good grounds* to do so. And we usually do so by providing both such an argument and considerations in favour of its premises. In particular, we might want to propound Moore's Proof to try to convince someone who doesn't already believe that there is an external world, and who in fact, like a sceptic, *doubts* that there is.

Davies suggests that these two purposes of arguing can be mapped onto two corresponding *epistemic projects*: respectively, the project of what he calls 'deciding what to believe' and the project of 'settling a question' [Davies 2004: 222-3, 240-3; 2008: 23-26]. When engaged in the former, one will be reviewing one's beliefs and, upon noticing that there is a valid argument from a subset of them, (P1, ...Pn), to a certain conclusion Q, one could then wonder, he writes, whether 'in the abstract space of warrants' [2008: 24], the warrant one has for the premises depends on there already being a warrant for the conclusion. If it does, one cannot come to believe Q *on the basis* of (P1, ..., Pn). If it doesn't, one may rationally come to believe Q on that basis.

When engaged in the project of 'settling a question', in contrast, one will characteristically start off by being *open-minded* (at least *pro tempore*) with respect to a conclusion, Q, and, on that

basis, go on to see if one can nevertheless provide effective warrants to accept Q [Davies 2004: 240-3; 2008: 25]. It is notable that when Davies speaks of ‘open-mindedness’ in this context, what he has in mind is a state of supposition, for the purposes at hand, that the conclusion ‘is, or may well be, *false*’ [Davies 2004: 240; 2008: 26, italics mine]. Thus, as he understands it, the project of ‘settling the question’ is aimed at overcoming *disbelief*—whether it be suppositional or real.

Let me add a terminological remark: with the expression ‘the abstract space of warrants’ Davies is simply alluding to the contrast, as it is now customarily expressed, between *propositional*, as opposed to *doxastic* warrants. Propositional warrants are those warrants a subject has, in a given situation, for believing a particular proposition P, independently of whether he appreciates them or not and even if he does not form the belief that P. Doxastic warrants, in contrast, are those warrants one has when one believes ‘the thing to think’—viz. the thing for which one has propositional warrants—and ‘*because* it is the thing to think’ [Davies 2008: 2]. But as Davies himself points out, there is (at least) another notion of ‘doing well doxastically’ [2008: 2]—viz. the notion of ‘*rational answerability to what one takes to be relations of propositional warrant*, even though one may be mistaken about those relations’ [Ibid., italics mine]. For instance, one may mistakenly think to have warrant for P, rather than for not-P and, on that basis, rationally form the belief that P. To form the belief that not-P would not be the rational thing to do, given one’s prior beliefs about the structure of propositional warrants, even if it were the right thing to think given the actual structure of those warrants.³

With this clarification in mind, let us go back to the kind of epistemic project Davies is concerned with. The reader may find the gloss Davies puts on the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ somewhat surprising, given that it is meant to correspond to the dialectical project of ‘teasing out’ which, as I characterised it, was purely concerned with commitment and had nothing to do with the ‘abstract space of warrants’. Here in full are the passages in which Davies makes the connection:

Facts about justifications or warrants are not, in themselves, facts about actual beliefs or other psychological states (...). We might highlight this by speaking of the abstract space of warrants (...). [2008: 2]

The evaluation of management your web of beliefs once errors creep in is clearly not a straightforward matter (...). *I suggest that, in the project of deciding what to believe, the overarching epistemic norm is that the structure of one's network of beliefs should conform to the structure of the abstract space of warrants* as a result of one's responsiveness (in a sense that needs to be made clear) to that very structure. [2008: 24, italics mine].

I think there is indeed an incongruity here and I will come back to it below (see §3). For now it is enough to point out that appeal to the abstract space of warrants is made because, as Davies sees it, the project of deciding what to believe is *normatively constrained*. The aim of that project is not just to produce a decision as to what to believe, but to produce the *right* decision—that is, the one which puts one's beliefs in line with what ought to be believed.

In sum: deciding what to believe is trying to organise one's beliefs in such a way that they conform to the structure of the abstract space of warrants, whereas settling a question is seeking considerations which can overcome disbelief.

These two projects, in turn, connect with the recent dispute between Crispin Wright and Jim Pryor on the nature of perceptual warrant. While, according to Wright [1985, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004], that warrant depends for its existence on having (some kind of⁴) prior warrant for some very general propositions such as that there is an external world, that one is not now dreaming, that one's sense organs are mostly reliable, etc., Pryor denies it. On his view, it is enough merely to have a certain course of experience with its characteristic content, while *having no reasons to doubt* these general propositions [Pryor 2000, 2004, 2008].

