

# Is it possible to improve the strength of a subject's epistemic position with respect to a sceptical hypothesis by using a "moorean" inference?

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## 0. Introduction

In this paper I will assess Martin Smith's recent diagnosis about what is wrong with *some* of the so called moorean inferences.<sup>1</sup> According to his diagnosis, the epistemic defect exhibited by these inferences consists in their being incapable of increasing the conclusion's *reliability*<sup>2</sup>. According to Smith, this epistemic defect can explain, in turn, the phenomenon of transmission failure which other epistemologists think these inferences exhibit. Thus, Smith claims that when a thinker reasons according to an inference of this type, she cannot *acquire* epistemic warrant for the conclusion, under certain circumstances, because the reliability of the conclusion isn't increased by the relevant inference.

I will argue that Smith's proposal successfully accounts for certain intuitions we have regarding the correctness or incorrectness of a representative sample of moorean inferences, in such a way that his view can provide a detailed account of what transmission failure consists in, which is also extensionally adequate. I will argue, nevertheless, that Smith's account of what transmission failure consists in is flawed in the next sense: it wrongly assumes that there can only be transmission of warrant if the evidence increases the reliability of the conclusion. I will argue that when the evidence increases the probability of the conclusion (even if there is no corresponding increase in

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<sup>1</sup> As I will explain below, I use the term "moorean inference" to refer to every inference which has the same logical structure as Moore's proof of the external world, even when its conclusion isn't necessarily a "heavyweight" proposition, i.e. a proposition which doesn't seem to be able to be known by mere reason or by using our perceptual faculties. (Zalabardo)

<sup>2</sup> Here I follow Martin Smith in using "reliability" as a technical term analogous to the notion of safety, which also applies to beliefs which aren't necessarily knowledge. I will explain with detail this notion below.

its reliability), our epistemic position regarding the conclusion improves, and this can have as a result the acquisition of epistemic warrant for the conclusion.

I concede that Smith's account of moorean inferences seems plausible. But I claim that we can develop an enlargement of his view, which is as plausible as his proposal, as well as more comprehensive. It is important to note that whereas Smith's view entails the rejection of a moorean response to skepticism, the view I present here might favour a moorean response.

## **1. Moorean Inferences**

I will call "moorean" to every valid deductive inference which exhibits the same structure of G. E. Moore's proof of the external world,<sup>3</sup> the next one is a fairly similar argument to that presented by Moore:

HANDS

- 1) I have hands.
- 2) If I have hands, then I am not a brain in a vat.
- 3) Therefore, I am not a brain in a vat.

The logical structure is such that a possibility of error (in this case, being a brain in a vat) is discarded on the basis of the obtaining of a fact which is incompatible with the obtaining of the possibility of error (in this case, that I have hands). Despite the fact that the inference is valid and that in, adequate circumstances, we have very good evidence in favour of the premises, it has been rightly pointed out that this proof usually strikes

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<sup>3</sup> See Moore, "Proof of the External World"

us as unsatisfactory.<sup>4</sup> In this case, the evidence for premise (1) is the experience of seeming to have hands and the evidence for premise (2) is given by reflection on what does it mean to be a brain in a vat. Even so, the sensation of dissatisfaction hardly disappears; the impression that there is something wrong with this argument lingers.

Some philosophers have claimed that dissatisfaction caused by Moore's inference (and other similar inferences) rests on the fact that these inferences exhibit an epistemic defect called “warrant transmission failure”. According to this diagnosis, the problem with these reasonings is that they violate the principle of warrant transmission through competent deduction, according to which acquiring warrant for the premises of a valid argument and recognizing its validity is enough for acquiring warrant for its conclusion.<sup>5</sup> More precisely, the principle is this:

*Transmission:*

If *S* believes that *p* and has warrant for it, then by recognizing the validity of the inference from *p* to *q*, *S* will acquire a warrant for *q*.<sup>6</sup>

According to the diagnosis of these philosophers, there is something distinctive about certain moorean inferences such that the warrant for their premises isn't transmitted to the conclusion, despite the subject's recognition of the validity of the inference. Again, in the case of (HANDS), the warrant for premise (1), let us call it *E*, is constituted by the experience of seeming to see hands. The feeling that this diagnosis about what is wrong with moorean inferences is in the right track is strengthened when we realize that the warrant for (1), on its own, cannot be used to discriminate the cases in which I am a BIV (brain in a vat) from the cases in which I am not, i.e. if I were a BIV and had to my

