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ARTICLE

# When Justifiers Transmit

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**Abstract**

What is it that is transmitted across known entailment from justified premises? My main aim in this paper is to clarify and defend the unpopular view that transmission of justification should be conceived as transmission of a justifier, and the search for cases in which transmission of justification fails should focus its energy on cases in which justifiers fail to be transmitted. The idea will take some time to develop, and along the way I will argue inter alia against Crispin Wright's well-known account that it is a subtle kind of epistemic circularity that prevents some deductive arguments from transmitting the justification of their premises to their conclusions.

**Keywords:** Transmission of justification; epistemic circularity; premise circularity; dogmatism; Crispin Wright; Fred Dretske

## 1. Transmission of justification

I carefully count that there are six chairs in the room, and I know that there being exactly six chairs in the room entails there being fewer than seven chairs in the room. It seems that the belief that there are fewer than seven chairs in the room becomes justified for me in virtue of my counting and acknowledging that necessarily, if there are exactly six chairs in the room, then there are fewer than seven chairs in the room. Thanks to my counting and my knowledge of the entailment from the "exactly-six" belief to the "fewer-than-seven" belief, I *thereby* acquire justification for the latter belief. When a belief that $q$ gains its justification from the justification that one has for another belief that $p$ in this way, the justification for $p$ transmits to $q$ across the known entailment from $p$ to $q$. Our epistemic practices, daily and scientific, routinely take it for granted that justification transmits across known entailment, and without that presumption, the sphere of our justified beliefs would be severely limited. Indeed, the very point of reasoning seems to be the transmission of justification, and if it were not for transmitting justification, reasoning would lose much of its attraction: if reasoning does not transmit justification, then why bother reasoning?[1]

[1]The literature I focus on in this paper tends to talk about transmission of warrant rather than transmission of justification. However, the distinction between warrant and justification in this context is mostly

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Despite its central significance for our overall epistemic economy, it is widely admitted that transmission of justification across known entailment is not exceptionless. An obvious way in which justification fails to transmit is when the reasoning involves explicit premise circularity, i.e., when the conclusion of the reasoning is one of the premises of that reasoning. Consider the deductively valid argument *p therefore p*, the most straightforwardly premise-circular argument there is. And suppose that *S* is justified to believe *p*, and *S* knows that *p* entails *p*. It seems clear that *S* cannot get any justification that she does not *already* have in virtue of the fact that *S* has justification for *p* and her recognition of the validity of *p therefore p*. There is no justification added to *S*'s justification for *p* resulting from her recognition of the inferential link from *p* to *p*: one cannot increase the justification one has for a proposition in virtue of her recognition that it is self-entailing. And there is no transmission of justification between two propositions if the proposition at the "receiving" end of the process does not gain any additional justification for the subject in virtue of her recognition of that link (even if the subject has justification for the proposition at the "giving" end). So, premise-circular arguments cannot transmit justification.

Justification transmits from one proposition to another only if the latter proposition acquires some justification that it does not already have as a result of that transmission; so, it is entirely predictable and thus uninteresting that premise circularity prevents transmission of justification. Are there *interesting* cases of transmission failure?[2] Are there, for instance, cases in which transmission fails despite the fact that the argument from *p* to *q* is not premise-circular, the subject has justification for *p* and recognizes that *p* entails *q*?

Crispin Wright has famously argued in a series of papers extending over a long period of time that the answer to these questions is "yes."[3] There are mainly two different diagnostics that one can identify in Wright's writings for a deductive argument's inability to transmit the justification for its premises to its conclusion. One stems from worries regarding epistemic circularity. As we shall see in Section 2, this approach has met considerable resistance, and rightly so in my opinion. Another diagnostic appeals to the idea of a direct justifier. In Section 3, I will present Wright's "counterfactual" account of direct justification and argue that it is defective. I will also extract in this section a significant idea about transmission from Wright's directness considerations, which I dub OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. In Section 4, I will take a closer look at OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION and argue that despite the fact that it has either received little attention or been set aside as inadequate rather prematurely, OBJECT OF

terminological and can be safely ignored. As Moretti and Piazza (2023) note, "Although many of the epistemologists taking part in the debate on epistemic transmission and transmission failure speak of transmission of *warrant*, rather than *justification*, almost all of them use the term "warrant" to refer to some kind of epistemic justification." Furthermore, what concerns me in this paper is the transmission of *propositional* justification rather than that of doxastic justification. A subject has propositional justification to believe a proposition if she has good grounds (or adequate evidence) to believe it, even if she does not actually believe it. And a subject has doxastic justification in believing a proposition if she has good grounds to believe it and she believes it on the basis of those good grounds.

[2]Transmission failure is interesting in the sense used here only if it is a self-standing phenomenon – one that is not reducible, for instance, to an underlying failure of *closure*. See below for the distinction between transmission failure and closure failure.

[3]See, for instance, (2002), (2003), (2004), (2007), and (2012). Another important contributor to the literature on the transmission of justification is Martin Davies, whose works *inter alia* include those from 1998, 2000, 2003, and 2004.

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TRANSMISSION provides the fundamental tenet for an adequate understanding of the transmission of justification. The main claim I wish to defend is that transmission of justification should be conceived as transmission of a *justifier,* and the search for cases in which transmission of justification fails should focus its energy on cases in which justifiers fail to be transmitted.

## 2. Epistemic circularity

According to Wright, there are deductively valid arguments that exhibit subtler kinds of objectionable epistemic circularity other than premise circularity that prevent them from transmitting the justification of their premises to their conclusions. The "key thought" on which his discussion of transmission failure is based is that warrant fails to transmit in those cases in which "only someone who took themselves to be rationally persuaded of the conclusion could rationally receive whatever grounds purportedly warranted its premises as doing just that" (Wright 2002: 331). Wright's "information-dependence template" is designed to substantiate this very thought. A piece of evidence, *e*, provides information-dependent justification to *S* for *p* if whether *e* justifies *p* for *S* depends on whether *S* has independent justification for a different proposition *q*. And, if *e* is information-dependent in this way, Wright argues, the justification it provides to *p* is not transmissible to *q*, even if (the subject knows that) *p* entails *q*. Wright asks us to consider the following argument:

*Soccer*
S1. John has kicked the ball between the white posts.
S2. John has scored a goal.
Therefore,
S3. A game of soccer is taking place.

