

Begging the question and settling the question

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In the first lecture, I presented three instances of the problem of armchair knowledge arising from the (LOT), (RED), and (WATER) arguments. In each case, there are armchair warrants for believing the premises, but it is implausible that the question whether or not the conclusion of the argument is true could be settled from the armchair.

We have considered two kinds of armchair warrant. In some cases, philosophical theorising provides the warrant. In other cases, the warrant for believing a premise is a specially authoritative first-personal warrant. The prospect or risk of instances of the problem of armchair knowledge does not depend on our classifying first-personal warrants as *a priori* warrants. Nor does it depend on the idea that philosophy's methodology yields warrants that are strictly or purely *a priori*. Indeed, I have suggested that revisionary philosophical theorising in a disobliging world will be characterised by substantial involvement with the results of empirical research. But I have also suggested that there is a kind or a phase of philosophical theorising that is relatively purely *a priori*, though even this may incorporate commonplace empirical assumptions. When, from time to time, I speak of philosophical-theoretical warrants as being *a priori*, I do not intend to suggest strict purity.

In the case of one of the premises of the (RED) argument, it may be said that the warrant is a perceptual warrant rather than an armchair warrant. But essentially the same epistemological problem still arises. For it is not plausible that the question whether or not the conclusion is true could be settled without rising from the armchair save perhaps to make a simple visual perceptual judgement.

Someone might respond to these three instances of the problem of armchair knowledge, and others, in a piecemeal fashion. Perhaps the first premise cannot really be known to be true from the armchair. Perhaps philosophical theorising does not really support the second premise. Perhaps philosophical theorising supports only a more cautious conditional premise and the correspondingly trimmed conclusion is a proposition for which it is plausible that the question of truth or falsity could be settled from the armchair.

However, my strategy is to offer a general form of solution for these three instances of the problem of armchair knowledge and others. Given the availability of this general form of solution, the piecemeal responses are apt to seem *ad hoc*.

My proposal is that, in each problematic case, epistemic warrant is not transmitted from the premises of the argument to its conclusion, even though the argument is palpably valid. By the non-transmission claim I mean just what I need to mean; namely, that I cannot settle the question whether or not the conclusion is true by deploying the warrants that I have for believing the premises.

In the case of Moore's argument, there is a perceptual warrant for believing one premise and a simple *a priori* warrant for believing the other. It seems to me implausible that I could deploy these warrants to settle the question whether or not an external world exists – whether instead, perhaps, some sceptical hypothesis is true. So I would expect that an account of non-transmission of warrant should group Moore's argument with the (LOT), (RED), and (WATER) arguments that give rise to the problem of armchair knowledge. Towards the end of this lecture, I shall propose a principle that limits the transmission of epistemic warrant. It will be clear that Moore's argument falls within its scope – and does so quite independently of whether the argument is implicitly circular.

Then, in the final lecture, I shall complete my main task by showing how this limitation principle offers solutions to the three instances of the problem of armchair knowledge.

In my view, non-transmission of warrant is related to begging the question. But I do not think that non-transmission and question begging are the very same phenomenon. Non-transmission of warrant is an epistemological phenomenon, while begging the question is a dialectical phenomenon having to do with propounding arguments. But I shall enter the philosophical hypothesis that non-transmission of warrant is, in a sense that will be made clear, the analogue in the epistemological domain of the dialectical phenomenon of begging the question.

Since there is more than one notion of begging the question in the vicinity, it is crucial that I should make clear just which dialectical phenomenon I am talking about. My hypothesis is that non-transmission of warrant is the epistemological analogue of a dialectical phenomenon that I shall describe. It is not, of course, essential that we should agree to call the phenomenon ‘begging the question’.

1. Jackson on begging the question

My starting point is Frank Jackson’s account of begging the question as a phenomenon in the dialectical domain of propounding arguments (1987, chapter 6).¹ I shall review that account in this section and then, in the next section, make a small refinement and a substantial generalisation. With the generalised account in place, I can take the step from the dialectical domain to the epistemological domain (section 3).

Jackson begins with a distinction between the *teasing-out* function of arguing and the *convincing* function.

1.1 One purpose of arguing: Teasing out

It sometimes happens that I wonder about the answer to a question even though my beliefs already commit me to an answer. I wonder, perhaps, whether or not a proposition Q is true even though my beliefs already commit me to the truth of Q. One way in which this may happen is that I simply overlook my antecedent belief that Q; for some reason it is not activated. In such a case, a bald assertion that Q may help me to answer my question, not so much by informing me that Q as by reminding me that Q.

Another way in which I may wonder whether or not Q is true even though my beliefs already commit me to the truth of Q is that I have beliefs P_1, \dots, P_n from which Q can be validly derived but I either overlook one of my beliefs, P_i , or overlook the valid argument that leads from those beliefs to Q. In such a case, someone’s propounding the argument from P_1, \dots, P_n to Q may help me answer my question by reminding me of some of my antecedent beliefs and of their relevance to the issue at hand. Jackson (*ibid.*, p. 102) calls this the ‘teasing-out’ function of propounding an argument.

1.2 The convincing purpose of arguing

When an argument is propounded with the purpose of teasing out the consequences of someone’s beliefs, there is no need to offer considerations in support of the premises. But when an argument is propounded with the purpose of convincing someone of the truth of its conclusion then the person propounding the argument usually offers considerations that support the premises. The person to whom the argument is propounded is implicitly invited to ‘borrow’ these considerations and to be persuaded by them of the truth of the premises, and thence of the truth of the conclusion.²

A hearer who has an antecedent doubt about the truth of the conclusion may, for that very reason, start out by doubting that the conjunction of the premises is true. But the

speaker's propounding the argument provides the hearer with new information. The considerations that are offered for borrowing support the premises. They go into the scales on the side opposite from the considerations that lead the hearer to doubt the conclusion. So, by propounding the argument, the speaker may convince the hearer.