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<sup>4</sup> Wright, “(Anti-) sceptics Simple and Subtle”, p. 331, Pryor, What's wrong p. 349,50 ; Smith, “Transmission Failure Explained”, p

<sup>5</sup> See, Wright “(Anti-) sceptics Simple and Subtle”, p. 332.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Zalabardo, p....

disposition evidence  $E$ , I would still believe (falsely) that I am not a BIV.<sup>7</sup> According to this type of diagnoses, some moorean inferences strike us as incorrect because they exhibit an epistemic defect (still to be specified), which prevent the transmission of warrant to its conclusion, *despite* satisfying Transmission. Following the standard terminology, I call the views that adopt this type of diagnosis *anti-morean*.

Nevertheless, this is not the only diagnosis that has been offered to explain the dissatisfaction experienced when we consider (HANDS) and other similar inferences. For example, James Pryor has presented a diagnosis according to which the only defect this type of moorean inferences exhibit is that they are dialectically inefficient; this is, we cannot use them to persuade some people to believe its conclusion. Nonetheless, according to him, these inferences do not exhibit any epistemic defect, which means that we can use them to acquire warrant for its conclusion. This diagnosis rests on the claim that a subject can have warrant for a belief while she is incapable of rationally accepting it. Pryor even provide us with an explanation of how this is possible: any rational obstacle (beliefs, doubts) for the belief that  $p$  prevents the rational adoption of  $p$ , regardless whether the rational obstacles are themselves justified, i.e. regardless whether one would be justified in abandoning the belief that  $p$  on the basis of those doubts. Pryor maintains that the dissatisfaction related with these inferences comes from the fact that there are certain rational obstacles for the adoption of its conclusion, *not* from any epistemic defect which prevents acquiring a warrant for its conclusion. Thus, according to this diagnosis, this kind of moorean inferences do not exhibit transmission warrant failure. In contrast, following the standard terminology, I will call *moorean* the views which adopt a diagnosis of this type.

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<sup>7</sup> This is, the belief that I am not a BIV isn't sensitive. See, DeRose and Sosa... A subject as a sensitive belief that, say,  $p$  if and only if in the nearest possible worlds where  $p$  is not true, the subject doesn't believe  $p$ .

This distinction will be useful only towards the end of this paper to explain under which category falls the proposal I advance here. In the central part of this work I will focus on the evaluation of a diagnosis which belongs to the first type, according to which the defect exhibited by this type of moorean inferences is epistemic. But before explaining in what consists this diagnosis I want to make it clear that not every deductive argument exemplifying the structure of (HANDS) produce the same dissatisfaction. As a matter of fact, we can find cases which, presumably, are both epistemically and dialectically acceptable. For example:

#### PET

1. Melisa's pet is a cat.
2. If Melisa's pet is a cat, then Melisa's pet is not a reptile.
3. Therefore, Melisa's pet is not a reptile.

Let us assume that my warrant for the first premise of this argument consists in my experience of seeming to see a cat and Melisa's telling me that that cat is her (only) pet. In this case it seems that there is nothing dissatisfactory with the inference and it also seems clear that anyone could acquire warrant for the conclusion by using this deduction. But even more, there are cases of moorean inferences which, under certain circumstances seem dissatisfactory, but under different circumstances they do not seem dissatisfactory at all. For example:

#### ZEBRAS

1. Those animals are zebras.
2. If those animals are zebras, then they are not cleverly disguised mules.
3. Therefore, those animals are not cleverly disguised mules.

This famous argument was originally presented by Fred Dretske in arguing against the universal validity of the closure principle.<sup>8</sup> In the case presented by Dretske, he asks us to imagine that the evidence for (1) is our seeming to see some animals that look like zebras, while facing the zebra enclosure in a zoo. In this case, using (ZEBRAS) to establish its conclusion sparks a similar dissatisfaction as that sparked by (HANDS). It's worth noting that in this case, the conclusion isn't sensitive relative to the evidence: even if the animals in the zebra enclosure were cleverly disguised mules, we would still believe they are zebras on the basis of our experience. But we can imagine a case in which the evidence for (1) is much more robust. We can imagine, for example, that the evidence consists in some DNA test results made on the animals. In this case, it seems plausible to say that there is nothing objectionable with using the argument to acquire a warrant for its conclusion. In this case the evidence for (1) is such that a belief in its conclusion will be sensitive relative to the relevant evidence: if the animals were cleverly disguised mules, the DNA test would allow me to know this, despite the fact that my perceptual evidence wouldn't allow me to perform that discrimination.