Now, according to Davies [2004: 240-3; 2008: 24-5], this dispute is actually to be viewed under the aegis of the former project, that of deciding what to believe. In Davies's view, what Wright and Pryor are disagreeing about is whether, in the abstract space of warrants, a subject's

perceptual experience can provide warrant for (I), only if there is already⁵ a warrant for (III). If Wright's interpretation of Moore's Proof is the right one, such a condition has to be met. So, one couldn't rationally decide to believe that there is an external world on the basis of Moore's argument. This is an example of Davies's *first kind* of failure of transmission of warrant in effect, exactly the kind of transmission failure which Wright originally characterised and which turns on the fact that—at least in Wright's view—the warranting potential of one's current visual experience for a premise such as (I) rests on one's prior possession of a warrant for (III). Since this is what Pryor denies, he is, in Davies's view, affirming that Moore's Proof *is*, in fact, suitable as a means to *decide what to believe*.⁶

So, according to Davies, the current debate between conservatives—such as Wright—and liberals—such as Pryor—over the structure of warrants for empirical beliefs, e.g. 'Here's a hand', is relevant to the first kind of epistemic project—that of 'deciding what to believe'. Still, on his view, that debate is in fact irrelevant to the second epistemic project—that of 'settling the question'. For no matter which (if either⁷) of Wright and Pryor is right about the enabling conditions for the possession of perceptual warrant, Davies thinks they should both agree on returning a negative verdict on the Proof's power to *settle the question*—convince a doubter—whether there is an external world. If that is the project then, be the 'abstract space of warrants' as it may, our concern will be with the warrants a subject can rationally take himself to have, given his own introspectively accessible experiences *and prior beliefs*. And if he starts out by taking it to be (likely) false that there is an external world, then he cannot regard his current visual experience as a warrant for 'Here is a hand'. There being no warrant for that belief in the first place, the Proof will—naturally—fail to provide a warrant to believe its conclusion. This is Davies's *second kind* of failure of transmission of warrant [2008: 28]: a failure which depends on the fact that if someone thinks it is (likely) false that there is an external world, they cannot rationally take their current sense experience as a warrant for any simple proposition purporting to describe it.

In Davies's view, then, the distinction between these two different epistemic projects allows us to maintain that, even should Pryor have the better of Wright regarding the structure of the perceptual (propositional) warrant in Moore's scenario, his account of the Proof's failure as owing to merely *dialectical* reasons is not correct: rather, its failure is due to the fact that the argument doesn't measure up to the standards involved in Davies's second kind of *epistemic* project—that of 'settling the question'. Moreover, it allows Davies to identify a kind of epistemic project, with an attendant notion of transmission failure, which is in fact insensitive to the outcome of the Wright-Pryor dispute. For that debate concerns the structure of the 'abstract space of warrants'; whereas the second project—that of 'settling the question'—concerns what warrants, if any, a subject can take himself to have, given his anterior beliefs about (III).

II. Davies's distinctions are ill-conceived

Now, it is striking, as I remarked, that on Davies's account a subject's *open-mindedness* with respect to the conclusion of an argument is identified with an attitude of *disbelief* in it (albeit perhaps only suppositional). For it is much more natural to think that to be open-minded with respect to a given issue is merely to have *no antecedent view* about it. In particular, being open-minded about (III) would involve having no view about whether or not there is an external world or about whether or not such a belief is warranted. So suppose we reconceive Davies's project of *settling a question* so that it is understood not in terms of addressing (suppositional) disbelief but in terms of overcoming open-mindedness on its more natural construal. Then the issue of how the propositional warrants are structured in the case of Moore's Proof now becomes highly pertinent to the (reconceived) project of settling the question of what to believe with respect to the existence of an external world. For, if Pryor is right, an open-minded subject with respect to (III) *can* acquire a warrant to believe it just by having an appropriate visual experience and by running Moore's Proof. If, in contrast, Wright's understanding of the structure of propositional warrants in the case of

Moore's Proof is correct, then an open-minded subject with respect to (III) could *not* acquire a warrant to believe it by running Moore's Proof. For, in order justifiably to take his experience as a warrant for (I), he needs—on Wright's view—already to have a warrant for (III).⁸

If this is right, then it is no longer clear that, once open-mindedness is most naturally—I should say: 'correctly'—described, it can still subserve the purpose of characterising an epistemic project substantially different from the one Davies originally labelled 'deciding what to believe'. For if a subject starts out by being open-minded (at least *pro tempore*) about the conclusion of a given argument, what will enable him to *decide what to believe*, as Davies explains the matter, is now exactly the same as what will enable him to—as reconceived—*settle the question* of whether he can justifiably believe that conclusion, namely whether the warrant(s) for the premise(s) he takes himself to have rest upon an antecedent warrant for the conclusion of the argument.