In short, Jackson says (*ibid.*, p. 107):

The utility of valid argumentation (over and above the teasing-out function) in convincing audiences of conclusions lies in the evidence implicitly offered for borrowing by the presentation and selection of premises.³

1.3 Begging the question

What is important for the notion of 'begging the question proper' (*ibid.*, p. 110) is the particular way in which the considerations offered for borrowing support the premises of the argument. The issues are particularly clear if they are presented initially in terms of a Bayesian account of the confirmation of hypotheses by evidence.

Evidence E supports hypothesis H relative to background assumptions B if the probability of H given E plus the background assumptions B, $\Pr(H/(E \& B))$, is greater than the prior probability of H given B alone, $\Pr(H/B)$. It can happen that E supports H relative to one set of background assumptions but not relative to another set of background assumptions. So, in particular, it may happen that E supports H relative to a speaker's background assumptions but not relative to the background assumptions of a hearer.

Suppose, then, that a speaker propounds an argument to a hearer who needs to be convinced of the argument's conclusion Q. Suppose, too, that P is among the argument's premises. By propounding the argument with those particular premises, the speaker implicitly offers for borrowing evidence of a certain kind for P. We may suppose that this evidence does indeed support P *relative to the speaker's background assumptions*. But it does not follow that the evidence supports P relative to the hearer's background assumptions. In fact, the hearer's doubt about the truth of Q may virtually guarantee that the speaker's offered evidence does *not* support P *relative to the hearer's background assumptions*. In that case, propounding the argument will be ineffectual. It will not convince the hearer of the truth of the conclusion Q because the evidence offered for borrowing will not provide the hearer with any grounds for accepting the premise P.

Thus, Jackson says (*ibid.*, p. 111, 112; emphasis added):

[I]t may be that a given argument to a given conclusion 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.

Such an argument could be of no use in convincing doubters, and is properly said to *beg the question*.

Consider one very simple kind of case. A speaker propounds an argument with the purpose of convincing a hearer of the truth of Q, which is itself among the speaker's background assumptions B^s . The argument has just one premise (or just one premise that stands in need of support), P, and the evidence offered for borrowing supports the premise relative to the speaker's background assumptions: $\Pr(P/(E \& B^s)) > \Pr(P/B^s)$. The hearer thinks that it is as likely as not that Q is false and so must have background assumptions, B^h , that are different from the speaker's. Considered against the background of these assumptions, the evidence offered for borrowing does not support premise P at all: $\Pr(P/(E \& B^h)) \leq \Pr(P/B^h)$.

Cast in these Bayesian terms, Moore's argument appears as a case of this kind. Given Moore's background assumptions, the evidence provided by a visual experience as of one hand [here] and then another [here] supports the premise MOORE(1). But the evidence does nothing to support that premise when it is considered against the background of the sceptic's assumption that it is as likely as not that there is no external world as ordinarily conceived – that it is as likely as not that, instead, I am the envatted victim of a powerful but deceptive scientist. So, propounding Moore's argument cannot serve the purpose of convincing the sceptic. The sceptic's doubt about Moore's conclusion rationally requires that the sceptic does not share Moore's background assumptions. The sceptic is bound to adopt different assumptions; and against the background of those assumptions the evidence that Moore offers for borrowing does nothing to support the premise. Thus, on Jackson's account, Moore's argument begs the question.

2. Begging the question refined and generalised

My solution to the problem of armchair knowledge turns on the philosophical hypothesis that non-transmission of warrant is the epistemological analogue of the dialectical phenomenon of begging the question. I shall describe this dialectical phenomenon by first refining and then generalising Jackson's account.

Since I expect that an account of non-transmission of warrant should group Moore's argument with the three arguments that give rise to instances of the problem of armchair knowledge, it is important to me that Jackson's account already classifies Moore's argument as begging the question.

But a critic may say that Jackson's account classifies Moore's argument as begging the question just because Moore's background assumption is tantamount to the conclusion of whose truth the sceptic is supposed to be convinced. So, the argument is question begging on Jackson's account only because it is treated as being question begging on a more familiar textbook account.⁴ In essence, Moore's argument is treated as being circular. The conclusion is included amongst the premises, but under the guise of an assumption.⁵

This critic's objection raises both local and global issues. At the *global* level, my response is that I already accept that an account of non-transmission of epistemic warrant should apply to Moore's argument independently of whether the argument is regarded as being implicitly circular. That is, Moore's argument should be classified as an example of non-transmission of warrant even if (as Pryor, 2000, forthcoming, says) my warrant for believing that I have hands does *not* depend on my having a substantive antecedent warrant for believing that there is an external world as ordinarily conceived. This requirement on an account of non-transmission of warrant will constrain the step of analogy from the dialectical to the epistemological domain.

2.1 A refinement: Assumptions and premises

As an initial *local* response to the critic's objection, we need to stress that it is crucial to Jackson's account of begging the question that we not assimilate background assumptions to additional premises. Being question begging is not a property of arguments in themselves. It is not constituted by a relationship between premises and conclusion. Rather begging the question is a phenomenon in the dialectical domain of *propounding* arguments.⁶

But, even with the distinction between premises and background assumptions in place, there is still a worry about Jackson's account of begging the question. For it may seem that every obviously valid argument with only one premise (or only one premise

that stands in need of support) will turn out to be question begging, if the considerations offered for borrowing provide support for the premise only against a background of assumptions.

Suppose, for example, that you doubt that there are any black birds and I intend to convince you that there are some. Pointing at a black swan, I say, ‘There are black swans’, offering for borrowing the evidence provided by a visual experience as of a black swan. My argument, as propounded, can be set out as follows:

BLACK(0) I am having an experience as of a black swan.

BLACK (1) There are black swans.

BLACK (2) If there are black swans then there are black birds.

Therefore:

BLACK (3) There are black birds.