In *Soccer*, S1 is (defeasible) evidence for S2, and S2 entails S3 (and we assume that the subject knows that S2 entails S3). However, Wright holds that S1 can be evidence for S2 only on the condition that the subject has independent reason for thinking that S3 is true. This point can be supported, Wright holds, by the consideration that if the subject were, for instance, in the vicinity of a film studio and knew that it is just as likely that what she witnesses is staged for the camera as that it is an event in a genuine game, S1 would provide "*no* warrant any longer for S2" (2002:335). What the subject needs, in order to restore its supporting power, is "some *independent* corroboration" (2002: 335) of the conclusion. Suppose that she gets that independent support from the testimony of a bystander. In that case, S1 becomes evidence for S2. However, it is exactly because S1 becomes evidence for S2 in virtue of the fact that the subject has independent evidence for S3, the subject does not gain any additional support for S3 in virtue of deriving it from S2. The rationality of the belief that S2 depends on the fact that a belief in S3 is independently rational for the subject, in which case Wright claims the former cannot add to the rationality of the latter via a deductive link.[4]

[4]The information-dependence template is not the only template Wright offers in his diagnosis of transmission failure. Another template he proposes is "the disjunctive template," which is presented as a diagnostic tool for identifying transmission failure in arguments whose premises receive non-inferential warrant. I will not address the disjunctive template here, as I think that the moral of this section also applies to that template. This is because these two templates, as Wright himself puts it, are "unified at a deeper level"

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Furthermore, Wright argues that Moore's infamous "Proof of an External World" suffers from the same circularity problem that afflicts *Soccer*. Moore's argument goes as follows:

*Moore*
M1. My experience is in all respects as of a hand held up in front of my face.
M2. Here is a hand.
Therefore,
M3. There is a material world.

Wright maintains that "M2 stands to M3 as, e.g., S2 stands to S3" (2002: 337). The idea is that the evidential force for the subject of M1 with respect to M2 is conditional on whether the subject has independent reason to think that M3 is true. This point can be supported, Wright holds, by the consideration that if the subject had evidence, for instance, that there is no material world whose characteristics are mostly, at least in large, disclosed in routine sense experience, then M1 would afford no justification for M2. And, it is exactly because M1 can become evidence for M2 in virtue of the fact that she has independent evidence for M3, the subject does not gain any additional support for M3 in virtue of deriving it from M2.

It is important to note that, according to Wright, whereas justification fails to be transmitted in *Soccer* and *Moore*, his diagnosis of these cases as exhibiting a subtle kind of epistemic circularity renders them to be compatible with the idea that justification is *closed* under known entailment. According to justification closure, a given subject can only be justified to believe that $p$, which she knows entails $q$, if she is justified to believe that $q$: having justification for the conclusion of an argument that she knows to be valid is necessary for having justification for the premise of that argument. In *Soccer* and *Moore*, however, according to Wright's diagnosis, the subject can have justification for the premises only if she already has justification for the conclusion; so, they are automatically *not* cases in which the subject has justification for the premises without having justification for the conclusion – hence, justification closure is not violated. And *that very same idea,* which explains why justification closure is not violated in these cases, also explains why transmission fails in these cases: it is because some justification for M3, for instance, must already come from *somewhere else* in order for her to have justification for M2, so our subject cannot *acquire* justification for M3 in virtue of having justification for M2 and knowing that M2 entails M3.

There are two important questions regarding Wright's thesis that it suffices for failure of justification *transmission* across a valid argument from $p$, justified by e, to $q$ if the justification of $p$ by $e$ is conditional on the fact that one has independent evidence for $q$. One is whether Wright has successfully identified a sufficient condition for transmission failure. The other is whether, assuming that the answer to the former question is "yes," Wright is right in claiming that philosophically interesting arguments such as *Moore*

(2002: 345), where epistemic circularity is the central worry that drives the overall approach. Wright writes, "Very simply, a warrant, w, for a belief, A, cannot transmit to any of its consequences, B, if – in context – one would need an entitlement (earned or standing) to B in order to defend the claim that the conditions for the acquiring of w were satisfied. That is the common pattern of all our examples" (2002 345). Furthermore, the "revised template" that Wright offers in (2012) is an attempt to "subsume [the information-dependence and disjunctive templates] under a single account" (466) and, as such, will not be addressed here for similar reasons.

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instantiates the structure articulated by the putatively sufficient condition. A negative answer to each question has its own formidable proponents. Starting with the latter question, Pryor (2004) agrees with Wright that if independent evidence for the conclusion of an argument is required for the premises of that argument to be justified, then that argument is non-transmissive of justification. However, Pryor holds that the evidential (or justificatory) structure of *Moore* is not problematically (or "viciously") circular in the way Wright envisages it to be since the (prima facie) support M1 provides to M2 is not conditional on the fact that M3 (or any other proposition) is independently justified, a thesis that Pryor famously calls *dogmatism*. On Pryor's version of dogmatism, M1 provides justification for M2 insofar as the subject *lacks* justification to believe that M3 is false and *not*, contra Wright, insofar as she *has* (independent) justification to believe that M3 is true. There is, on this view, still a type of epistemic circularity *Moore* instantiates between M2 and M3: evidence against M3 would undermine the support M1 provides to M2. However, this kind of circularity is "epistemologically respectable" (Pryor 2004: 359) and thus does not prevent transmission of justification.

If there is really nothing to be ashamed of about the *justificatory* structure of *Moore*, as Pryor claims, then the dogmatist owes us an account of why it appears to be defective. Why does *Moore* "sound funny"? How are we to explain "our squeamishness" (Pryor 2004: 351) about it? A good part of the answer to these questions lies, according to Pryor, in the recognition that arguments are "dialectical creatures," which might be offered to "different audiences" who "come to the table with different commitments and doubts" (369). The dialectical effectiveness of arguments is something that they have relative to audiences, while their justificatory legitimacy is not: a given argument might be dialectically effective for one particular audience but not for another, whereas the epistemic standing of its structure is, unsurprisingly, to be evaluated in terms of the features of its structure, which obtain independently of the commitments of the audience to whom the argument happens to be presented. Pryor's idea is that *Moore* is dialectically ineffective specifically against the skeptic, who already has doubts, justified or not, about our knowledge of the external world. However, the fact that *Moore* is "persuasively crippled" (362) in that regard (that it is not capable of rationally persuading the skeptic) is compatible with the claim that it is "perfectly legitimate" (369) in terms of its justificatory structure. The failure of *Moore* is dialectical, not epistemic – or so Pryor argues.