I am presenting these cases to highlight that a correct diagnosis has to explain why some moorean inferences strike us as unsatisfactory while others don't. In other words, the diagnosis has to be “extensionally adequate”, i.e. it has to identify a defect which is exhibited by the inferences we perceive as unsatisfactory, but which is not exhibited by the inferences that do not seem unsatisfactory. In short, any diagnosis has to explain why (HANDS) seems unsatisfactory, why (ZEBRAS) seems unsatisfactory in some case and not in others, and, finally, why (PET) seems satisfactory.

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<sup>8</sup> See Dretske, “Epistemic Operators”.

Now, the strategy of explaining the dissatisfaction by appealing to the epistemic defect of warrant transmission failure rests on a modification of the transmission principle with an instance of the following schema:

If  $S$  believes that  $p$  and has warrant for it, then by recognizing the validity of the inference from  $p$  to  $q$ ,  $S$  will acquire a warrant for  $q$ , just in case  $X$ .

Where  $X$  takes the form of a limitation clause that restricts the circumstances under which warrant transmission through competent deduction occur.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the defender of this strategy has to identify a set of additional conditions that are only satisfied by the cases in which there is warrant transmission. Even more, we have to be able to appeal to the violation of the limitation clause in order to *explain* why a given moorean inference does not transmit warrant to its conclusion. On the other hand, we should be able to appeal to satisfaction of the clause to explain why warrant is transmitted in certain cases.

In a nutshell, there are two conditions any plausible diagnosis of what's wrong with certain moorean inferences must meet: it has to be explanatory and extensionally adequate.

## **2. Smith's Diagnosis**

In this paper I will focus my attention in a specific way of articulating the limitation clause, which has been presented recently by Martin Smith. According to him, a deductive inference can transmit warrant to its conclusion only if the evidence for the

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of a limitation clause and the explanatory and extensional adequacy requirements are presented explicitly by Zalabardo in "Wright on Moore".

premises increases the conclusion's reliability.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the warrant transmission principle proposed by Smith is the following:

*Transmission-R:*

If *S* believes that *p* and has warrant for it, then by recognizing the validity of the inference from *p* to *q*, *S* will acquire a warrant for *q*, just in case the evidence for *p* increases the reliability of *q*.

To understand what an increase in the reliability of a belief is, we have to explain first the notion of epistemic safety. Ernest Sosa has presented a widely accepted formulation of what does it mean to say that a belief is epistemically safe: “What is required for the safety of a belief is that not easily would it fail by being false, or untrue. A belief that *p* is safe provided it would have been held only if (most likely) *p*” (Sosa, 2007, p. 25). For example, the belief in the proposition “I am not a brain in a vat” is safe because it would *hardly* be false. In other words, the nearest possible worlds in which a belief in that proposition would be false are worlds which are quite remote from the actual world. Following Smith I will call the beliefs that are safe in this way “safe in virtue of its content.” On the other hand, a belief that *p* is “safe in virtue of its basis” only when *p* is believed on a basis which we would *hardly* possess if *p* were false. In other words, when a belief *p* is safe in virtue of a basis *b*, the nearest possible worlds in which *b* is true, but *p* is false, are very far away from the actual world. For example, the belief that I have hands isn't safe in virtue of its content, since it could easily be false: there are possible worlds quite near to the actual world in which I don't have hands. Nevertheless, the same belief *is safe* in virtue of the basis of seeming to see hands. The situations in which I have this basis but I don't have hands are very far away from the actual world: worlds in which I hallucinate that I have hands or worlds in which I am a BIV.

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<sup>10</sup> As I said in the introduction, Smith uses the term reliability in an unorthodox way, quite different from the use of reliabilist epistemology. I will explain with more detail in which way Smith uses this term.

It's important to note that from the definition of safe belief it follows that safe beliefs necessarily are true beliefs: in order to find a possible world in which a safe belief is false one has to move far away from the actual world, which means that a safe belief is true in the actual world. This feature of safe beliefs makes it impossible for us to use safety to account for the phenomenon of warrant transmission failure, since a warranted belief can be false, but a safe belief is always true.