The experience described in BLACK(0) supports the premise BLACK(1). The other premise, BLACK(2) is (let us agree) an obvious *a priori* truth that does not stand in need of support in this dialectical context. And the argument is clearly valid.

Since you antecedently doubt that there are any black birds, you are antecedently committed to doubting that there are black swans. When I propound my argument, I provide you with new information and you do not doubt that it *seems* to you that you see a black swan. But perhaps you maintain your doubt that there are *really* black swans, and come to suspect that there is a trick of the light, or that your perceptual apparatus (and mine) is behaving oddly. Perhaps, because of your antecedent doubt about BLACK(3), you come to doubt the assumptions about normal conditions against the background of which the visual experience described in BLACK(0) supports the premise BLACK(1). In short, it could be that because you doubt the conclusion of the propounded argument, you doubt its premise; and because you doubt its premise, you call into question the background assumption. But we do not want the (BLACK) argument as propounded to be classified as question begging.⁷

In defence of Jackson, it may be said that, even as his account stands, it will not classify the (BLACK) argument as begging the question. It is true that you might maintain your doubt about the conclusion by calling my background assumptions into question. But Jackson’s criterion is that ‘*anyone sane* who doubted the conclusion would have background beliefs relative to which the evidence for the premises would be no evidence’ (ibid., p. 111; emphasis added). And it has not been shown that calling my background assumptions into question is the *only* rational response for a doubting hearer to make. Surely it at least might be rational for a hearer to accept the perceptual evidence and stop doubting that there are black birds.

However, strategic considerations argue for adding a small refinement to what Jackson actually says. For, first, accounts of begging the question very often face the objection that they classify all valid arguments as question begging, or at least all valid arguments with one premise. And existing accounts of non-transmission of warrant face the same kind of objection as well. It would be strategically useful to block this line of objection. Second, if we rely on Jackson’s criterion and consider the route to doubt about background assumptions that goes via doubt about the premise, then the classification of an argument as question begging is liable to depend on potentially delicate questions about the balance of considerations for and against the premise.

The refinement that I propose is this. If an argument is to be question begging, then doubt about the conclusion should have a direct impact on the background assumptions, not merely an impact mediated by doubt about a premise. Antecedent doubt about the

conclusion should *directly* rationally require the adoption of assumptions against the background of which the considerations offered for borrowing would no longer support the premises.⁸

2.2 A generalisation: When propounding an argument is of no use in convincing doubters

The core idea of Jackson's account of begging the question, thus refined, is this. A speaker propounds an argument, offering for borrowing considerations that, by the speaker's lights, support the premises of the argument. The argument, so propounded, is question begging if a hearer who antecedently doubted the conclusion would be directly rationally required to adopt assumptions against the background of which the putative support for a premise afforded by one of the considerations offered for borrowing would be no support. If the argument is question begging then it 'could be of no use in convincing doubters' (ibid., p. 112).

If an argument has several premises, then it is question begging according to this account if the following condition is met:

Begging the question (basic condition)

For one of the premises, P_i , that is supported (according to the speaker) by the consideration C_i , a hearer who antecedently doubted the conclusion would be directly rationally required to adopt assumptions (B^h , different from the speaker's background assumptions B^s) against the background of which C_i would provide no support for P_i .

However, an argument might be of no use in convincing doubters even though this basic condition was not met.

Suppose that a speaker propounds an argument with two premises, and offers for borrowing evidence C_1 that supports P_1 and evidence C_2 that supports P_2 . Suppose that doubt about the conclusion Q would not directly rationally require adoption of assumptions that would remove the support for one or other of the premises. So the argument as propounded does not meet the basic condition for begging the question. But suppose that doubt about the truth of Q , *taken together with acceptance of the evidence offered in support of P_2* , would directly rationally require the adoption of assumptions against the background of which C_1 would no longer support P_1 . Then the argument so propounded could be of no use in convincing doubters. For a doubter could not rationally regard *both* premises as being supported by the considerations offered for borrowing.⁹

Consider, for example, Bruce and Charlene. If Bruce is to convince the doubting Charlene of the truth of Q by propounding an argument with premises P_1 and P_2 then he needs to ensure that, despite her antecedent doubt, Charlene can rationally do two things. First, Charlene must be able rationally to accept the evidence, C_1 and C_2 , that Bruce offers for borrowing. But second, Charlene must be able to do more than just accept that evidence in itself. She must be able rationally to accept the evidence as supporting Bruce's premises. Because Charlene starts out with a doubt about the truth of Q and Bruce's argument is clearly valid, Charlene regards herself as having reason to doubt the conjunction of the premises ' P_1 & P_2 '. But this does not mean that Bruce's argument could be of no use in convincing Charlene. For Bruce's act of propounding his argument changes Charlene's evidential situation. Now she has evidence to put into the scales on the opposite side and, given this new evidence, she may accept P_1 and accept P_2 . She may accept those premises because they are supported by the evidence C_1 and C_2 respectively, and so she may be convinced of the truth of Q .

Suppose, however, that Charlene's antecedent doubt about the truth of Q , taken together with her acceptance of the evidence C_2 in itself, directly rationally requires her

to adopt an assumption against the background of which the putative evidence, C_1 , offered in support of P_1 , is no evidence. Then, even if Charlene accepts the premise P_2 because it is supported by the evidence C_2 , she still regards herself as having reason to doubt the conjunction ‘ $P_1 \& P_2$ ’, and she has nothing to put into the scales on the side of accepting P_1 . Indeed, this remains so, even if Charlene accepts the putative evidence C_1 in itself. Thus, in this case, Bruce’s propounding his argument could be of no use in convincing Charlene of the truth of Q .