Let me now move on to the former question: has Wright successfully identified a sufficient condition for transmission failure? Some philosophers argue that contrary to Wright, the fact that having justification to believe the conclusion of a given argument is among the conditions that make one have the justification one has for its premises need not generate transmission failure. Why should an inference fail to transmit justification if one's justification for believing a premise does not include the justification for believing the conclusion, but the latter is merely "an enabling condition" (Silins 2005: 77) for the former to obtain? It is of course true that if an independent justification for the conclusion is required for the premises to have justification at all, then the argument cannot provide one's original, first-time justification for the conclusion. However, why think that it cannot provide *additional* (perhaps second-time or third-time) justification for the conclusion? In other words, why think that an argument transmits justification only if it can provide a first-time justification for its conclusion?[5]

[5]Cf. Alspector-Kelly (2015): "The fact that I already know, and so possess a warrant for, a proposition does not prevent my acquiring a second warrant for that proposition by inference. So it doesn't, in itself, imply that I cannot acquire a second warrant by an inference to that proposition, where the premise's

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Somewhat ironically, in one of his own later discussions of the possibility that transmission might be apt for enhancing justification but not for creating first-time justification, Wright (2012) presents a compelling case that substantiates the worry at hand.[6] Consider the following argument:

*Flock*
F1. I have counted the sheep as best I could and got the result, 28.
F2. There are 28 sheep in the pen.
Therefore,
F3. There are fewer than 30 sheep in the pen.

Suppose that the background against which we consider *Flock* is as follows:

> I am trying to count a rather mobile, smallish flock of sheep in a pen. And suppose I am told that there are fewer than thirty and, on counting as carefully as I can, get the result twenty-eight. I might reasonably take that result as corroborating what I have been told. But I might also reasonably think that, had I lacked any independent information about the number of flock, I could not in the circumstances have trusted in the result of the count sufficiently to conclude that their number was fewer than thirty. (2012: 83)

Under these circumstances, Wright suggests, if F3 were not independently justified for me (by testimony), then I would not be justified in believing F2 on the basis of F1. Despite that, however, Wright acknowledges that transmission might succeed here: I might *receive* justification, not first-time but second-time, for F3 by inferring it from F2, whose justification on the basis of F1 is in turn conditional on the fact F3 is independently justified. However, if Wright is right that *Flock* is transmissive of justification, then the information-dependence template he offers is not a correct diagnostic for transmission failure.

It is fair to say that Wright's case for the claim that instantiating the information-dependence template is responsible for the failure of transmission of justification in such arguments as *Soccer* and *Moore* has proved to be far from being decisive (arguably, by Wright's own admission). So far as I can see, there are two main sources for resistance against Wright's proposal under consideration, from which the replies that I have just presented above appear to stem. One is that an attempt like Wright's to base a claim of transmission failure upon a charge of epistemic circularity is *bound* to meet resistance, given the extremely problematic and thus rather poorly understood nature of epistemic circularity. It is a well-advised procedure at this point to remind ourselves of Robinson's contention that the charge of epistemic circularity is "nearly always a muddle, or improper, or both" (1971: 117). If all epistemic circularity is bad (or "vicious" or "malignant" or "illegitimate") in that arguments having that feature are structurally incapable of transmitting justification, then having identified a novel *type* of epistemic circularity instantiated by such arguments as *Soccer* and *Moore*, Wright is entitled to conclude that they are non-transmissive of justification. However, it is far from clear that

warrant required prior warrant for that same proposition" (581). See also Tucker (2010): "One might assume, as Wright (2002: 335) seems to, that a deduction transmits justification only if it can provide an original, or first-time, warrant fot its conclusion . . . .[This] assumption is mistaken" (513).

[6]This point is also made by Alspector-Kelly (2015).

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all epistemic circularity is bad. Indeed, someone who wishes to defend that there are *some* benign (or legitimate) types of epistemic circularity will find herself in excellent company.[7] This is, of course, not to say that Wright's strategy under consideration fails but only that the move from identifying a type of epistemic circularity to claiming that arguments instantiating that type of circularity cannot transmit justification is not straightforward. White's (2006) following remarks succinctly capture the point I am driving at:

> Complaints of circularity must be handled with care. There are plenty of legitimate [and yet circular] lines of reasoning . . . I can read the optometrist's report from my eye exam and learn that my eye-sight is good. Doing well in a memory game can suggest that I have a good memory, even though I can't help but use my memory to evaluate my performance. To see whether the kind of circularity that dogmatism appears to support is illegitimate, we really need an account of just what kinds are circularity are vicious and why. (530)

The difficulty here is that we currently lack an adequate account of how the distinction between malignant and benign epistemic circularity, assuming that there is such a distinction, is to be understood. In fact, Talbott (2020) might well be correct in maintaining that "there is no adequate principle in the literature for distinguishing malignant from benign epistemic circularity" (2283). The upshot is that if the goal is to propose a (relatively uncontentious) sufficient condition for (and to come up with some clear cases of) failure of justification transmission, it is not an effective strategy, dialectically speaking, to search for it in the chaotic realm of epistemic circularity.