In order to avoid this problem Smith proposes to use an condition analogue to safety, but which applies to beliefs that could be false in the actual world. Smith calls this condition “reliability”, moving away from the standard use of this term in contemporary epistemology. The fundamental difference between the notions of safety and reliability is that the safety of a belief is determined in function of the remoteness from the actual world of the circumstances in which the relevant belief would be false, whereas reliability is determined in function the remoteness from the “normal world” of the circumstances in which the relevant belief would be false.<sup>11</sup> Thus, a belief  $p$  is reliable in virtue of its content when the nearest possible world in which  $p$  is false are very far away from the normal world. Thus, even if a subject is in a world in which she is a BIV, her belief that she is not a BIV would still be reliable in virtue of its remoteness to the normal circumstances. In a similar way, a belief  $p$  is reliable in virtue of this basis  $b$  if the nearest possible worlds in which  $b$  is true, but  $p$  is false, are very far away from the normal world.

This means that the notion of reliability can be applied to false beliefs and, thus, to warranted beliefs as well. Now, equipped with this crucial notion we can explain

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<sup>11</sup> Clearly, in order for this proposal to be complete we need to give an account of what is a “normal world”. I won't give here a detailed account of what a normal world is; for the present purposes it is enough to appeal to a proposal advanced by Goldman in “Strong and Weak Justification” (p. 61), according to which a normal world is a world consistent with our general beliefs concerning the real world, i.e. a world in which there are as a matter of fact external objects we can perceive, in which we are not having an endless dream, in which we are not BIV nor the victims of an evil demon.

Smith's view, according to which certain moorean inferences exhibit warrant transmission failure. As I said before, the belief that not-BIV is highly reliable in virtue of its content. The limitation clause proposed by Smith says that any inference can transmit warrant for its conclusion only if (in addition to satisfying the conditions presented in the original transmission principle), the warrant, or evidence, for the premises *increases* the reliability of its conclusion. Thus, in order to evaluate whether (HANDS) satisfies the limitation clause we have to determine whether the reliability of not-(BIV) relative to the basis, *b*, of seeming to see hands is bigger than its reliability in virtue of its content. In particular, we have to determine whether the circumstances (i.e. the possible worlds) in which I falsely believe not-BIV on the basis of *b* are further away from the normal circumstances (i.e. the normal world), than the circumstances in which I falsely believe not-BIV simpliciter. It seems that the result of this test is negative: it's just not clear that when I base my belief that not-BIV in my experience of seeming to see hands the possibilities of error move further away from where they were before using my experience as a basis for the belief in question. When basing my belief that not-BIV on the basis that I seem to see hands the initial reliability of not-BIV *does not* increase and, therefore, the limitation clause isn't fulfilled. This means that, according to the transmission principle proposed by Smith, (HANDS) would be a case of transmission failure. The analysis proposed by Smith has, then, a straightforward explanation of the dissatisfaction we experience with (HANDS): it is unsatisfactory because it is epistemically defective, since it exhibits transmission failure.

Let us consider now if this limitation clause gives appropriate results for the cases presented before; if this is so we can say that the proposal is extensionally adequate. Let us start with (ZEBRAS) when the evidence for the first premise consists in seeming to see some zebras before us. In this case using (ZEBRAS) sparks

dissatisfaction; if Smith's diagnosis is correct this means that the evidence doesn't increase the reliability of the conclusion. Definitely, the belief that the animals are not cleverly disguised mules is reliable (although it's true that it's not as reliable as the belief that not-BIV), since the worlds in which they are in fact cleverly disguised mules are very remote from the normal circumstances. Now, the question is whether by acquiring the relevant evidence increases the reliability of the conclusion; in other words, are the worlds in which the proposition that describes my evidence is true, but the conclusion false, more remote from the normal circumstances than the worlds in which the conclusion is false simpliciter? Here the answer seems to be a negative one: the cases in which I am wrong about whether the animals in the zebra enclosure are actually zebras simpliciter seem to be as remote from the normal circumstances as the cases in which I am wrong on the basis of my experience. Since my evidence does not allow me to discriminate the cases in which the animals are mules from the cases in which they are actually zebras, the cases in which I am wrong on the basis of my evidence will be as remote as the cases in which I am wrong simpliciter. Therefore, Smith's diagnosis gives the correct result in this case: the dissatisfaction can be explained by the fact that the inference exhibits warrant transmission failure.