More generally, if propounding an argument is to serve the purpose of convincing a doubter, then it must be possible for the doubter to do two things. First, the doubter must be able rationally to accept all the considerations offered for borrowing. But second, the doubter must be able to do more than just accept those considerations in themselves. The doubter must also be able rationally to accept all the premises as so supported. Offering for borrowing considerations C_1, \dots, C_n in support of premises P_1, \dots, P_n will be of no use in convincing a doubter if, for example, acceptance of the considerations C_2, \dots, C_n in themselves, and acceptance of the premises P_2, \dots, P_n as so supported, when taken together with doubt about the conclusion, would directly rationally require the adoption of assumptions against the background of which C_1 would no longer support P_1 .

As we just noted in Bruce and Charlene’s case, the propounded argument will still be no use even if the doubter accepts *all* the considerations C_1, \dots, C_n in themselves. Acceptance of C_1 in itself is no help unless the doubter is able rationally to regard the premise P_1 as being so supported. Otherwise, the doubter still has nothing to put into the scales on the side of accepting P_1 .¹⁰

Thus, the following very general condition ought to be sufficient for a propounded argument to be question begging:

Begging the question (generalised condition)

Acceptance of the putatively supporting considerations, C_1, \dots, C_n , in themselves and acceptance of all the premises save P_i as so supported, when taken together with antecedent doubt about the conclusion, would directly rationally require the adoption of assumptions against the background of which C_i would no longer support P_i .¹¹

2.3 Begging the question and dialectical effectiveness

Jackson says that a question begging argument ‘could be of no use in convincing doubters’ (ibid., 112). But the notion of begging the question is not supposed to encompass every way in which an argument might be dialectically ineffective. For example, an argument might be of no use in convincing a particular doubter who has an utterly unassailable doubt about the truth of one of the premises, or a particular doubter who is beset by doubts about the validity of *modus ponens*. A propounded argument begs the question if it could be of no use in convincing doubters because of a structural property of the argument as propounded, a rational relationship between antecedent doubt about the conclusion and the adoption of one set of background assumptions rather than another. An argument that could be of no use in convincing doubters because, for example, a speaker’s propounding it would drive the hearer insane is not – or, at least, is not in virtue of that fact alone – question begging.

3. Begging the question and non-transmission of epistemic warrant

However interesting this generalisation of Jackson’s account of begging the question may be in its own right, it is of no use to me unless it can be put at the service of solving the problem of armchair knowledge. The philosophical hypothesis on which my solution is

supposed to turn is that non-transmission of warrant is the analogue in the epistemological domain of the dialectical phenomenon of begging the question. So I need to explain the analogy and provide some reason to think that the hypothesis might be true. Then, of course, I need to show that the hypothesis solves the problem of armchair knowledge – or, at the very least, that it offers solutions to the three instances of the problem that I presented in the first lecture.

3.1 *Earned and unearned assumptions*

Jackson presents his account of begging the question in a Bayesian framework and I have followed him in this. A premise is supported by evidence that raises its probability. But in the epistemological context we want to consider warrants that are not naturally conceived as evidential. Thus, in the case of Moore's argument, we want to allow that it is my experience itself, rather than a belief about the experience, that provides a warrant for believing that I have hands. More generally, we want to include both inferential warrants and non-inferential warrants. So, in place of the notion of putatively supporting evidence, we need the more neutral notion of a putatively warranting element. Thus, we suppose that for each premise P_i there is a putatively warranting element w_i .

In the Bayesian framework, evidence supports a hypothesis relative to background assumptions. The removal of support for a premise that is consequent on the hearer's antecedent doubt about the conclusion has been described in terms of a difference between the speaker's and the hearer's background assumptions. If we were to transpose this structure of two sets of background assumptions into the epistemological context then we would say, first, that the putatively warranting element w_i constitutes a warrant for believing P_i given one set of background assumptions – perhaps, default background assumptions. But then, we would say, doubt about the conclusion directly rationally requires the adoption of a different set of background assumptions, and w_i does *not* constitute a warrant for believing P_i given this second set of background assumptions.

However, this structure of two sets of background assumptions is not wholly appropriate to the epistemological context, for the structure obscures an important distinction between two kinds of case in which a putatively warranting element constitutes a warrant for believing something. For the first kind of case, consider again the argument (ELECTION). I am asked to imagine 'that [I] live in a society which holds electoral "drills" as often as we hold fire drills, so that the scene [I] witness of itself provides no clue whether a genuine election is going on or not' (Wright, 1985, p. 436). It is plausible that, if I lived in such a society, then the evidence of Jones writing an 'X' on what looked like a ballot paper would not constitute a warrant for believing that Jones had just voted. From that starting point, I would need additional information, some positive reason to think that this was not a drill but a genuine election, before that evidence could provide a warrant for believing that Jones had just voted.

But there is a second kind of case. Suppose that I live in a society where there are elections every few years and no election drills, nor even rumours of election drills. In this case it is not nearly as plausible that the evidence of Jones writing an 'X' on what looks like a ballot paper could not constitute a warrant for believing that Jones had just voted unless I had an antecedent positive reason for ruling out the election drill possibility.

It might be suggested that we can acknowledge the importance of the difference between these two kinds of case even while agreeing that, in both cases, the evidence constitutes a warrant only against the background of an assumption that this is a genuine election and not just a drill. For, it might be said, the important distinction is between an

assumption that is earned and a default assumption that is unearned. In the first case, the background assumption is earned. I do something substantive to rule out the election drill possibility. In the second case, the same background assumption is unearned. It simply does not occur to me to doubt that this is a genuine election or to worry that this might be just a drill.

Many of Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* (1969) would naturally suggest making the distinction between the two kinds of case in this way. Consider, for example (*OC*, 357–9):

357. One might say: “‘I know’ expresses *comfortable* certainty, not the certainty that is still struggling.’

358. Now I would like to regard this certainty, not as something akin to hastiness or superficiality, but as a form of life. . . .

359. But that means I want to conceive it as something that lies beyond being justified; as it were, as something animal.

We might regard an unearned assumption as one to which we have a right, one about which we may be comfortably certain, even though we do not have what would ordinarily be regarded as a justification for making the assumption.