The second, related source of resistance to Wright's current proposal stems from the observation that an investigation into the nature of epistemic circularity cannot proceed without an accompanying account of the structure of reasons (that is, an account of what supports what, of the role the background information plays in the obtaining of support relations among propositions, of whether support relations are mutual or unidirectional and bottom out at a level on which the entire structure of those relations rest, and so on). And Wright explicitly bases the information-dependence template upon a specific and controversial conception of this structure, which is "the holism of empirical confirmation famously emphasized by Quine in the last two sections of 'Two Dogmas'" (2002: 335). This preference of Wright's excludes, without much argument, alternative conceptions of the structure of reasons, leaving one wondering whether the phenomenon of transmission failure is less of a *general* epistemological worry and more of a problem that emerges only on some conceptions of that structure. It is undoubtedly an achievement to show that transmission failure occurs on a holistic conception of reasons, but a proponent of the "atomistic" conception (such as Pryor's dogmatism and other foundationalist accounts like *phenomenal conservatism*[8]) might simply remain unmoved by this observation (and perhaps even claim, "This is all the more reason to endorse atomism!"). So, if the goal is to treat transmission failure as a phenomenon that epistemological theories in general should give an account of, as I take (and think Wright takes) it to be, then it is not advisable to tie its proposed condition too closely to

[7]The literature on epistemic circularity is vast. A representative sample of philosophical works defending that some forms of epistemic circularity are benign include Alston (1986), Sosa (2009), Bergmann (2004), Cling (2002), Van Cleve (2003), Steup (2013), Alexander (2011), Barnett (2014), and Kornblith (2009).

[8]For a defense of phenomenal conservatism, see, for instance, Huemer (2006).

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one particular theory among many. I conclude that it is preferable to search for a sufficiency condition for transmission failure somewhere else.

## 3. Directness

The second mechanism that Wright identifies as a source of transmission failure appeals to considerations of *directness* (or *simultaneity*) of evidential support. Suppose that in regard to *Soccer*, we already have the collateral information that scenes of the sort witnessed reliably indicate that real soccer matches (not, for instance, mere film takes) are going on. Against this background, Wright maintains S1 provides evidence for S3 as "directly" (2002: 334) as it does for S2 and thus "simultaneously" (335) with its doing so for S2. And if this is so, then it seems to follow that "it is not because S1 is a warrant for S2 that it is a warrant for S3" (335). And if this is so, then Wright concludes, "there is, arguably, a failure of transmission in this case" (335).

There are two significant ideas Wright's directness considerations advance. One concerns the *object* of transmission, the thing that is supposed to be *transmitted* across known entailments. Wright assumes that it is S1's justifying power for S3 that is supposed to be transmitted across the entailment from S2 to S3: what would be transmitted across the link between S2 and S3, if this were a successful transmission, is S1's justifying power. In *Soccer*, a successful transmission of justification from S2 to S3 would *turn* S1 for the subject into a justifier of S3; however, this is not so, Wright argues, because S1 is *already* a justifier for the subject for S3, a justifier for S3 as directly as it is for her for S2. So, the underlying idea is that justification fails to transmit from S2 to S3 *because* the justifier of S2 – namely, S1 – fails to be transmitted from S2 to S3 (S1 is, as it were, already there with S3, and thus there is no work left to be done for the purposes of transmission). If only S1 were to *become* a warrant (or justifier) for the subject for S3 because S1 is a warrant for S2 (and the subject knows that S2 entails S3), then we would, by Wright's lights, have a case of genuine transmission. Since, however, S1 does not become a justifier for S3 in virtue of its being a justifier for S2 and the entailment between S2 and S3 (it is already a justifier for S3), transmission fails. I think this idea of Wright's (which, as we shall see, however, does not originate with Wright) – which I call OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION – is fundamentally right, and it will play a central role in my argument in the next section.

> OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION: In successful cases of justification transmission across known entailment from $p$, justified by $e$, to $q$, what is being transmitted is $e$ (that is, in successful cases of justification transmission across known entailment from $p$, justified by $e$, to $q$, $e$ becomes a justifier for the subject for $q$).

The other idea is that it is because, under the circumstances described, S1 is a direct justifier for the subject for S3, avoiding the circuitous route via S2, that deduction from S2 to S3 fails to transmit justification. I agree with Wright that directness is a source of transmission failure; so, *if* S1 is a direct justifier for the subject for S3, then it straightforwardly follows that there is no transmission of justification from S2 to S3 across the known entailment from the former to the latter.[9] If S1 is *already* a justifier for

[9]Moretti and Piazza (2013) characterize this directness condition of Wright's for transmission failure as being "less problematic but more trivial from" (2496) the kind of epistemic circularity condition he proposes, which I addressed in the previous section.

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our subject for S3, as it should be if S1 is a direct justifier for her for S3, then S3 cannot acquire any additional justification in virtue of the fact that she knows that it is entailed by S2 that is also supported by S1. The fact that a given subject is capable of marshalling *more* deductive steps, thanks to her greater knowledge of entailments, than another subject to arrive at the same conclusion on the basis of the same premises, justified to the same degree for both, does *not* make that conclusion more justified for the former than the latter.

This gives one main way in which an OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION might fail to be satisfied:

> FAILURE 1: If a given piece of evidence *e* is a *direct* justifier for the subject for *q*, then irrespective of whether a given subject knows that *p* (justified by *e*) entails *q*, justification fails to be transmitted for her from *p* to *q*.

An important question is this: is it really the case that S1 is a direct justifier for a subject for S3? In order to answer this question, we need to take a closer look at Wright's own account of what it is for a piece of evidence to be a direct justifier for a proposition for a certain subject. The account of direct justifier Wright offers can be properly called "counterfactual," for it assesses whether a piece of evidence is a direct justifier for a certain proposition on the basis of what would happen – or what we would say – if certain conditions were to obtain. To see this, consider the reason Wright gives for thinking that in *Soccer*, S1 is a direct justifier for S3:

> [It is not the case that] the warrant we have for S3 should be regarded as *transmitted* via the inference from S2. On the contrary: we would have *that* warrant for S3, on the basis of the very same evidence, even if we had also noticed the referee's assistant's flag raised to mark an infringement . . . In that case we'd have what is essentially the *same* warrant for S3 without, yet at least, having a warrant for S2 at all. So we should deny that there is genuine transmission of warrant from S2 to S3 even in the scenario where the official's flag remains down. (334–335, emphases original)

The idea is that since we would have S1, by itself, as a justifier for S3 under the circumstances in which the referee's flag were "raised," we should conclude that even under the (actual) circumstances in which the referee's flag "remains down," S1, by itself, is a direct justifier for S3. In other words, since there would be no transmission of justification via the inference from S2 if the referee's flag were raised (simply because S2 would not be justified under those circumstances), there is no transmission of justification via that inference when, as in the actual case, the referee's flag remains down.