It will be particularly useful to consider now the case of (ZEBRAS) when the evidence for the first premise is the DNA test results. Since in this case we have the intuition that there is nothing wrong with the inference, Smith's diagnosis predicts that there is in fact an increase in the reliability of the argument's conclusion. Again, the cases in which I am wrong and the animals are as a matter of fact mules are very remote from the normal circumstances. But are the cases in which the DNA test results say that they are zebras, but are as a matter of fact are mules, more remote from the normal circumstances? The answer in this case seems to be affirmative, since the cases in which

this happen are cases in which not only the zoo authorities behave in a very unusual way (a very *abnormal* way), but they are *also* cases in which the DNA test results (generally reliable) give a wrong result, which is quite abnormal as well. In this case we have reasons to say that the worlds in which two unusual things happen are more remote from the normal circumstances than the worlds in which only one of those things happen. Therefore, it seems sensible to maintain that in this case the evidence increases the reliability of the conclusion and, therefore, this explains why the argument seems satisfactory. Again, from Smith's viewpoint, this means that in this case there is transmission of warrant.

Finally, let us consider (PET). We should remember that this case seems to be one in which nothing seems to be wrong with the inference, therefore Smith's diagnosis must give the result that there is an increase in the conclusion's reliability. Let us make some additional stipulations about the case: let us assume that Melisa has only one pet, that she is sincere most of the time, and that she values any type of animal as much as any other, in particular this means that she values reptiles as much as mammals. In this case the argument's conclusion, "Melisa's pet is not a reptile" *is not* reliable in virtue of its content, since the circumstances in which that belief is false are not very remote from the normal circumstances: we have to move very little from normality to find cases in which Melisa's pet is a reptile. On the other hand, the cases in which her pet is a reptile, but I have the experience as of seeing a cat while she tells me that that's her pet, seem to be very remote from the normal circumstances. Again, Smith's diagnosis gives the correct result: there is an increase of reliability, which explain the intuition that there's nothing wrong with the argument and, therefore, this seem to be a case of transmission of warrant, according to Smith's view.

The analysis of these cases suggest that the limitation clause introduced by Smith and its correspondent warrant transmission principle are extensionally adequate: the clause is satisfied by the cases which intuitively seem to be cases of warrant acquisition, whereas it is not satisfied by the cases which seem illegitimate. Now we have to find out if the view can provide us with a good explanation of why satisfying the principle allow us to acquire warrant by using those inferences.

### **3. Strength of Epistemic Position**

An intuitive and straightforward way of explaining why the satisfaction of the limitation clause proposed by Smith (along with the other requirements imposed by the transmission principle) has as a result the acquisition of warrant, is by claiming that performing the inference enhances the strength of the epistemic position with respect to the relevant proposition. There is a case for claiming that enhancing the reliability of your belief that  $p$  enhances the strength of your epistemic position with respect to  $p$ , and that this, in turn, might have as a result the acquisition of an epistemic warrant for your belief that  $p$ .<sup>12</sup> But what determines the strength of one's epistemic position with respect to a given proposition? According to Sosa, "One's epistemic position with respect to  $p$  is stronger the more remote are the least remote possibilities wherein one's belief as to whether  $p$  does not match the fact of that matter" (Sosa, 1999, p. 144). This is, the strength of one's epistemic position with respect to  $p$  is a function of the closeness of the possibilities of error with respect to the real world: the further away from the real world the possibilities of error with respect to  $p$  are, the stronger our epistemic position with respect to  $p$  will be. As DeRose correctly points out, thus formulated, the notion of

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<sup>12</sup> Moretti and Piazza adopt explicitly the idea that acquiring a warrant for a belief is just improving your epistemic position with respect to that propositions. See "When Warrant Transmits and When it Doesn't: [Towards a General Framework](#)". p. \_\_\_\_\_

strength of one's epistemic position is very similar to that of safety,<sup>13</sup> to the extent that they could be considered equivalent.