Thus, for example, in the second half of ‘Facts and certainty’ (1985), Wright returns to the pattern of sceptical argument that is suggested by the intuitive inadequacy of Moore’s argument. The problem posed by the sceptic is that, without antecedent support for the conclusion, MOORE(3), a perceptual experience as of one hand [here] and another [here] does nothing to support the premise MOORE(1). And there is no prospect of such antecedent support. But Wittgenstein’s remarks suggest a way to avoid the sceptic’s argument (Wright, 1985, p. 450): ‘We could escape this bind if it could be reasonable to accept [MOORE(3)] without reason; that is, without evidence.’¹²

The notion of an assumption that we are simply entitled to make, or are entitled to make in one or another context, holds considerable appeal. It promises, not only some relief from the sceptic’s challenge, but also a fairly plausible account of the way in which, when there are no election drills nor even rumours of the same, the evidence of Jones writing an ‘X’ on what looks like a ballot paper could provide a warrant for believing that Jones had just voted.

3.2 Warrants and defeaters

However, I do not think that, in every case where earning a background assumption is intuitively not required, we should postulate an unearned or default background assumption. One reason is that a thinker to whom we would, on this proposal, credit a default background assumption may not have any such assumption in mind. Even in a situation where there are regular elections and no drills, I might not have in mind any assumption to the effect that this is a genuine election and not an election drill. I might not even have the concept of an election drill. Similarly, in a case where the putatively warranting element is a perceptual experience, a thinker might not have in mind any assumption to the effect that lighting conditions are normal or that his perceptual apparatus is functioning properly. Still less should we suppose that the thinker has in mind an assumption to the effect that he is not the envatted victim of a powerful but deceptive scientist.

Someone might credit the thinker with *implicit* assumptions in order to retain the Bayesian framework. But I agree with Tyler Burge (1993, 2003) that this is really an over-intellectualisation of the epistemological situation. A thinker may simply *take* the

deliverances of perceptual experience as veridical, without having in mind the assumption *that* the deliverances of perceptual experience are veridical – let alone assumptions about lighting, perceptual apparatus, or vats. Indeed, intuitively, we want to allow that a thinker could have a perceptual warrant for believing that he has hands while lacking the intellectual resources even to formulate such assumptions.¹³

Thus, in the move from the dialectical domain of propounding arguments to the epistemological domain, I shall not retain the structure of two sets of background assumptions. In the epistemological domain there may be no need for a set of assumptions corresponding to the speaker's background assumptions. The element w_i may by itself constitute a warrant for believing P_i . By focusing on such cases, or treating examples as such cases, we steer clear of the idea that what is at issue is a kind of circularity. But there may still be assumptions that someone who doubts the conclusion of an argument is directly rationally required to adopt, beliefs to which a doubter is directly rationally committed. And it may be, roughly speaking, that, given those beliefs, w_i does not constitute a warrant for believing P_i .

However, this is only rough. We need to draw a distinction between the question whether a putatively warranting element really does constitute a warrant and the question whether a thinker can rationally take that element to constitute a warrant. Sometimes, my having a particular warranted belief may have the consequence that a putatively warranting element w does not constitute a warrant for believing a proposition P . For example, it is plausible that a warranted belief to the effect that election drills are just as likely as real elections would have the consequence that evidence of Jones writing an 'X' on what looks like a ballot paper would not constitute a warrant for believing that Jones had just voted. This is plausible even if, in ordinary circumstances where there are no election drills nor even rumours of election drills, that evidence would constitute a warrant. In that case, we might say that the warranted belief about drills *defeats*, or undermines, or removes my warrant for believing that Jones has just voted.

But now consider the case in which there are regular elections and no drills, nor even rumours of drills, but I am suddenly seized by the idea of election drills without any evidence whatever. I believe that election drills are just as likely as real elections, but this belief is not warranted. Then, on one natural way of employing the notions of warrant and defeat, the evidence of Jones writing an 'X' on what looks like a ballot paper still does constitute a warrant for believing that Jones has just voted. The warrant is not really defeated. Yet, given my belief that election drills are just as likely as real elections, I cannot rationally take that evidence to constitute a warrant. My belief rationally commits me to not availing myself of that warrant. I cannot rationally combine that belief with taking the putatively warranting element as a warrant.¹⁴ In such a case, I shall say that, while the belief does not defeat the warrant that is ordinarily constituted by the putatively warranting element, it *R-defeats* that warrant.

3.3 *The structural analogue of begging the question*

We are now in a position to describe the structure of the epistemological situation that is analogous to the structure of propounded arguments that meet the *basic condition* for begging the question:

A thinker has warrants for believing the premises, P_1, \dots, P_n , of a palpably valid argument, and these warrants are constituted by putatively warranting elements w_1, \dots, w_n . Someone who doubted the conclusion, Q , of the argument would be directly rationally committed to a belief that would R-defeat the warrant for some premise P_i that is constituted by w_i .

Similarly, we can describe the structure of the epistemological situation that is analogous to the structure of propounded arguments that meet the *generalised condition* for begging the question:

A thinker has warrants for believing the premises, P_1, \dots, P_n , of a palpably valid argument, and these warrants are constituted by putatively warranting elements w_1, \dots, w_n . For some premise, P_i , someone who (i) accepted all the putatively warranting elements w_1, \dots, w_n , in themselves and (ii) accepted all the premises save P_i as so warranted, but (iii) doubted the conclusion Q would be directly rationally committed to a belief that would R-defeat the warrant for P_i that is constituted by w_i .

In these descriptions, the distinction between accepting a putatively warranting element *in itself* and accepting a proposition as so warranted is important. I can surely agree that Jones just wrote an 'X' on what looks like a ballot paper, and even appreciate that this evidence putatively warrants believing that Jones has just voted, without accepting the proposition that Jones has just voted as so warranted. In the case of a warranting element that is a perceptual experience, the term 'accept' is not so appropriate, but I hope that the idea of accepting the warranting element *in itself* is clear. I can have a visual experience as of one hand [here] and another [here], and agree that it is for me as if there were a pair of hands, without accepting the proposition that I have hands as so warranted.