The general principle that Wright relies on here appears to be this:

> COUNTERFACTUAL: Where X and Y actually obtain, if X would obtain even if Y did not obtain, then it is not in virtue of Y that X actually obtains.

Let us say that X counterfactually depends on Y just in case if Y did not obtain, X would not obtain. According to COUNTERFACTUAL, the counterfactual dependence of X on Y is necessary for it to be the case that X obtains in virtue of Y. Wright takes it for granted that counterfactual dependence of S3's justification on S2's justification is

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necessary for it to be the case that S3 is justified (at least in part) in virtue of the fact that S2 is justified. Wright's reasoning, which fits COUNTERFACTUAL, then goes like this: given that S3 would be justified (by S1) if S2 were not justified, then it is not (and not even at least in part) in virtue of the fact that S2 is (actually) justified that S3 is actually justified.

However, COUNTERFACTUAL is false: from the fact that X would obtain even if Y did not obtain, we cannot derive the conclusion that it is not in virtue of Y that X actually obtains. That is, the counterfactual dependence of X on Y is not necessary for it to be the case that X obtains in virtue of Y. My wife bought chocolate candies for me, so I have chocolate candies in virtue of the fact that she bought me some. However, even if she did not buy any chocolate candies for me, I would still have some chocolate candies – I would buy them for myself! I already had formed a resolute intention to buy chocolate candies, and if I were not stopped on my way to the market by my wife holding candies, I would buy them. So, contra COUNTERFACTUAL, the following conjunction appears to be true: I actually have chocolate candies in virtue of the fact that my wife bought me some, despite the fact that I would still have them if she did not buy me some.

The problem with COUNTERFACTUAL is a version of the preemption problem that afflicts counterfactual analyses of causation. On a (reductionist) counterfactual analysis of causation, causation can be explained, without remainder, in terms of counterfactual dependence: counterfactual dependence is both necessary and sufficient for causation. The preemption problem concerns the necessity claim. Suppose that Shooter 2 had fired a little later than Shooter 1 and that the dictator was already dead by the time Shooter 2's bullet arrived. However, if Shooter 1 had not fired, Shooter 2's bullet would have killed the dictator. In this case, it is clear that it is Shooter 1's firing that caused the death of the dictator, despite the fact that the death of the dictator does *not* counterfactually depend on Shooter 1's firing (it is *not* true that if Shooter 1 had not fired, the dictator would not have died since, in that case, Shooter 2's bullet would have killed him). Shooter 1's firing preempts Shooter 2's firing. It is widely acknowledged that preemption cases such as this one "*do not* play nicely with" (Broadbent 2026) and proved to be "the biggest bugbear for" (Menzies and Beebee, 2024) counterfactual analyses of causation. And, as the chocolate candies case above is intended to show, preemption is as deadly a problem with COUNTERFACTUAL (which is intended to serve a necessary condition for the *in-virtue-of* relation rather than for causation) as it is with counterfactual analyses of *causation*.

Given that there are good reasons to think that COUNTERFACTUAL is false, then, from the fact that S3 would be justified even if S2 were not justified, we cannot conclude, contra Wright, that it is not in virtue of the fact that S2 is justified that S3 is actually justified. That is to say, the evidential structure that obtains among S1-S2-S3 when the background information is as it actually is (that is, when the referee's flag remains down) need not be the same as the evidential structure that obtains among them if the background information were different (that is, when the referee's flag were raised): it might be because S1 is evidence for S2 that S3 is justified when the referee's flag remains down, despite the fact that S3 would still be justified when the referee's flag were raised. I conclude that while Wright is right that directness generates transmission failure, his account of the conditions for directness rests on a mistaken principle like COUNTERFACTUAL and thus is defective. Since, without an adequate account of directness, we cannot correctly identify arguments that are non-transmissive due to directness, Wright's claim that arguments such as *Soccer* (when the background information is fixed in a certain way) suffer from transmission failure lacks persuasiveness.

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I would like to conclude this section by emphasizing three points that have emerged. Firstly, a significant idea in Wright's discussion of directness is OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION, and a central way in which justification might fail to be transmitted across known deduction is due to a piece of evidence being a direct justifier for the subject for the conclusion of the argument. Secondly, Wright's counterfactual account of direct justifier (for a given subject) is defective. Thirdly, we need (but currently lack) an adequate account of direct justifier.

## 4. Transmission of justifiers

In the preceding section, I have extracted a significant idea from Wright's discussion of directness that I have dubbed OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION, which goes, let's remember, as follows:

> OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION: In successful cases of justification transmission across known entailment from *p*, justified by *e*, to *q*, what is being transmitted is *e* (that is, in successful cases of justification transmission across known entailment from *p*, justified by *e*, to *q*, *e* becomes a justifier for the subject for *q*).

There are some passages in Wright's writings that clearly indicate that he endorses OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. Consider, for instance, what Wright says with respect to Dretske's famous Zebra case:

> You go to the zoo, see several zebras in a pen, and opine that those animals are zebras. Well, you know what zebras look like, and these animals look just like that. Surely you are fully warranted in your belief. But if the animals are zebras, then it follows that they are not mules . . . disguised as zebras. Does your warrant transmit to the latter claim? There is a strong intuition that it does not. Did you examine the animals closely enough to detect such a fraud? Almost certainly not. The grounds you have for "Those animals are zebras" – essentially, the look of the beasts – have no bearing on this possibility. (2002: 342)

In this passage, Wright says that the justification that one has for "Those animals are zebras" does not transmit to "They are not mules disguised as zebras" (despite the fact that the former is justified and the subject knows that the former entails the latter) because the justifier of the former (that is, "the look of the beasts") is not a justifier for the latter (or "have no bearing on this possibility"). In the Zebra case, the OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is not fulfilled because the look of the beasts does not become a justifier *for the subject* for the proposition "they are not mules disguised as zebras" (which is in turn simply because that look is *not a justifier simpliciter* for that proposition). And it is because the OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is not fulfilled, Wright effectively argues, that there is failure of justification transmission in this case.