Analogously, we could argue that the strength of one's epistemic position with respect to a proposition is enhanced, insofar as the respective possibilities of error are very remote from normal circumstances. This modification would allow us to explain why we are in a good epistemic position with respect to warranted (but false) propositions. If we adopted Sosa's definition of epistemic strength, we couldn't explain this phenomenon, and we could only say that our epistemic position is "strong" when the relevant proposition is true. If it is a desideratum for the epistemic notions that they are capable of making sense of the most prominent discussion in epistemology, then it is sensible to extend in this way the notion of epistemic strength.

Clearly it is necessary to give a more detailed explanation of how is it that an increase in the reliability of a propositions has as a result the acquisition of a warrant for that proposition. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the considerations presented here should be enough to show at least that Smith's limitation clause doesn't rest in ad hoc assumptions, and that it has enough epistemic substance to provide relevant explanations of how the satisfaction of the limitation clause is related to the acquisition of epistemic warrant.

At this point I don't want to challenge Smith's general idea that certain moorean inferences provide us with warrant because they increase the strength of our epistemic position with respect to its conclusion. It seems to me that this diagnosis is in the right track, despite certain central notions have to be developed with more detail, specially the notion of "normal circumstances." At this point I rather want to propose that there

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<sup>13</sup> See DeRose "Sosa, Safety and Sceptical Hypothesis", p. ----

might be at least another way to increase the strength of a subject's epistemic position with respect to a certain proposition, different from the one presented by Smith.

So far, the emphasis has been in how remote from the normal circumstances certain possibilities of error are. Sosa's formulation makes it very clear: the strength of one's epistemic position depends on the remoteness of the possibilities of error. Nevertheless, there might be another legitimate sense in which we can formulate the notion of strength of a subject's epistemic positions with respect to a proposition: in terms of the probability of the obtaining of a possibility of error, regardless of the remoteness of that possibility from the normal world. Sosa's formulation of safety presented before *suggests* this reading, despite the fact that he explicitly endorses the reading which rests on the notion of remoteness from the actual world: "A belief that  $p$  is safe provided it would have been held only if (most likely)  $p$ " (Sosa, 2007, p. 25). Indeed, a natural way to construe this claim is using the conceptual resources of possible worlds and interpreting "most likely" exclusively in terms of the remoteness from the actual world or from the normal circumstances. This is precisely the reading privileged by Sosa, DeRose and Smith. Nevertheless, it is not the only reading available; as I suggested, we can interpret the "most likely" in terms of probability.<sup>14</sup> According to this reading the strength of a subject's epistemic position with respect to a proposition changes depending on the probability (absolute or relative to evidence) of the relevant proposition. I will argue for this reading by presenting two cases in which the strength of a subject's epistemic position with respect to a proposition seems to depend on the probability of the relevant propositions and *not* on the closeness or

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<sup>14</sup> It is controversial that there is a completely satisfactory way of interpreting the notion of probability. I will assume an objectivist notion of probability, according to which the probability of any event happening is given independently from the beliefs of the subjects. In particular, I want to move away from the subjectivist interpretations of probability. A classical frequentist notion is sufficient for the purposes of this work: the line of reasoning presented here does not depend on a detailed explanation of the notion of probability.

remoteness of certain possibilities of error from the normal circumstances or the actual world.

### *3.1 Probability and Epistemic Strength*

The first case is one in which intuitively the strength of the subject's epistemic position increases despite the possibilities of error staying “in the same place”. Let us use again the case of Melisa's pet. Let us assume that Melisa can only have a pet and that she has to choose between ten possibilities (ten possible pets), and we know that; let us assume further that each possible choice is equally probable (this is, the probability is equally distributed among the possibilities). Given these stipulations, it would seem reasonable to say that each possibility is equally distant from the normal circumstances, since there is no reason to suppose that in order for any possibility to obtain the circumstances should be more abnormal than in any other case.<sup>15</sup> This means that in the sphere of possible worlds the ten relevant possibilities are equidistant from the centre, i.e. the normal circumstances. Let us assume now that out of the ten pets, five are cats. This means that the probability that Melisa's pet is a feline (let us call this proposition  $F$ ) is  $5/10$ . The other five possible pets are a bird, a reptile, an amphibian, a fish, and a rodent. By stipulation, each of these possibilities has a probability of  $1/10$ . Given these circumstances (without any additional information), it seems intuitive that our epistemic position with respect to  $F$  is quite precarious, since we could easily go wrong: the possibilities in which we go wrong are quite close to the normal circumstances and the probability of going wrong is quite high, namely  $5/10$ .