At the outset, I stated my philosophical hypothesis. Non-transmission of warrant is, in a sense that I promised would be made clear, the analogue in the epistemological domain of the dialectical phenomenon of begging the question. I have described the dialectical phenomenon that I call 'begging the question' (section 2), and I have now made clear the sense in which an epistemological phenomenon is the analogue of that phenomenon. So my philosophical hypothesis has become the hypothesis that, when we have the structure that I have just described, warrant is not transmitted from the premises, P_1, \dots, P_n , to the conclusion Q .

By the non-transmission claim I mean that I cannot settle the question whether or not the conclusion is true by deploying the epistemic warrants that I have for believing the premises. So it remains for me to say something about the epistemic project of settling a question.

3.4 *The epistemic project of settling a question*

The project of settling the question whether or not a proposition is true begins with my regarding that question as open *pro tem*. In this respect, the project of settling a question is more ambitious than the project of deciding what to believe about the answer to the question.

When I say that I regard the question as open *pro tem*, I do not mean that I work myself into a state of really doubting that the proposition is true. Nor does it even mean that I mentally simulate doubting that the proposition is true.¹⁵ When I regard a question as open, I suppose, for the purposes of the project, that my antecedent epistemological situation is such that it is as likely as not that the proposition is false. This supposition then conditions my conduct of the project. In particular, it conditions my rational deployment of epistemic warrants as I try to answer the question that I have begun by regarding as open.

I have already described a case where a belief – even an unwarranted belief – rationally commits me to not availing myself of a warrant. Given the belief, I cannot

rationally take the putatively warranting element as a warrant even if, in reality, that element does constitute a warrant. The belief R-defeats the warrant. Now I want to extend this idea from belief to supposition. If a belief would R-defeat a warrant then I cannot rationally avail myself of that warrant within the context of a project whose conduct is conditioned by a supposition with the same content as that belief. We may say that the supposition *S-defeats* the warrant.

There are thus three notions that run in parallel: defeat, R-defeat, and S-defeat. First, a *warranted belief* that D (or perhaps just a warrant for believing D) *defeats* a warrant for believing P that is constituted by the putatively warranting element *w*. Second, if this is so then a *belief* that D, whether warranted or not, *R-defeats* the warrant for believing P. This means that one cannot rationally combine believing D with taking *w* as a warrant for believing P. Third, if this is so then *supposing* D *S-defeats* the warrant for believing P. This means that, within the context of a project whose conduct is conditioned by the supposition that D one cannot rationally take *w* as a warrant for believing P.

To see how a supposition conditions the conduct of a question-settling project, imagine that I undertake the project of settling the question whether or not there is an external world as ordinarily conceived – whether instead, perhaps, I am the envatted victim of a powerful but deceptive scientist. In particular, I attempt to settle that question by deploying the warrants that I have for believing the premises of Moore’s argument. I begin by regarding the question of the truth of the conclusion of Moore’s argument as open *pro tem*. So my conduct of the question-settling project is conditioned by the supposition that it is as likely as not that there is no external world as ordinarily conceived.

As the sceptic points out, if I really believed that it was as likely as not that there was no external world as ordinarily conceived then I could not rationally regard my experience as constituting a warrant for believing MOORE(1). That belief (that doubt) would R-defeat the warrant for believing MOORE(1). Just so, within the context of a project whose conduct is conditioned by the supposition that it is as likely as not that there is no external world as ordinarily conceived, I cannot rationally avail myself of the warrant for believing MOORE(1). The supposition S-defeats that warrant.

In short, I cannot settle the question whether or not the conclusion of Moore’s argument is true by deploying the epistemic warrants that I have for believing the premises. And this is what I mean when I say that Moore’s argument is an example of non-transmission of warrant.

4. A limitation principle

With so much by way of explanation, I hope that my hypothesis – that non-transmission of warrant is the analogue, in the epistemological domain, of the dialectical phenomenon of begging the question – will seem rather plausible. On the basis of that hypothesis, I now propose the following principle for limiting the transmission of epistemic warrant:

Limitation Principle (revised and generalised)

Epistemic warrant cannot be transmitted from the premises, P_1, \dots, P_n , of a valid argument to its conclusion Q if the warrants for believing the premises are constituted by putatively warranting elements, w_1, \dots, w_n , and, for one of the premises, P_i , someone who (i) accepted all the putatively warranting elements w_1, \dots, w_n in themselves, and (ii) accepted all the premises save P_i as so warranted, but (iii) doubted the conclusion Q would be directly rationally committed to a belief that would R-defeat the warrant for P_i that is constituted by w_i .¹⁶

I said at the beginning of this lecture that I would propose a limitation principle on the transmission of epistemic warrant and that it would be clear that Moore's argument falls within the scope of that principle – and does so quite independently of whether the argument is implicitly circular. I hope that what I said would be clear is indeed clear. Moore's argument is an example of transmission failure. And this is the case even though (as Pryor, 2000, forthcoming, says) my perceptual experience constitutes a warrant for believing the premise MOORE(1) and my having that warrant does not depend on my having a substantive antecedent warrant for believing the conclusion MOORE(3).

What remains of my main task is to show how this limitation principle offers solutions to the three instances of the problem of armchair knowledge. I shall do that in the final lecture.

Notes

¹ See *OED*. **Dialectical** or **dialectic** (adj.): Of, pertaining to, or of the nature of logical disputation; argumentative, logical.

Pryor (forthcoming, ms p. 24, n. 28) says that it is a mistake to '[take] begging the question to be essentially a dialectical phenomenon'. I begin from a dialectical phenomenon that Jackson and I call 'begging the question'. I then draw an analogy between this dialectical phenomenon and an epistemological phenomenon that I call 'non-transmission of warrant'.