Here we have another way (that is, distinct from FAILURE 1, observed in the previous section) in which OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION might fail to be satisfied:

> FAILURE 2: If a piece of evidence *e* is not a justifier *simpliciter* for *q*, then irrespective of whether a given subject knows that *p* (justified by *e*) entails *q*, then justification fails to be transmitted from *p* to *q*.

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If OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true, then justification fails to be transmitted from *p*, justified by *e*, to *q*, across known entailment, unless *e* is a justifier *simpliciter* for *q*. This is what happens in the Zebra case according to Wright: the look of the beasts is not a justifier *simpliciter* for the "not-disguised-mules" proposition, despite the fact that it is a justifier *simpliciter* for the "zebras" proposition, which the subject knows entails the not-disguised-mules proposition; and this is why transmission fails in this case.

The gist of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is that transmission of justification is transmission of a *justifier*: the justifier of a given proposition is transmitted to what it knowingly entails as a justifier.[10] When transmission succeeds, what is a justifier for a proposition *becomes* a justifier for the subject for what the subject knows that proposition entails. Before proceeding further, I would like to make two points concerning this notion of "becoming" and how it is related to the notion of "being a justifier for a subject." Firstly, only those things that are not *already* F can *become* F by going through a certain process. So, only those things that are not already justifiers for a subject for a certain proposition can become justifiers for her for that proposition across known entailment. This is the point, as we have seen in the previous section, on which directness considerations and FAILURE 1 rest.

Secondly, the fact that a piece of evidence is a justifier *simpliciter* for a proposition obtains irrespective of the contingencies that might befall us as mere mortals, irrespective in particular of whether a given subject comes to know whether a given proposition entails another. So, there is no such thing as a given piece of evidence *becoming* a justifier *simpliciter* for a proposition in virtue of the fact that the subject comes to know that a proposition entails another. When transmission succeeds, what happens is that what is a justifier *simpliciter* for a proposition becomes a justifier *for the subject* for that proposition: the justificatory relations that obtain among pieces of evidence remain the same as they have always been; what changes through transmission of justification is that what has not been a justifier *for the subject* for a proposition becomes a justifier *for her* for that proposition (more on this below). And, accordingly, if a given piece of evidence is not a justifier *simpliciter* for a proposition, then it cannot become a justifier for the subject in virtue of the subject's knowledge that that proposition is entailed by a proposition for which that evidence is a justifier. And this is the point captured by FAILURE 2.

OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is an old idea, and various defenses of some of its versions can be traced back at least to Dretske's (1969, 1970) attack on closure of justification (and also, notably, to Thalberg's (1969, 1974) defense of the justified true belief analysis of knowledge against Gettier's counterexamples). Reflecting "nearly half a century later" (2014: 29) on the relevant issues his earlier works addressed, Dretske notes that "a more revealing way" of making his main point has emerged as a result of work by Wright and Davies. Dretske writes:

> The idea is that some reasons for believing P do not transmit to things, Q, known to be implied by P. In normal circumstances – a wine tasting party, say – one's reasons for thinking there is wine left in the bottle do not *transmit* to, they are not reasons for believing, what you know to be implied by this – that the liquid in the bottle is not merely colored water. Having already tasted it, you may know that it is wine and not just colored water, but the point is that your reasons for believing the one (visual) are not reasons for believing the other (gustatory). Colored water in the

[10]When *p* "knowingly entails" *q*, the subject knows that *p* entails *q*.

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> bottle would look exactly the same as the wine. The reasons for believing what you say you perceive (there is wine left in the bottle) are not *transmitted* to this known consequence (that it is not merely colored water) of what you perceive. (2014: 19)

It is clear that Dretske here subscribes to OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. It is, Dretske holds, because reasons (or evidence) for believing that what is in the bottle is wine are not reasons (or evidence) that what is in the bottle is not merely colored water, so justification fails to transmit from the former proposition to the latter. Dretske simply takes it for granted that transmission of justification *is* transmission of the justifier.

It is generally acknowledged that if OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true, then there are more or less intuitively clear cases such as Dretske's Zebra and Wine cases in which transmission of justification seems to fail. Here are two representative passages, the former about the Zebra case and the latter about the Wine case:

> If the creature in the pen fails to produce a visual experience as of a zebra, it follows that the creature is not a cleverly disguised mule. It would instead be an *ineptly* disguised mule or something else altogether. As a consequence, it seems that the Zebra warrant [that is, the visual experience as of an animal that looks like a zebra] actually does bear on the possibility that the creature is a cleverly disguised mule – by raising the probability that the Zebra conclusion [that is, that the animal is not a cleverly disguised mule] is false. But then the Zebra warrant is presumably not even evidence for the Zebra conclusion. (Silins 2005: 85)

> Transmission is sometimes characterized as requiring that the warrant for the premise is itself carried through the inference to the conclusion, so that the very same warrant for the premise becomes a warrant for the conclusion. Dretske, for example, so characterizes transmission . . . Dretske argues that a reason for believing P does not necessarily transmit through the inference so as to constitute a reason for believing Q: I might see that there is wine in the bottle without seeing that there isn't colored water in the bottle . . . Failure of transmission in Dretske's sense is unsurprising. (Alspector-Kelly 2015: 573)

The important question is, then, whether the OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION *is* true. In the next subsection, I argue that there are good reasons to think that the answer is yes.

### *4.1. Why object of transmission is true*

Let me start with noting that a literal and pre-theoretical understanding of the very expression "transmission of justification" points towards OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. As Silins (2005) maintains, "After all, when we speak of transmission of a message from one person to another, we mean that the same message has been transmitted from one person to another" (87).[11] Or, when we colloquially speak of transmission of "information by the USB cable from A to B" (Tucker 2010: 501), we mean the same information has been transmitted by the USB cable from A to B. And if the transmission of a message (or information) from one person to another is the model by which we understand transmission of justification, then it is natural to take the

[11]Note that Silins finds this understanding of transmission "too literal" (2005: 87) and argues that it should not be the model by which we understand transmission of *justification*. More on this below.

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justifier as "the message" (or "the information") that is transmitted through known entailment from one proposition to another.