Furthermore, it should be observed that the second kind of transmission failure presented by Davies is surely spurious—is no kind of transmission failure at all. Trivially: in order for an argument to exhibit a failure of transmission of warrant, there must *be* a warrant for its premises in the first place, which, however, does not transmit to its conclusion. In cases of Davies's second kind of transmission failure, however, it seems that there will simply be no such warrant for (I) in the first place. The warranting power of the subject's experience would be annulled by his antecedent doubt with respect to (III).

It might be countered [Davies 2008: 26] that, even in the presence of doubt about (III), there would still *be* a perceptual (propositional) warrant for (I), but that it wouldn't transmit to the conclusion because of one's collateral beliefs about (III). Antecedent doubts about (III) would not *destroy* the perceptual warrant for (I), but rather would make it *rationaly unavailable* to the subject.⁹ In that case, however, there is no reason to deny that the rationally unavailable warrant *does* transmit, but remains rationally out of reach. The problem wouldn't be one of failure of transmission of a perceptual warrant for (I), but, rather of the *rational unavailability*, to the given doubting subject, of that warrant in light of his collateral beliefs. So, whatever phenomenon Davies

is trying to draw attention to—whether the doubt about (III) is conceived as destroying the warrant for (I) or merely making it rationally unavailable—I suggest it has to be conceived of as something other than a kind of failure of transmission of warrant.¹⁰ Connectedly, Moore’s Proof, interpreted as Pryor interprets it, could not fail because it exhibits this kind of transmission failure. Indeed, there is no such type of failure of transmission of warrant! So I see no reason, after Davies’s discussion, to qualify Pryor’s view that, if his account of the Proof is right, its failure will depend on merely *dialectical* reasons [Pryor 2004: 369] and [Davies 2008: 29-30].

Thus, we can conclude that Davies has not shown that there are two kinds of transmission failure, properly so regarded, nor that ‘deciding what to believe’ and ‘settling a question’ are two genuinely different kinds of epistemic project. As a consequence, he has failed to show that if Pryor were right about the structure of the epistemic warrants involved, he would still be wrong to think that the Proof fails for merely dialectical reasons. Lastly, he has failed to show that the Wright-Pryor dispute about the Proof, while relevant when the project is that of deciding what to believe, has no bearing when it is that of settling the question. For when the latter project is correctly described, it actually collapses into the former.

III. Different kinds of ‘deciding what to believe’

Let me now turn to address the issue of whether we can, after all, make out two different kinds of epistemic project to correspond to plausible understandings of ‘deciding what to believe’ and ‘settling a question’. Our discussion of Davies’s characterisation of ‘settling a question’ seemed to force a negative verdict on this issue, for the latter project seemed to collapse into the former. In the next section, I will show how there are, plausibly, *several* kinds of projects of ‘settling a question’. First, though, I wish briefly to reconsider Davies’s understanding of the project of ‘deciding what to believe’.

Recall that Davies's first project was meant to be an epistemic analogue of the 'teasing out' purpose of arguing. We saw that 'teasing out' is naturally understood merely as the business of drawing out the consequences of beliefs one is already *committed to*, for whatever reason, and accordingly noted with surprise that, in order to map the 'teasing out' project of arguing onto an epistemic task corresponding to 'deciding what to believe', Davies proceeded to introduce the idea that the latter should consist in assessing whether *in the abstract space of warrants* the warrants for one's beliefs (P_1, \dots, P_n) presupposed a prior warrant for the belief Q , logically entailed by those beliefs. We noted that Davies was drawn to that conclusion by holding that the project of deciding what to believe had to be governed by the 'overarching epistemic norm' that one should try to believe what ought to be believed.

Now, although one may sympathise with this norm as an *ideal* at which one should *aim* in managing one's web of belief, it is by no means clear that decisions with respect to what to believe will be regarded as rational just in case they *actually conform* to it. After all, as Davies himself recognises [2008: 23], one might do well doxastically modulo one's erroneous conviction(s). That is to say, we don't necessarily regard subjects as failing of (epistemic) rationality if they correctly draw consequences out of false or incorrect beliefs, even about the structure of their own warrants for empirical beliefs. Of course we may impose the further norm that one's beliefs should aim at truth. But, arguably, that wouldn't have a decisive bearing on the issue of the (epistemically) rational management of one's actual web of beliefs. After all, when one believes that P , one believes that P is true. Of course one can decide to be particularly cautious and devise ways of testing more carefully the content of one's would-be beliefs, so as to increase the chances of holding only true ones. Still, it remains that aiming at truth would just be another ideal, which we should strive for but might not attain. Hence, arguably, even a very scrupulous subject would still have a lot of false beliefs which, however, he would be able rationally to manage.