² The term 'borrow' is Jackson's, and he connects it with 'the division of epistemological labour' (1987, p. 104).

The speaker's choice of premises may convey important information to the hearer about the nature and structure of the considerations that are being offered for borrowing. Thus consider, for example, the arguments 'P, Q; therefore Q' and 'P, if P then Q; therefore Q'. The conjunction of the premises of the first argument, 'P & Q', is logically equivalent to the conjunction of the premises of the second argument, 'P & (if P then Q)'. But, according to Jackson, my choice of the *modus ponens* argument generates the *argumentative implicature* that there are considerations that support the conditional premise, 'if P then Q', and are independent of the considerations that support P. In particular, it generates the implicature that the considerations that support the conditional premise are not just considerations that support the antecedent P together with considerations that support the consequent Q.

³ If this much is right then one kind of argumentative misdeed is to choose premises in a way that generates an implicature to the effect that particular kinds of consideration are being offered for borrowing when, in fact, the available considerations are quite different. Jackson calls this misdeed 'misleading advertising' (ibid., p. 107). It is dialectically important. But, since there is no obvious epistemological analogue in the thinking of a single subject, I shall not dwell on it.

In order to isolate the argumentative misdeed of 'begging the question proper', Jackson (ibid., p. 110) asks us to consider examples in which an argument is propounded and there is no mismatch between the considerations available for borrowing and the argumentative implicatures generated by the speaker's presentation and selection of premises.

⁴ According to Irving Copi's *Introduction to Logic* (1961, pp. 65–6), someone who 'assumes as a premise the very conclusion he intends to prove' commits the fallacy of begging the question. The fallacy is glaringly obvious if the premise and the conclusion are formulated in exactly the same words. But even when the formulations are very different, the fallacy is still committed if the same proposition occurs both as premise and as conclusion. Furthermore, the fallacy is committed even if the premise is separated from the conclusion by several steps of argument. Thus, a proposition Q might be the conclusion of an argument from intermediate lemmas including R, while the argument in support of R has the proposition Q (in the same or a different formulation) as a premise. In short, propounding a circular argument is committing the fallacy of begging the question.

However, as Jackson (1987, pp. 100, 110) points out, the problem for any account of begging the question that relies on the idea of including the conclusion among the premises and allows for differences in formulation is that it is difficult to avoid the consequence that propounding any valid argument is begging the question. The argument

'Q; therefore Q' is patently circular, and 'P, Q; therefore Q' is no less circular. In that case, propounding the argument 'P & Q; therefore Q' is begging the question. But 'P & Q' can be reformulated as 'P & (if P then Q)', so propounding the argument 'P & (if P then Q); therefore Q' is begging the question, and so is propounding the *modus ponens* argument 'P, if P then Q; therefore Q'.

⁵ As we saw at the end of the first lecture, the sceptic can mount a powerful argument by relying on the claim that Moore's argument is implicitly circular. But, if non-transmission of warrant is the epistemological analogue of begging the question and the key to begging the question is circularity, then the prospects are not good for showing that Moore's argument is an example of transmission failure. For it seems that if the circularity claim is wrong then the argument is not question-begging, and so there is no failure of transmission; while if the circularity claim is right then there is no warrant to be transmitted in the first place.

⁶ Propounding an argument is question begging when the hearer's antecedent doubt about the conclusion rationally requires that the hearer should not share the speaker's background assumptions but should instead adopt assumptions against the background of which those considerations no longer support the premises. If, at the outset, background assumptions are assimilated to additional premises, then the structure of begging the question is assimilated to a structure in which the hearer's antecedent doubt about the conclusion of an argument rationally requires that the hearer should doubt one of the premises. And the consequence of that assimilation is, at best, that propounding any obviously valid argument with one premise will be classified as begging the question. In order to avoid the threat of this unwanted consequence, we need to maintain a distinction between premises and background assumptions.

⁷ There are two intuitions at work here. The first is simply that propounding the (BLACK) argument could be of use in convincing someone who doubted that there are black birds. The second is that I could settle the question whether or not there are black birds by deploying the warrants for believing the premises of the (BLACK) argument, particularly the perceptual warrant for believing BLACK(1). So, if non-transmission of warrant is to be the epistemological analogue of begging the question, then we should not expect the (BLACK) argument to be classified as question begging.

⁸ I am grateful to Daniel Nolan for insisting on the importance of this refinement. See further the discussion of Brian McLaughlin's objection in note 16.

⁹ Suppose that Bruce and Charlene, like everyone else, believe what the oracle says. Bruce also believes what he reads in the newspapers while Charlene thinks that the newspapers are generally reliable except for those occasions when the print journalists are on strike. The oracle is an unimpeachable source of information, but it needs its power supply to be working if it is to provide any information at all. So Charlene is annoyed that, as it seems to her, almost every week the oracle's power supply is not working – and to make matters worse, when it is working the print journalists always seem to be on strike. In fact, Charlene rather suspects that the print journalists go on strike just because an up-and-running oracle threatens to make them redundant. Bruce thinks that Charlene is going too far with her theory about the print journalists and wants to convince her that this is a doubly good week when the oracle's power supply *is* working and the journalists are *not* on strike. So he propounds the following argument:

BRUCE(1) Bloggs has already taken over as head of the information and related industries trade union.

BRUCE(2) Once Bloggs is head of the information and related industries trade union, the oracle's power supply will work and the print journalists will not go on strike.

Therefore:

BRUCE(3) The power supply is working and the journalists are not on strike.

In support of the first premise, Bruce offers the consideration that it said as much in a newspaper report; and in support of the second premise, he offers the evidence of what they both heard the oracle say. Any sane person would regard BRUCE(2) as conclusively supported, and Charlene's doubt about the truth of BRUCE(3) does not directly rationally require her to adopt assumptions against the background of which BRUCE(1) would not be supported. But, Charlene's doubt, *taken together with acceptance of the fact that they have just heard the oracle speak*, does directly rationally require her to assume that the print journalists are on strike. When the journalists are on strike the newspapers are utterly unreliable. So, against the background of that assumption, the newspaper report does nothing to support BRUCE(1). Thus, Bruce's argument as propounded is of no use in convincing a sane doubter like Charlene, although it does not clearly meet the basic condition for begging the question.