Furthermore, OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION has undeniable intuitive appeal and even "obviousness" (as the fact that a highest-caliber philosopher like Dretske simply *takes it for granted* attests). Consider the following scenario. Holmes has scrupulously collected pieces of evidence E regarding a famous murder, which many officers consider to be an unsolvable case. Having realized that E justifies $P_1$, Holmes recognizes, thanks to his exceptional logical ingenuity, a long and sophisticated path of entailments starting with $P_1$, moving to $P_2$, then moving to $P_3, \ldots$, ending with C, which is that the butler is guilty. What Holmes comes to appreciate as a result of his recognition of these entailments is that *his initial evidence E justifies that the butler is guilty*. That is, what is being transmitted across known entailments is the justifying power of E: Holmes's sequential recognition of the entailments turns E for him into a justifier of $P_2$ in the first instance, and then into a justifier of $P_3$ in the second instance, and so on, up until into a justifier of C, that the butler is guilty. Having solved the case as a result of coming to appreciate these entailments, Holmes can truthfully proclaim in court "Your honor! The butler is guilty *because* – the because of justification – E!" (and then move on to explaining the deductive connections with his characteristic self-proud). And, if this is so, then in this case where justification presumably transmits, the justifier transmits.

It is important here to emphasize the role *knowledge* of entailments is supposed to play in the transmission of justification. Consider a logically omniscient being that has perfect knowledge of the entailment relations among all propositions. Any given evidence for a certain proposition is evidence *for that being* for whatever that proposition entails, thanks to her knowledge of entailment relations. Going back once again to Holmes's murder case, E is evidence for such a being for C, thanks to her knowledge of entailment relations that hold among $P_1$, $P_2 \ldots$, and C. So, if she bases a belief that C on E, then that belief is justified for her in virtue of her logical omniscience. Her knowledge of entailment relations turns pieces of evidence for a proposition into pieces of evidence for what that proposition entails. We are evidently not logically omniscient, but the role knowledge of entailments is supposed to play for us is the same as the role that knowledge plays for the logically omniscient being. If Watson, Holmes's less-than-brilliant assistant, for instance, were to base his belief that C on E, without recognizing the logical connections among $P_1$, $P_2 \ldots$, and C, then that belief of his would not be justified for him. That is to say, E is intuitively not a justifier *for Watson* for C if he does not know how to "traverse" the logical path from $P_1$ to C. Watson's subsequent acquisition of knowledge of entailments as a result of Holmes's tutoring changes the evidential power of E for Watson: E becomes a justifier for him for C. So, the role of knowledge of entailments is to turn justifiers for propositions into justifiers for their deductive consequences. And, if this is so, then it follows that the OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true: if the role of knowledge of entailments is to make a novel connection for a subject between a proposition and preexisting evidence, then in successful cases of justification transmission from $p$, justified by $e$, to $q$ (where the subject knows that $p$ entails $q$), $e$ becomes a justifier for the subject for $q$.

### 4.2. Reply to the Klein-Silins objection

Despite its intuitive and theoretical appeal, OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION has been rejected by some philosophers. The attack against OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION finds its first effective expression in the work of Klein (1995). In his discussion of the Zebra

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case, Klein maintains that Dretske "has restricted the search for a source of the justification for the entailed proposition [namely, *those animals are not mules disguised as zebras*] in such a way that it precludes finding the entailing proposition – namely, *the animals in the pen are zebras* – as that source" (221). Klein's suggestion is that once the entailing proposition *p* is justified by a piece of evidence *e*, *p* itself becomes a justifier ("a source of justification") for what it entails, *q*, and that *this is so whether or not e is a justifier for q*. So, if Klein is right, then even if the look of the beasts is not a justifier for the entailed not-disguised-mules proposition, as Dretske holds, that does not mean that the sources of justification for that proposition are thereby exhausted – the entailing zebras proposition, which is itself justified by the look of the beasts, might itself be that very source. And, if this is so, then since there is justification transmitted to the entailed proposition without it being the case that the justifier of the entailing proposition becomes a justifier for the entailed proposition, OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is false.

However, Klein is mistaken to think that a proponent of an OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION, such as Dretske is committed to denying that an entailing proposition *p*, which is justified by *e*, cannot be a source of justification for the entailed proposition *q*. What a proponent of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION as such is committed to denying is that an entailing proposition *p*, which is justified by *e*, can be a source of justification for the entailed proposition *q even if e does not justify q*. Clearly a proponent of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION does not need to deny that the proposition that the pen isn't empty, for instance, is justified by the proposition that there are zebras in the pen, which is in turn justified by the look of the beasts – that the proposition that there are zebras in the pen, justified by the look of the beasts, is a source of justification for the proposition that the pen isn't empty. What a proponent of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is committed to denying is that the proposition that there are zebras in the pen, justified by the look of the beasts, can be a source of justification for the proposition that the pen isn't empty even if the look of the beasts is not a source of justification for the proposition that the pen isn't empty.

Consider the following analogy. Neil is extremely knowledgeable about the universe, and he regularly shares pieces of this information with his wife Alice. Alice's friend Mary is highly curious about the universe but does not have a direct contact with Neil, and she acquires new pieces of information from Alice whenever the two meet. Now, it is true that Alice is a source of information for Mary: Mary is the one from whom Alice gets new information. However, it is also true that Neil is a source of information for Mary: he is also, in a more fundamental way, the one from whom she gets new information. And, importantly, under these circumstances, Alice cannot be a source of information for Mary unless Neil is a source of information for Mary. A proponent of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION holds that what goes for the sources of information goes also for the sources of justification.

Silins (2005), "drawing on the work of Peter Klein" (86), offers the following case as a counterexample to OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. Mike is justified by E to believe (D) that 243 is divisible by 81 and 3. Suppose that, having a grasp of the concept *prime number*, Mike knows that D entails (P) that 243 is not a prime number. It seems clear that, under these circumstances, Mike is justified to believe P. If OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true, then, according to Silins, Mike's justification for P "is not provided by the premise (namely, D), but instead by his justification (namely, E) for believing the premise" (88). However, Silins argues, this description of the case "is not attractive" (88). And this is, Silins holds, because this description contradicts with the plausible idea that if a subject is justified to believe *p* on the basis of the fact that *q*, which

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is justified for her, (knowingly) entails $p$, then one of her reasons for believing that $p$ is $q$. So, since it is plausible that at least one of Mike's reasons for believing P is D, and OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is inconsistent with this, OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION must be rejected.