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<sup>15</sup> We should remember that it was stipulated before that Melisa values equally every type of animal. We can include additional assumptions to secure this point, we can assume, for example, that the attention required for each pet is exactly the same, etc.

Now, let us assume that we acquire additional evidence, let us assume that we find out that Melisa didn't choose the bird, the reptile, the amphibian nor the fish. Given this new piece of evidence, it seems that our epistemic position with respect to  $F$  is strengthened, i.e. we are in a better epistemic position after acquiring the evidence. Sosa, Smith and De Rose's way of understanding the strength of epistemic position cannot account for this phenomenon, since, by stipulation, each of the possibilities is equally distant from the normal circumstances. Before acquiring the evidence, the possibilities of error are at a distance  $n$  from the normal circumstances; after acquiring the new piece of evidence, the possibilities of error are still at a distance  $n$ . The inability to explain this phenomenon by appealing to this view follows from the fact the increase of the strength in our epistemic position with respect to  $F$  does not lie at all in where the possibilities of error are located within the sphere of possible worlds. Rather, the appropriate explanation is linked with the sheer number of cases in which we could go wrong. The reading of the notion of strength of epistemic position I want to introduce can explain successfully this case. The acquisition of the new piece of evidence has as a result that the probability of  $F$  *increases* from  $5/10$  to  $5/6$ . It is this increase in probability what explains the correspondent increase in our epistemic position with respect to  $F$ . This alternative reading not only can give an explanation of the phenomenon, but it seems that the explanation tracks the correct causes, i.e. the fact that the number of possibilities of error *decreases*.

This example shows that it makes sense to explain increase of strength in someone's epistemic position with respect to a proposition in terms of increments on the probability of the *same proposition* in virtue of the acquisition of new evidence. This is precisely the type of cases which are relevant for the study of the phenomenon of warrant transmission. Nevertheless, as the next example shows, the alternative reading

can also be used to explain why at least in some cases the strength of someone's epistemic position is greater with respect to a given proposition than with respect to another, while the evidence remains fixed. The reading favoured by Sosa, Smith, and DeRose cannot account for some of these cases. Let us keep using the same case, but let us focus in the moment *before* the acquisition of the new piece of evidence. Under these circumstances, the probability of  $F$  is  $5/10$  and the probability that Melisa's pet is a rodent (we will call this proposition  $R$ ) is  $1/10$ . It seems reasonable to claim that in this case my epistemic position is stronger with respect to  $F$  than it is with respect to  $R$ . Despite the fact that in both cases my epistemic position isn't as good as it could be, we can still make this comparative judgement. The reading of epistemic strength in Sosa's terms do not allow us to explain this fact: the circumstances in which I falsely believe that  $F$  are equally distant from the normal circumstances than the circumstances in which I falsely believe that  $R$ . The explanation must lie in a different place. Again, the reading I am proposing accounts for the phenomenon we are considering in a straightforward way: the reason why it seems to us that we are in a better epistemic position with respect to a proposition than with respect to another is simply because a proposition is more likely than the other.

I want to suggest that these examples show that the alternative reading of strength of someone's epistemic position I am proposing not only is consistent but it is *indispensable*, inasmuch as we need it in order to explain in a successful way cases like those just presented. I would like to remind the reader at this point that the aim of the line of reasoning presented in this section is not to show that the reading of strength of epistemic position in terms of closeness to normal circumstances is incorrect, rather only that it is *incomplete*. Therefore, the proposal I am advancing is that the strength of

epistemic position depends not only on how close the possibilities of error are, but also on how likely is it that we go wrong.

### *3.2 Probability and Warrant Transmission*

At this point we can go back to the main topic of this paper. I would like to consider now the consequences this modification has with respect to the phenomena of warrant transmission and transmission failure. As we saw before, Smith argues that a subject can acquire warrant by using a moorean inference only if, in addition to satisfying the traditional requirements for warrant transmission, the evidence for the premises increases the reliability of its conclusion. The notion of reliability was analysed in terms of strength of epistemic position. In turn, the latter notion was analysed in terms of closeness to normal circumstances of certain possibilities of error. But I have proposed an alternative way to analyse the notion of strength of epistemic position. What consequences this modification has in Smith's diagnosis of what's wrong with certain moorean inferences? In what follows I will suggest that, given this modification, our epistemic position with respect to some conclusions of moorean inferences, which strike us as unsatisfactory, might be enhanced. In particular, I will argue that using (HANDS) enhances the strength of our epistemic position with respect to its conclusion, i.e. not-BIV.