However, there are several other ways in which Jackson's 'teasing out' purpose of arguing could be taken over into an epistemic project worth calling 'deciding what to believe'. One—the

simplest—way would be to think of the latter project as merely a matter of the exploration of the logical coherence of belief-sets: if one believes (P_1, \dots, P_n) and notices that they entail Q , then one should also commit oneself to believe Q (or else withdraw from (P_1, \dots, P_n)). After all, commitment *always* transmits! But, in such a case, the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ would obviously have nothing to do with considerations pertaining to the issue of the nature of and inter-dependencies among one’s warrants for the premises and the conclusion of such an argument. So the Wright-Pryor dispute would have no bearing whatever on the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ when so reconceived.

Davies might reply that as long as warrants aren’t taken into account, then one won’t have identified any genuinely *epistemic* project to correspond to ‘teasing out’. But there is a second, simple way of taking warrants into account which would in fact match much more closely Jackson’s ‘teasing out’ purpose of arguing but still wouldn’t yet engage any questions about the ‘abstract space of warrants’. Assume the principle of Closure of warrant over known entailment. Then if one takes oneself to have *warrant* for (P_1, \dots, P_n) and realises that (P_1, \dots, P_n) logically entails Q , then one ought to take oneself to have warrant for Q . So a plausibly named project of ‘deciding what to believe’ can simply be a matter of drawing out the *epistemic consequences*—via Closure—of what *warranted* beliefs *one takes oneself to have*. In that case, the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ can still be a matter simply of assessing logical coherence. It would be a further issue, not necessarily connected to the epistemic project of ‘deciding what to believe’, whether the warrant one takes oneself to have for (P_1, \dots, P_n) is such that it would presuppose—in the abstract space of warrants—a warrant for the conclusion Q .

This may seem a much more natural characterisation of an epistemic project corresponding to the ‘teasing out’ purpose of arguing, since it is closer to that dialectical purpose than Davies’s proposal. But of course the Wright-Pryor dispute would still have no bearing on it. For that dispute concerns precisely the *epistemic preconditions* of warrant (if any); it cannot be addressed just by

agreeing about the holding of Closure and the kind of commitments one would undertake by taking oneself to have warrants for a given set of beliefs that logically entail a given conclusion.¹¹

In summary: we can in fact make out a distinction, different from Davies's, between the projects of 'deciding what to believe' and of 'settling a question' in such a way that both are properly viewed as epistemic—as concerning the extent and nature of warrants among beliefs—and the former is naturally associated with Jackson's 'teasing out'. However, no way is evident of spelling out the details of such an alternative understanding of the project of 'deciding what to believe' so as to allow the Wright-Pryor dispute to be anything but neutral on it.

Nonetheless, it seems to me that Davies's original understanding of the project of deciding what to believe highlights something important. Specifically, it has the merit of drawing attention to the fact that the Wright-Pryor dispute, as originally conceived, concerns the structure of the 'abstract space of warrants'; or, equivalently, the nature of perceptual warrants taken as such, independently of any interaction with a subject's collateral beliefs. On Pryor's view, those warrants are presuppositionless; on Wright's they aren't. To preserve this insight, I think we do well to distinguish at least three different *epistemic* projects: the first is the project of 'deciding what to believe', characterised as I proposed in this section as a close epistemic analogue of Jackson's notion of 'teasing out'. The second is the project of determining the structure of the 'abstract space of warrants'—that is, the heir of Davies's original project of 'deciding what to believe'. Here, what is at issue is whether perceptual warrants as such depend for their existence on certain (warranted) presuppositions. Finally, the third project is that of 'settling the question', which concerns the cogency of a given argument when a subject's anterior beliefs or lack thereof are taken into account.

So far, we have seen that the Wright-Pryor dispute is in fact irrelevant to the first project; but highly pertinent to the second. It remains to see how it may contribute to the third.

IV. Different kinds of ‘settling a question’

We saw earlier that, contrary to what Davies maintains, the Wright-Pryor dispute *is* relevant when the epistemic project at hand is that of ‘settling the question’ whether one’s belief in the existence of the external world is warranted. At least, this is so on the most natural reading of the open-mindedness requirement that Davies builds into that project. For now all will depend on whether someone who is *open-minded* with respect to such an issue could acquire a warrant to believe that there is an external world by being given Moore’s Proof. As we saw before, on Wright’s understanding of the structure of warrants, that couldn’t happen, while the opposite would be true on Pryor’s interpretation of the Proof. For, on Pryor’s view, perceptual warrants for (I) are presuppositionless. So, an open-minded subject with respect to (III) could avail himself of such a warrant just by having a certain experience with the representational content that a hand is in front of him. And then, by running Moore’s Proof, he could presumably come to acquire a warrant to believe (III)—for what obstacle would there be? Not so in the case of Wright’s understanding of the structure of perceptual warrants. For Wright, a subject’s open-mindedness with respect to (III) would make the necessary presupposition of a warrant for (III) rationally unavailable to him. Hence, he would take himself to have no warrant for the minor premise of Moore’s argument and would accordingly be in no position to exploit the argument to arrive at warrant for its conclusion.

