Metz' Incoherence Objection : Some Epistemological Considerations

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Abstract

In his *Meaning in Life*, Thaddeus Metz puts a certain argument – the 'incoherence objection' – to a number of different uses. The incoherence objection states that attempts to establish knowledge of the truth of certain conditionals will, in conjunction with some uncontroversial knowledge claims, commit us to decidedly controversial ones. Given that we do not wish to be so committed, it follows that we cannot claim to know the truth of those conditionals. This article seeks to examine some of the underlying epistemological assumptions of such an argument, raising potential problems to work on and locating areas where the argument might be refined or clarified. Although the considerations raised are for the most part general, specific issues concerning epistemic transmission principles are canvassed as regards the argument's application to a particular view of life's meaning associated with John Cottingham.

1. Introduction

Thaddeus Metz' *Meaning in Life* is a rich discussion of meaningfulness, impressively covering a large amount of ground without sacrificing depth in its treatment of the questions. It will doubtless provide material for philosophers working in this area to think through for many years to come. It is testament to the thought-provoking nature of the book that my own discussion focuses on just a few pages, but at some length; there was a great deal to say even about this short section. I still do not think I have exhausted it, but I hope that the issues I raise in this article will profitably open up further avenues to a consideration of the theoretical context of some of Metz' views – particularly the epistemological context.

2. The Incoherence Objection and Cottingham's Response

I would like to discuss an argument that Metz puts to a number of different

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uses, but first appears as an objection to John Cottingham's claim that a theistic worldview best grounds the type of universal, objective, necessary and normative morality that is required for meaningfulness in life. Metz' claim is that this position leads to a logical incoherence in Cottingham's views, and in the views of most of the rest of those who would embrace Cottingham's claim. To explain this he outlines the following principle (A): If I know that X obtains, and I know that 'If X, then Y' is true, then I know that Y obtains.[1] Applying this principle, Metz holds that Cottingham's claim to know that (1) 'Wrongness exists', to know that (2) 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', but not to know that (3) 'God exists' is an incoherent one. If Cottingham (or anyone else) wants to persist in claiming to know the truth of the claim that 'A theistic worldview grounds ethics' he must either claim to know that God exists, or deny knowing that wrongness exists. Metz adduces textual evidence from Cottingham's writings to indicate that Cottingham is unwilling to embrace the latter two claims, but is anxious to indicate his argument's wider reach: if one thinks one knows that wrongness is real, but can doubt that God exists, one cannot claim to know that wrongness logically depends on God. This is quite an important argument for Metz, as elsewhere he uses versions of it to criticise supernaturalism about meaning (p.145), non-naturalism about meaning (p.158), and consequentialism about meaning (p.194). Given this, and the fact that the argument seems to be one that has a very general application outside of Metz' work and would lead to a number of quite startling conclusions, I will spend some time discussing it. I will consider the version raised against Cottingham here, but I think that most of the questions I raise about it will apply *mutatis mutandis* to the versions Metz presents elsewhere (though not all – the discussion of transmissivity with which I conclude is specific to the version raised against Cottingham).

Metz considers a counterexample from Cottingham, who claims that he can maintain that apples are constituted by quarks, yet be much more confident of the evidence that apples exist than of the evidence that quarks do. Metz still finds this incoherent, on the basis that if one has enough evidence to know that apples exist, and to know that if apples exist, then quarks exist, one cannot consistently claim one does not have enough evidence to know that quarks exist. He diagnoses Cottingham's error in the latter's use of the word 'confidence',

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[1] Metz (2013), p.89. I have reconstructed this from the inconsistent triad Metz gives there.

insofar as this allows evidence to be inconclusive, as opposed to knowledge, which requires that evidence be conclusive. The idea is that one might consistently claim the conditional 'If wrongness exists, God exists' is true whilst being very confident in the truth of the antecedent, and less confident in the truth of the consequent. But Metz' principle (A) refers to knowledge, not confidence, and one cannot consistently make the *mutatis mutandis* claim.