It was established while considering (HANDS) that not-BIV is a highly reliable proposition in virtue of its content, in virtue of the remoteness of the possibilities of believing falsely not-BIV. It should be clear as well that the probability of not-BIV is very high as well. I have accepted Smith's reasoning, according to which the evidence of seeming to see hands does not increase the reliability of not-BIV. But now we have

to consider whether this piece of evidence enhances probability of not-BIV, since we could also improve in this way our epistemic position with respect to that proposition. Again, the probability of not-BIV is quite high. Let us assign an arbitrarily high value to that probability, say,  $996/1000$ . This means that out of a thousand possible situations, in four of them we are as a matter of fact BIVs. Let us assume for the sake of simplicity that out of those four possibilities in two of them I have the experience of seeming to see hands, whereas in the other two I have the experience of seeming to see wings. Once I have acquired the evidence of seeming to see hands, I can rule out two possibilities of error; I know that if I am wrong and I am as a matter of fact a BIV, at least I am not a BIV who is deceived into believing that has wings by feeding him with experiences of seeming to see wings. In other words, the probability of being wrong decrease from  $4/1000$  to  $2/998$ , which is equivalent to say that the probability of not-BIV, the conclusion for (HANDS) is increased from  $996/1000$  to  $996/998$ .

Clearly, the increase of not-BIV's probability is very small. Furthermore, the values presented here are merely illustrative (and arbitrary). A more realist value assignation could yield even more discouraging results; it could have as a result, for example, that the increase in probability is even smaller than the one presented here. To these considerations I would like to reply that the probability of not-BIV is very high by itself and, therefore, it's just not possible to increase its probability a lot; therefore the accusation that the increase in probability is minimal shouldn't be surprising.

Adopting the alternative version of the notion of strength of epistemic position I have presented here, we are obliged to accept that the evidence for the premises of (HANDS) increase the strength of our epistemic position with respect to its conclusion even if minimally.

The value of this result rests, of course, in that it opens a new line of reasoning to argue that it is possible to acquire warrant for not-BIV using (HANDS). To develop such line of reasoning we should, in the first place, adopt the following modification of the transmission principle, which seems reasonable in light of the examples presented in (3.1):

*Transmission-R-P:*

If *S* believes that *p* and has warrant for it, then by recognizing the validity of the inference from *p* to *q*, *S* will acquire a warrant for *q*, just in case the evidence for *p* increases the strength of the epistemic position with respect to *q* to an arbitrarily high degree.

In second place, we should remember the result just obtained, namely that the evidence for the premises of (HANDS) actually enhances the probability of not-BIV. From the alternative analysis of the notion of strength of epistemic position it follows that using (HANDS) increases the strength of a subject's epistemic position with respect to not-BIV; which means that the limitation clause of *Transmission-R-P* is satisfied. From this result and from *Transmission-R-P* it follows that a subject who reasons according to (HANDS) acquires an epistemic warrant for the conclusion not-BIV.<sup>16</sup>

This means that the adoption of the alternative reading of the notion of strength of epistemic position provides us with the bases to defend a moorean view of warrant transmission. On this basis we can argue that (HANDS) and other similar arguments do not exhibit any type of epistemic defect which has as a result that we cannot acquire warrant by using them. As I pointed out before, every proposal should be capable of explaining why some moorean inferences strike us as unsatisfactory while others don't. The proposal advanced here has not done anything to explain why some moorean

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that we acquire an analogous result for the case of (ZEBRAS) when the evidence for its premiss is the experience of seeming to see zebras.

inferences seem unsatisfactory, in particular we haven't provided an explanation of why (HANDS) seems unsatisfactory. The only consequence regarding this issue which can be extracted is that the dissatisfaction doesn't come from the instantiation of the epistemic defect of warrant transmission failure. Of course, the proposal advanced here has the possibility to adopt an explanation as that presented by Pryor,<sup>17</sup> according to which the defect exhibited by these inferences is dialectical instead of epistemic.

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<sup>17</sup> See Pryor....