We also saw how, given Davies’s characterisation of the project of ‘deciding what to believe’, this more natural understanding of open-mindedness had the effect of making the project of ‘settling a question’ collapse into it. But in the previous section I argued that in fact the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ should best be understood differently and, in particular, in such a way that it would not concern at all the issue of the nature and preconditions of perceptual warrant for (I). If that is right, we can accordingly preserve the difference between the two projects (as well as the difference between them and the project that, in the previous section, I labelled ‘the project of determining the structure of the abstract space of warrants’).

On reflection, however, it appears that Davies's original second purpose of arguing—the 'convincing a doubter' one—could be taken to correspond to *several* different kinds of epistemic projects, each of which might deserve the title of 'settling a question'. It all depends on how we understand the notion of *being a doubter*. Certainly, there is an ambiguity in English: a doubter as to whether P may be someone who *disbelieves* P, or, at any rate, is more inclined to think it is false than true; or else, he may be someone who neither believes P nor not-P—that is, an *unbeliever*.

With respect to a disbeliever (whether suppositional or real), I agree that Moore's Proof—no matter what structure of propositional warrants it is taken to involve—can do nothing to settle the question whether there is an external world because, just as Davies maintains,¹² such a subject is not rationally free to consider his current sense experience as a warrant for 'Here's a hand'. Accordingly, taking himself to have no warrant at all for its first premise, the argument couldn't give such a subject a warrant to believe its conclusion.

The more interesting issue, however, is how Moore's Proof fares when directed at an unbeliever. Here we need some further distinctions. One kind of unbeliever is an *agnostic*. Characteristically, agnostics about P think that one can't rationally believe either P or not-P because the available arguments for or against P are equally defective or inconclusive. Hence, agnosticism is usually a *principled* position.¹³ But 'available' is here open to further distinctions. *Contingent* agnostics don't exclude that in principle arguments that would allow one to embrace either P or not-P might be brought to light. Their point concerns the already existing lines of consideration, or merely the ones that, so far, they have been able to review and assess. On the basis of what they have come to know so far, they think that—at the present stage of the inquiry—it is epistemically required that one hold no opinion whether or not P.¹⁴

However, there is scope for agnosticism of a yet more *robust* kind. Think of a philosophical sceptic, who, in the case at hand, thinks that neither belief in the existence of the external world, nor in its negation, can be warranted *in principle*—that no *possible* considerations can constitute effective evidence one way or the other—and thinks this on the basis of apparently powerful

philosophical, hence *a priori*, arguments. These arguments will seem to prove that *necessarily* one cannot rationally be anything but agnostic as to whether there is an external world, that one is forced to *suspend judgement* about this issue indefinitely.¹⁵

One very interesting epistemic project would then be to try to settle the question of whether our belief in the existence of the external world can be warranted in such a way that even someone who started out by being *this* kind of robust agnostic—in effect, a Sceptic—could in fact come rationally to endorse that belief. How does Moore's Proof fare if this is the project?

It depends on the grounds for the Scepticism. Let us, following Wright [2004 and Coliva 2008a], distinguish between *Cartesian* and *Humean* scepticisms. Characteristically, Cartesian sceptics emphasise that it is a metaphysical possibility that perceptual experiences can be subjectively indistinguishable, no matter whether they are produced by normal interaction with physical objects; or else, by a dream, or in a scenario of brain-entrapment. Since, in their view, we cannot justifiably discount the latter, uncongenial possibilities — i.e. that we are not now dreaming, or that we are not merely entrappedly experiencing —,¹⁶ and could only reasonably claim warrant for any specific empirical belief such as (I) if we could do so, we are in no position to regard as warranted beliefs such as that here is a hand in front of me now, or that there is a computer where I now seem to see one, and so forth. Moreover, since this will hold for each and every perceptually-based belief we may have, the Cartesian sceptic will therefore *conclude* that our *general* belief about the existence of an external world cannot be warranted either: he will conclude that the belief that there is an external world—or, equivalently, that the category of physical objects isn't empty—cannot be warranted at all.