Those versed in epistemology will observe that (A) is in some ways very similar to, yet is also importantly different from, a simple epistemic closure principle. Such a principle states that all members of a given epistemic set (say, 'x's warranted beliefs') bear a given relation (say, entailment) only to other members of that set – the set is 'closed' under that relation. Examination of certain facets of closure principles can help in our assessment of Metz' argument. First we must observe that, as it stands, (A) needs some tweaking, for it is quite possible that I fail to follow through all the consequences of my knowledge, through laziness, or stupidity, or being distracted or somesuch. This can easily be resolved by adding that I competently deduce the fact of Y's obtaining from X's obtaining and from the fact that if X is true then Y is true. However, I take the thrust of Metz' argument to be that the evidence for wrongness and for Cottingham's conditional *transmits* warrant, and hence (I am assuming here) justification, to the proposition that God exists. So we have here not just an epistemic closure principle, but, more strongly, an epistemic transmission principle. So we need to add to (A) not only that I make the relevant deduction, but that I know that Y obtains *in virtue of* knowing that X obtains and the truth of the conditional. Note that it is the addition of this 'in virtue of' that distinguishes a transmission principle from a closure principle; whilst a closure principle merely tells us that if X obtains (and the conditional is true) Y obtains, a transmission principle will tell us *why* Y obtains – namely, in virtue of X's obtaining (and the conditional being true). Call (A) with these tweaks '(A*)' (further tweaks are possible, and probably necessary, but are not salient for present purposes). Now, I think that Metz is right in holding that there appears to be no obvious transmission failure[2] if we apply (A*) to the apples and quarks case, so denying that (A*) applies is not a way out, unless one can point to a difference between the apple case and the God case which means that the latter exemplifies transmission failure and the former does not. In fact, I think that

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[2] 'Transmission failure' denotes a case where, for one reason or another, an argument fails to transmit warrant from its premise(s) to its conclusion.

there is such a difference, and that the God case, unlike the apple case, *does* involve transmission failure, but that this fact may not be as helpful to Cottingham as it first appears. Given this, I will postpone discussion of transmission failure until the end of this article.

One may have other concerns about the incoherence objection. Metz appears to overlook that Cottingham has said (in the same paragraph in which he makes the apples/quarks analogy) that he does not wish to think of his arguments for a theistic ground of ethics as 'conclusive',[3] and so presumably, *contra* Metz (p.88), he does not think he *knows* the conditional, he merely takes a weaker attitude toward it, like holding it to be true, or having a certain degree of justified belief in it (this is suggested by Cottingham's claim that he 'maintains' the conditional, rather than 'knows' it). This would prevent the application of Metz' principle, the price paid being that Cottingham must accept that his arguments for a supernaturalist theory of life's meaning do not conclusively refute alternate views. I imagine, given the tenor of Cottingham's work, that this will not be a great worry for him (his apples/quarks example may indicate that, by analogy, he takes his arguments for the conditional to be abductive-style reasoning, whereby theism is the best out of its competitors at explaining ethics, but cannot be said to be the only option), or anyone who is not convinced that many, if any, philosophical arguments are conclusive, although it may worry other upholders of theistic grounds for ethics more.

3. Fallibilism

Another perspective to take on Metz' argument would be to examine the distinction Metz draws between being confident in a proposition's truth and knowing it to be true. Insofar as Metz claims that knowledge requires conclusive evidence, he seems to be embracing an infallibilist epistemology.[4] On the other hand, it is plausible, given Cottingham's claims about gradations of confidence in evidence, to take the latter to be espousing a fallibilist (and internalist, although I am not sure anything turns on this) epistemology. Infallibilism in epistemology roughly claims that, in order to be said to know a given

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[3] Cottingham (2008), p.266. Of course, Metz may omit discussion of this point due to lack of space – it is not possible to cover everything one wants to talk about in a single book.