However, as it should be clear from the foregoing discussion, a proponent of an OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is not committed to denying that if a subject is justified to believe $p$ on the basis of the fact that $q$, which is justified for her, (knowingly) entails $p$, then *one* of her reasons for believing that $p$ is $q$. What a proponent of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is committed to denying is that, under those circumstances, one of the subject's reasons for believing that $p$ might be $q$ while what makes $q$ justified is *not* a justifier for $p$. So, the fact that at least one of Mike's reasons for believing P is D is not inconsistent with OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION.

It is fair to conclude, on the basis of these considerations, that OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION survives the objection originally raised by Klein and subsequently endorsed by Silins.

### 4.3. Epistemic circularity and justifier transmission

There are two significant implications I would like to mention of understanding transmission of justification along the lines of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION rather than epistemic circularity. Firstly, if we understand transmission of justification thus, then the strategy of saving justification closure alluded to in Section 1, which comprises a significant part of Wright's overall agenda, is no longer available. *If* the correct diagnosis of *Moore*, for instance, is that of transmission failure due to epistemic circularity (that an independent justification of M3 is a prior condition for M1 to provide justification to M2), then it directly follows that *Moore* is not a counterexample to justification closure:

*Moore*
M1. My experience is in all respects as of a hand held up in front of my face.
M2. Here is a hand.
Therefore,
M3. There is a material world.

However, as we have seen, it is highly doubtful whether *Moore* is epistemically circular in the way Wright claims it to be; so, it is far from clear whether *Moore* is a case in which transmission fails due to epistemic circularity (and hence a case in which closure is preserved due to epistemic circularity). Now, suppose that OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true, and suppose further that *Moore* does not satisfy OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION. If so, M1 does not become a justifier for M3 (in virtue of the deductive link between M2 and M3). However, unlike the previous diagnosis due to epistemic circularity, this evidently leaves the possibility open that there is no justification for M3, in which case *Moore* might well be a counterexample to justification closure.

Secondly, if OBJECT OF TRANSMSSION is true, as I have argued above, then epistemic circularity is a problem for the purposes of transmitting justification only if it prevents a piece of evidence $e$ from becoming a justifier for the subject for $q$, where $e$ supports $p$ and $p$ knowingly entails $q$. If a given argument is epistemically circular in a way that does not prevent the justifier of a given proposition from becoming a justifier for what the subject knows entails, then that kind of epistemic circularity does not

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generate transmission failure. The type of epistemic circularity that Wright thinks arguments such as *Moore* instantiate occurs when a given piece of evidence can justify the premise of a deductive argument only if the conclusion of the argument is independently justified. Now, if OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true, then this sort of circularity generates transmission failure only if the fact that the justificatory efficacy of the evidence with respect to the premise is conditional on there being independent justification for the conclusion prevents that piece of evidence from becoming a justifier for the subject for the conclusion across the deductive link. However, I do not see any reason why the type of circularity that is identified by Wright should have that kind of prevention effect. Indeed, his own *Flock* case mentioned in Section 1 demonstrates that it need not have that effect:

*Flock*
F1. I have counted the sheep as best I could and got the result, 28.
F2. There are 28 sheep in the pen.
Therefore,
F3. There are fewer than 30 sheep in the pen.

The background circumstances we are asked to imagine by Wright are such that they make it reasonable to think that F1 is a justifier for F2 only if F3 is independently justified. However, as Wright himself acknowledges, there is intuitively no transmission failure in this case. And this is plausibly because, I maintain, the type of circularity instantiated by *Flock* does not prevent F1 from becoming a justifier for the subject for F3 in virtue of the deductive link between F2 and F3. F3 can receive (second-time) justification from F2 because the justifier of the latter becomes a justifier for the subject for the former in virtue of the deductive link in question.

Now, I do not wish to exclude the possibility that there might be some cases in which the type of epistemic circularity that Wright puts his finger on works in such a way that it generates transmission failure by preventing the justifier of the premise of a given argument from *becoming* a justifier of its conclusion. This might perhaps happen, for instance, if the way in which the conclusion is independently justified renders the justifier of the premise a *direct* justifier for the subject for the conclusion. However, even if this is so, it remains the case that the fundamental criterion for transmission of justification across a deductive argument is whether the justifier of the premise of that argument becomes the justifier of the conclusion: epistemic circularity as such does not play any distinctive role in finding out whether transmission failure is present. So, it is epistemic circularity that can be safely set aside in our considerations about whether a given argument transmits justification.

### 4.4. Two problems

I have argued above that the OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION is true: transmission of justification is transmission of the justifier. When transmission of justification succeeds, the justifier of the premise of the argument known to be valid by the subject becomes a justifier for the subject for the conclusion. However, the application of OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION to particular cases is far from being trivial (which does not, of course, exclude the possibility that there are some more or less intuitively clear cases in which OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION appears not to be satisfied). One problem is that in order to figure out whether a given argument has the capacity to transmit justification, we

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need an account of what makes a given piece of evidence a direct justifier for a given subject for the conclusion of that argument. I have argued above that Wright's counterfactual account of direct justifier is defective, and we currently have no other account.

Another problem is that in order to figure out whether a given argument has the capacity to transmit justification, we need an account of whether a given piece of evidence is a justifier *simpliciter* for the conclusion of that argument. Consider *Moore* again:

*Moore*
M1. My experience is in all respects as of a hand held up in front of my face.
M2. Here is a hand.
Therefore,
M3. There is a material world.

*Moore* transmits justification only if M1 is a justifier *simpliciter* for M3. Is M1 a justifier *simpliciter* for M3? I am not sure whether there is an intuitive answer to this question, and clearly, different conceptions of evidence are bound to give different answers to it.

I take it that these two problems that accompany OBJECT OF TRANSMISSION are exactly the sorts of problems that an adequate account of transmission of justification must aspire to solve; these problems are, I maintain, where philosophers trying to understand the conditions for justification transmission should focus their intellectual energy on.[12]

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