Now, if Moore's Proof is directed against such a Cartesian sceptic, it will obviously fail to settle the question as to whether our belief in the existence of the external world is warranted. For the sceptic will not regard its premise (I) as warranted in the first place—that indeed is the *starting point* of Cartesian scepticism, as I have just claimed. For, recall, that kind of scepticism starts out by envisaging a kind of uncongenial scenario, whose obtaining we are in no position to exclude given

our evidence, which annuls the warranting power of our present experience as of a hand where we seem to see one. In a sense which I have specified elsewhere [2008a], Moore's Proof would then seem to fail even to *hear* the Cartesian sceptical question, let alone to provide an answer to it. For it begins by assuming the very thing such a sceptic would call into question—namely, that we may have a perceptual warrant for (I), or for any other *specific* empirical belief we may have and from which we could reason to the very same—*general*—conclusion as the Proof, viz. that there is an external world.¹⁷ The Proof would thus fail *in the dialectical context* in which it was, in this scenario, intended as a move. This is of course a highly epistemological context. Still, it remains that the Proof would fail because of its dialectical inadequacy: an inadequacy of an even stronger kind than the one diagnosed by Pryor. For, no matter what the Cartesian sceptic comes to think of (III)—and we know that he will eventually come to think that it is unwarrantable—, Moore's Proof would, first and foremost, attempt to counter him by simply assuming the opposite of what he considers as his starting point: that it is a priori and on principle that we can't have warrant for (I), once certain sceptical, non-discountable hypotheses are raised.

Humean scepticism, in contrast, is robustly agnostic about the external world for reasons subtly different from those advanced by its Cartesian relative. The Humean sceptic does not make play with sceptical hypotheses which would impair one's perceptual warrants for propositions such as (I), thus making it impossible to obtain warrants for general beliefs such as (III). Rather, a Humean sceptic starts off by considering whether (III), the *general* belief in the existence of an external world—taken as such—can be warranted. He then argues that it cannot be warranted in a *non-circular way*: on his view, one could only try to warrant it by propounding something like Moore's Proof, where, however, the perceptual warrant one may indeed have for (I) would be dependent on there already having warrant for (III). In fact, Humean scepticism depends on conceiving the structure of perceptual warrants for empirical beliefs such as (I) in exactly the way Wright recommends.

No doubt, having come to the view that (III) is unwarrantable and hence that warrant for (I) cannot be obtained either, a Humean sceptic will regard Moore's Proof dialectically ineffective, for the reasons exposed by Pryor. To repeat: if, by a Humean sceptic's lights, that Proof starts off with unwarranted (and unwarrantable) premises, it cannot obviously produce warrant to believe its conclusion.

However, it remains to be investigated whether, depending on what kind of architecture of the structure of warrants one favours, Moore's Proof could do anything to remove either the Cartesian or the Humean motivations to be agnostic with respect to the existence of an external world. As it was hinted at before, both the Cartesian and the Humean sceptic think that perceptual warrant for beliefs such as (I) is possible only if one has prior warrant for certain presuppositions.¹⁸ The latter, in their turn, are subtly different in the two cases: a Cartesian sceptic maintains that we need warrant for 'I am not now dreaming' (or for 'I am not now merely envattedly experiencing'), while a Humean one thinks we need warrant for 'There is an external world'. Still, it remains that, contrary to what Pryor maintains, both forms of scepticism hold that perceptual warrant isn't presuppositionless. Now, on Pryor's view, certainly they are both mistaken as they *misconstrue* the structure of empirical warrants. If he were right, then, they would both have to give up their agnosticism and accept Moore's Proof and its outcome—that we can gain perceptual warrant for the belief in the existence of an external world in the way the Proof recommends. For they could only cling to their agnosticism by stubbornly subscribing to a mistaken conception of the conditions which have to be met in order for a belief such as (I)—'Here is a hand'—to be warranted. By contrast, on Wright's view, both the Cartesian and the Humean sceptic are well within their rights in thinking that empirical warrants depend in their turn on having warrant for certain presuppositions. Of course, Wright thinks that both kinds of sceptic have overlooked the possibility that there be non-evidential warrants for those presuppositions. Still it remains that Moore's Proof could do nothing—on Wright's understanding of the architecture of warrants—to remove their agnosticism with respect to the existence of an external world.

If this is right, then the Wright-Pryor dispute may be highly relevant to the project of settling the question of whether the belief in the existence of the external world is warranted for (non-stubborn) Humean and Cartesian agnostics—as we may now say—, as well as for an *open-minded* subject. For, no matter whether one simply has no view with respect to (III) or else thinks that it hasn't yet been or that it can't in principle be warranted, a decision about the actual architecture of the 'abstract space of warrants' will determine the possibility of acquiring a warrant for a belief in the existence of the external world by means of Moore's Proof.

5. Summary

So, to summarise our rather intricate discussion. Davies distinguishes between two kinds of transmission failure—Wright's notion and a second one which, allegedly, is an epistemic analogue of Pryor's dialectical ineffectiveness. I have argued that Davies's second kind of transmission failure is no transmission failure at all.