[4] Although Metz does sometimes use the phrase 'conclusive reason(s)' in an epistemic context, I do not take him to be advocating a (controversial) Dretske-style epistemology; his acceptance of degrees of justification (see later in this section) and of closure both do not sit well with such a view.

proposition to be true, one's justification for it must be so good that one cannot rationally doubt that proposition. Fallibilism claims the opposite – one can be said to know a true proposition for which one's justification is nevertheless not conclusive. Looked at from the point of view of a fallibilist internalist epistemology, however, multi-premise closure principles (let alone transmission principles) of justification, and thus knowledge, famously give rise to problems, insofar as they seem to lead to lottery paradoxes and the paradox of the preface.[5] The appearance of these paradoxes is often taken to suggest that such principles fail in this context. The claim is that when knowledge is fallible, if we conjoin enough claims for which we take ourselves to have sufficient justification to count as knowing, we might nevertheless not take ourselves to have sufficient justification for their conjunction to know that conjunction (and likewise for a proposition entailed by this conjunction, which is important for our current discussion) – this is due to the small amount of epistemic risk pertaining to each claim accumulating for the conjunction of them.[6] (A*) is one of these aforementioned suspect multi-premise principles, although it is, of course, not a very extensive multi-premise transmission principle.[7] But to make anything out of this latter point would require some principled way of explaining how many premises a transmission principle may legitimately have. Moreover, in the context of arguing that single-premise closure (and by extension single-premise transmission) is just as problematic as multi-premise closure, Maria Lassonen-Arnio has claimed that the competent deduction required in a principle like (A*) will not require infallibility and so will itself add some epistemic risk (which she calls 'deductive risk').[8] Not only will this lead to the possibility of multi-premise transmission principle paradoxes affecting single premise transmission principles, as Lassonen-Arnio thinks, but it will increase the risk

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[5] In this context, take a fallibilism that claims that one knows a proposition only if one's justification for it makes its truth probable to a degree of 0.99 or higher. Very briefly, the lottery paradox will affect such a fallibilism in the following way. Imagine a lottery with 100 tickets, one winner and a fair draw. For each ticket number n, the probability of the proposition 'Ticket number n will lose' will be justified sufficiently to be known. From this we can, with the acceptance of some plausible epistemic principles, conclude that no ticket will win. But this contradicts our knowledge that one ticket will win, hence the paradox. Incidentally, note that I say 'of justification, *and thus* knowledge' in this sentence as I agree with Luper (2012) that attempts to break the link between justification and knowledge in this context are ad hoc. Of course, Metz may disagree.

[6] On this, see Collins (2015), section 1. c.

[7] Nevertheless, it *is* a multi-premise principle. On this, see Sharon and Spectre (2013), p.2734, footnote 7.

[8] Lasonen-Aarnio (2008).

accumulated under seemingly low-risk, few-premised multi-premised transmission principles like (A*). Finally, we would also have to ask where the justification threshold for knowledge was; if the answer to this is vague, it may make it harder to use our intuitions about what we think we know to demonstrate a logical incoherence in Cottingham's position.

Transcending these messy details, the moral is that on fallibilism (taking into account the connection between probability and knowledge), highly likely premises, sufficient in likelihood for knowledge, can entail a conclusion that is not sufficient in likelihood for knowledge due to the accumulation of epistemic risk, so even if Cottingham were to claim he did know the conditional, yet not that God existed, his position would not display a *logical* incoherence, as Metz claims.[9] (So, even were I to be mistaken about Metz' infallibilism and he in fact accepts a fallibilist epistemology, this will not allow him to convict Cottingham of such an incoherence.) Now, depending on the level of epistemic risk one assigns to the premises, Metz' argument may well locate greater or lesser tension in such a position – where the less the tension the more implausibly great the level of epistemic risk one is taken to tolerate for the premises. Certain comments from Metz suggest that he may be amenable to constructing a weaker argument along these lines: he sometimes talks of the strength of the evidence for a God-based ethic needing to be only comparable, rather than equal, to that of God's existence.[10] And he posits that, for theists who maintain that they do know God's existence, he might grant this but reformulate his objection to invoke 'a large discrepancy in the degree of justification for believing in God relative to that for believing in meaning [or wrongness]'.[11] Whilst we should agree that a weaker argument along these lines avoids the problem of epistemic risk, moving from a claim of incoherence to a claim of tension does lessen the dialectical force of the objection. So many of the words used in constructing the objection and assessing its force will be vague ('risk', 'comparable', 'justification') that, coupled with the considerations about transmission in section 5, a weaker objection may be hard to press (though obviously this will vary from individual to individual).