¹⁰ Indeed, a propounded argument might be of no use in convincing doubters precisely because antecedent doubt about the conclusion, taken together with acceptance of the consideration C_1 in itself, would directly rationally require the adoption of assumptions against the background of which that very consideration C_1 would no longer support the premise P_1 .

¹¹ It is important to note that, even with this generalisation, the earlier refinement – the requirement that the route from doubt about the conclusion to adoption of an assumption should be *direct* – remains in place. Otherwise we would risk having the unwanted consequence that every obviously valid argument is classified as question begging if, for one of the premises, the considerations offered for borrowing provide support for that premise only against a background of assumptions.

¹² Towards the end of 'Facts and certainty' (1985, pp. 470–1), Wright considers the possibility that there are propositions (including some of Wittgenstein's 'hinge' propositions) that lie outside the domain of *cognitive achievement*, and so 'outside the domain of what may be known, reasonably believed, or doubted'. But although these propositions would not be known in the sense that involves epistemic achievement, they would still be known in the more inclusive sense that Wittgenstein captures by 'comfortable certainty'. Wright actually explores the idea that these propositions lie outside the domain of cognitive or epistemic achievement because they lie outside the domain of truth-evaluability or are *not fact-stating*. But it seems that the structure of Wright's proposal as involving less inclusive and more inclusive notions of knowledge might be retained even if we do not go so far as to deny the fact-stating status of the propositions to which only the more inclusive notion ('comfortable certainty') applies.

¹³ In my own earlier work (e.g. Davies, 2003a), I have appealed to the idea of 'assumptions that we are epistemically entitled to make' (2003a, p. 28). Conversations with Tyler Burge helped me to see the importance of cases in which there are no assumptions involved, whether earned or unearned. His own use of the term 'entitlement' reflects this importance (1993, p. 458–9):

The distinction between justification and entitlement is this: Although both have positive force in rationally supporting a propositional attitude or cognitive practice, and in constituting an epistemic right to it, entitlements are epistemic

rights or warrants that need not be understood by or even accessible to the subject. We are entitled to rely, other things equal, on perception, memory, deductive and inductive reasoning, and on – I will claim – the word of others. The unsophisticated are entitled to rely on their perceptual beliefs. Philosophers may articulate these entitlements. But being entitled does not require being able to justify reliance on these resources, or even to conceive such a justification.’

We might say that this notion of entitlement more fully takes account of the Wittgensteinian idea that we are dealing here with ‘something animal’.

¹⁴ Pryor (forthcoming, ms p. 21) draws a distinction between ‘what you have *justification* for believing, and what you are *rationally committed to believing*, given the beliefs and doubts you in fact already have’. He then says (ibid., ms p. 22):

‘[S]uppose you suspect that your color vision might not be working properly. This doubt is in fact unjustified, but you have not realized that. In any case, I’m inclined to say that your doubt would make it irrational for you to form any beliefs about color, on the basis of your visual experiences. Even though your experiences might very well be giving you justification for those beliefs.’

¹⁵ In my view, I can regard a question as open *pro tem* without identifying in imagination with a doubter.

¹⁶ 4.1 McLaughlin’s objection and a reply

This is far from being my first attempt at a principle limiting the transmission of epistemic warrant. Here I shall consider a published objection to a recent version that is only slightly less general – though perhaps rather less clearly expressed – than the version now before us.

Limitation Principle (old version)

Epistemic warrant cannot be transmitted from the premises of a valid argument to its conclusion if, for one of the premises, the warrant for that premise counts as a warrant only against the background of certain assumptions and acceptance of (i) those assumptions together with (ii) the warrants for all the premises cannot be rationally combined with doubt about the truth of the conclusion.

Putting this principle into the terminology that I am now using, it is intended to say that warrant cannot be transmitted if, for some premise, P_i , someone who accepted the putatively warranting elements for all the premises and who doubted the conclusion, would be rationally committed to a belief that would R-defeat the warrant for P_i .

Brian McLaughlin objects (2003, pp. 84–5):

The main problem with [this limitation principle] is that it entails that warrant cannot be transmitted across any one-premise valid argument, when the premise is warranted. The reason is that since the premise is warranted and entails the conclusion, one cannot rationally combine doubt about the conclusion with the acceptance of the warrant for the premise. Since that premise is the only premise of the argument, it follows that one cannot rationally combine doubt about the conclusion of the argument with acceptance of the warrants for all the premises. And since one cannot do that, it follows that one cannot rationally combine acceptance of the background assumptions against which the warrant counts as warrant for the premise with the warrants for all of the premises.

The key to this objection is the claim that, for a one-premise valid argument, one cannot rationally combine doubt about the conclusion with the acceptance of the warrant for the premise. But there is a reply to this claim. We must distinguish between accepting the putatively warranting element for a premise (accepting that element in itself), and

accepting the premise as warranted. While one cannot combine doubt about the conclusion of a valid one-premise argument with acceptance of the premise as warranted, one can, in general, combine doubt about the conclusion with acceptance of the putatively warranting element for the premise.

However, even with that distinction made, McLaughlin can object that, for any one-premise valid argument whose premise is warranted, one cannot rationally combine doubt about the conclusion with acceptance of *both* the putatively warranting element *and* the assumption against the background of which that element constitutes a warrant for the premise. For acceptance of both the putatively warranting element and the background assumption rationally requires acceptance of the premise as warranted. This is a good objection to the old version of the principle. But it is not an objection to the present version because we now require that the route from doubt about the conclusion to R-defeat of the warrant for the premise should be direct, rather than going via doubt about the premise itself (see above, section 2.1).