When we turn to Davies's two kinds of epistemic projects, we have, on the one hand, the project of 'deciding what to believe', organised around the issue of what one ought to believe in order to conform the structure of one's web of beliefs to that of the 'abstract space of warrants'; and on the other, the project of 'settling the question', where we are in fact trying to convince a doubter—officially an open-minded subject, but actually a disbeliever—of the conclusion of a given argument. I have claimed that on a correct understanding of the notion of open-mindedness, Davies's version of the latter project collapses into his version of the former. I then suggested that the project of 'deciding what to believe' is better construed as having nothing to do with the issue of the abstract space of warrants, but, simply, with the issue of drawing out the epistemic consequences of what warranted beliefs one takes oneself to have. I claimed that the issue of 'determining the structure of the abstract space of warrants' should best be conceived as another kind of epistemic project one might set out to accomplish. I have subsequently shown that, actually, depending on how one understands the notion of being a 'doubter', we can distinguish a variety of

epistemic projects, which can plausibly be labelled as concerned with ‘settling the question’. We may want to settle the question as to whether there is an external world when addressing an open-minded subject; or else a disbeliever; or, finally, an agnostic. And, in this latter case, we may have in view contingent agnostics, or ‘robust’ philosophical ones, i.e. Sceptics. In this latter case, we may then further distinguish between Cartesian and Humean Sceptics.

Finally, regarding the bearing of the Wright-Pryor dispute, Davies thinks it is relevant only to the project of ‘deciding what to believe’ as he describes it. On the contrary, I think that on a proper characterisation of that project, their dispute has no bearing on it at all. In contrast, I have maintained that it does have a bearing on the project of determining the structure of the ‘abstract space of warrants’ and on the project of ‘settling a question’, on at least some ways of understanding the latter. In particular, I have argued that the Wright-Pryor dispute is relevant when we try to settle the question whether there is an external world in the context of addressing either an open-minded subject, or—more interestingly, to my mind—(non stubborn) Cartesian and Humean sceptics.

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¹ As a matter of fact, Moore meant his Proof to be an anti-idealistic argument—that is, as an argument against those who deny that there is an external material world—and explicitly said it couldn't be used as an anti-sceptical one, viz. as an argument against those who think they can't know, or warrantably believe, that there is an external material world. However in [Coliva 2004] I show how, despite its author's intentions, the Proof, just as presented by Moore, can legitimately be read as an anti-sceptical argument as well.

² Besides the contributions by Wright [1985, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2004], Davies [1998, 2000, 2003, 2004, 2008] and Pryor [2000, 2004], which gave rise to, and have shaped the debate, see also Beebe [2001], Peacocke [2004: 112-5], Schiffer [2004], Brown [2005], Silins [2005], White [2006], Wright [2007], Coliva [2008a, 2008b] and Pryor [2008].

³ One may be suspicious of the idea of 'an abstract space of warrants' or, equivalently, of the notion of propositional warrant. Nothing in what follows really hinges on that, so long as one is happy with the distinction between having doxastic warrant for P—viz. thinking the thing to think, given one's available evidence—and being rationally answerable to what one takes to be the relations among warrants, even if one is mistaken about them. For, in such a case, where I talk about the abstract space of warrants one could simply replace my terminology with 'doxastic warrant'. (Of course I cannot be responsible for Davies's terminology although I think he should not mind a similar replacement). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the need to be clearer about these distinctions and to address the worry that talk of an abstract space of warrant may be spurious.

⁴ As is well-known the kind of warrant Wright [2004] thinks we have for these general propositions is non evidential, that is an ‘entitlement’ in his terminology.

⁵ This is not a temporal constraint but an epistemic one: the issue is whether or not warrant for (III) is needed for one’s sense experience actually to provide warrant for (I).

⁶ ‘Thus, if the structure in the space of warrants is as Wright and the sceptic say that it is, then the use of Moore’s argument in deciding what to believe fails to measure up to the overarching epistemic norm of that project (...). If the structure in the space of warrants is as Pryor’s dogmatist says that it is then there need be no failure to measure up to the overarching epistemic norm if I use Moore’s argument in deciding what to believe’. [Davies 2008: 25].

⁷ In Coliva [2008b] I present an intermediate position between Wright’s and Pryor’s.

⁸ Let us ignore for present purposes that Wright [2004] thinks that one would nevertheless be entitled by default to assume (III).

⁹ Pryor [2004: 364-5, 369] too distinguishes between a warrant’s destruction and its rational unavailability to a given subject and calls the latter phenomenon ‘rational obstruction’.

¹⁰ Beebe [2001] remarks that the phenomenon I call ‘rational unavailability’ wouldn’t amount to Davies’s *first* notion of transmission failure. However, it is important to note that here I’m not saying that Davies’s alleged second kind of transmission failure can’t count as a case of transmission failure because it isn’t identical to the first one! What I am saying, rather, is that since his alleged second kind of transmission failure is a case where there is no (rationally available) warrant to transmit *at all*, it certainly can’t count as a case of failure of warrant transmission in *any* reasonable sense.

¹¹ In order to avoid possible confusions, it is important to stress that on Wright’s account of Moore’s Proof there is no failure of Closure. For the claim is merely that one’s perceptual experience *as such* cannot give one a warrant to believe (I). To have such a warrant, one needs, beside a certain course of experience, also independent warrant for (III). Now, according to Wright, we do have such an independent warrant for (III), although he does not conceive of it as evidential. That non-evidential warrant—call it w^* —together with one’s current experience as of a hand in front of one—call it e —provides for an ordinary empirical warrant—call it w —for (I), which *does* transmit to (III) via the entailment. So, Closure holds, but what Wright is pointing out is that since w is not independent of w^* , just by having the appropriate kind of experience and running Moore’s Proof one won’t have a warrant to believe (III)—i.e. that there is an external world. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the need to clarify this point.

¹² Although, as we saw before, he unhappily views the phenomenon whereby doubt about (III) makes warrant for (I) rationally unavailable as an instance of a kind of transmission failure.

¹³ Being principled is what sets it apart from mere open-mindedness. So an open-minded subject as to whether there is an external world could only be someone who (implausibly) has never obtained perceptual warrant for an ordinary empirical belief such as ‘Here is a hand’; or else, (more plausibly), someone who has never thought about the entailment between ‘Here is a hand’ and ‘There is an external world’ or, more generally, about the whole issue of whether our belief in the existence of an external world is warranted.

¹⁴ It is difficult to conceive of such a contingent agnostic about the existence of an external world. One illustration may be provided by a subject who is rationally unpersuaded, so far, by both Moore’s Proof, say, after reading Moore’s paper as an assignment for his first year course in epistemology, as well as by the sceptical arguments against the existence of an external world so far reviewed in his course. However, such a subject is open to the idea that further developments of either argument (such as the ones recently provided by Pryor, or their counter on behalf of a sceptic lately advanced by Wright in response to Pryor’s defence of Moore’s Proof) which he can read of in the bibliography for his course could rationally persuade him to see things one way or the other. Given the difficulty of characterising and of stabilising such a position, it is particularly hard to see what effect Moore’s Proof would have in ‘settling the question’ with respect to such a contingent agnostic.

¹⁵ On the one hand, a philosophical sceptic will think that he has arguments which show that one can’t warrantably believe in the existence of an external world. On the other hand, being a sceptic as opposed to an idealist, he will also think that he has no warrant to conclude from that to the fact that the belief in the non-existence of an external material world is warranted. Moreover, I think he would insist that this isn’t simply a provisional feature of the existent lines of inquiry. Rather, he will also think that no proof of the non-existence of an external material world can be provided *in principle*. For instance, a Cartesian sceptic will think that since, in principle, the content of one’s perceptual experience is indistinguishable with respect to its cause, there is no way to acquire empirical evidence that one’s beliefs on specific empirical objects are all produced by the interaction with a meddlesome scientist (or in a dream, or hallucination, etc.), and that they are, therefore, all false (this would of course be a weak form of idealism, since it would countenance, *ex hypothesis*, the existence of at least one scientist, brains, etc. Still it would impair the idea that there are ordinary empirical objects such as hands, chairs, human bodies and so forth). A Humean sceptic, in contrast, will think that since all empirical evidence in favour of or against specific empirical beliefs depends on the prior assumption that there is an external world, no empirical evidence can be acquired against (III), because it would in turn depend on assuming that piece of information. Thus, both Cartesian and Humean sceptics are robust and principled agnostics. To repeat, they

believe that neither the belief in the existence nor in the non-existence of an external material world can *in principle* be warranted (and, *a fortiori*, known). I will presently come back to both forms of scepticism.

¹⁶ As Stroud [1984: ch. 1] and Wright [1991] pointed out, to do so, according to Cartesian sceptics, we should first be able to prove that we are not dreaming (or envatted). That will require some kind of test. But our predicament is that we have no antecedent reason to exclude the hypothesis that we may in fact be dreaming of (or merely envattedly seeming to ourselves to be) carrying out any test we may devise to the end.

¹⁷ Notoriously, Moore thought that his Proof could be replicated *ad libitum* just by substituting ‘Here is a hand’ with any similar, perceptually warranted, empirical belief.

¹⁸ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing to my attention the need to make this more explicit and thus to embark in the discussion of how conceiving differently of the structure of warrants would impinge on Moore’s Proof’s prospects of settling the question of whether there is an external world when directed to Cartesian and Humean sceptics.