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[9] Cf. Metz (2013), p.88 and p.94 for his claims of specifically logical incoherence.

[10] Metz (2013), p.88.

[11] Metz (2013), p.146, footnote 3. I am not sure that objection can be reformulated in this context, as given that, for Metz, knowledge must be based on conclusive evidence, and evidence is either conclusive or it is not (being conclusive is not a property that comes in degrees), there can be no discrepancy in the degree of the justifying evidence. One cannot be more than certain.

Now, of course, there have been various ways mooted in the literature to maintain both fallibilism and multi-premise closure principles, so the foregoing does not show that Cottingham or others can just ignore (A*). However, all of these methods have to do *something* with both the epistemic paradoxes and the plausible intuition that, on fallibilism, epistemic risk increases as we add fallibly known premises (an intuition that Metz seems to share, insofar as he concedes that if we focus on 'confidence' rather than 'knowledge' his argument fails), and unless what they do with these manages to reconcile fallibilism and multi-premise closure principles *and* preserve Metz' argument, that argument cannot be said to have isolated a logical incoherence in Cottingham's view. It is, it would seem, encumbent on Metz to produce an epistemological theory which can accomplish all this in order to press his argument.

Maybe Metz can just reject Cottingham's fallibilism. Aside from putting a (substantial) theoretical price tag on his argument, such an embrace of infallibilism may have other unattractive consequences. Metz seems to think that his own naturalistic grounding of morality is immune to a *tu quoque* objection of logical incoherence, since '[v]irtually no one disputes that there is a material world'.[12] I take him here to mean that his position satisfies (A*), as he knows that morality exists, he knows that morality is a function of natural properties, and so he knows what this entails: that there are natural properties. But does Metz know all these things on infallibilism? He claims that knowledge requires having 'conclusive evidence', but it is hard to see how he acquires such evidence for the material world's existence just from the sociological fact that virtually no one disputes this claim. In order to claim that he has conclusive evidence for this claim, Metz would have to conclusively refute idealism, solipsism and scepticism about the external world (Metz own principle (A*) is, of course, handy in formulating this point). It is just the sort of difficulties that one has in doing this that have provided part of the motivation for fallibilist construals of knowledge. Metz also denies that we have inconclusive evidence that wrongness exists. In doing so he appeals to Cottingham's claim that, say, cruelty is not just wrong if wrongness exists, but is in fact wrong, on the basis that wrong actions such as cruelty are wrong in all possible worlds. Metz seems to take this to amount to an explicit denial that there is merely inconclusive evidence that wrongness exists.[13] But I am not sure that I see how this follows

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[12] Metz (2013), p.159.
[13] Metz (2013), p.90.

(or that Cottingham meant his claim to establish this). Someone who doubts that wrongness exists in this world (that is to say, they doubt that cruelty is really objectively wrong, and instead explain our moral intuitions via some kind of error theory, for example) need not find their doubts assuaged by being told that, if wrongness exists in this world, it exists in all other worlds. They might even find their doubts increased, as the latter claim is much stronger! Even if true, Metz' statement that most debate in moral philosophy is not about whether wrongness exists, but about its nature and epistemology once again seems to tell us less about wrongness and more about what moral philosophers are interested in; certainly, by itself it does not provide the conclusive evidence that an infallibilist would take to be required for knowledge. Finally, both the claim that wrongness exists and the claim that the material world exists seem to have much more evidential support to me than Metz' claim that naturalism can ground morality (even if we suppose the evidence for the latter to be pretty good). Given this, Metz' own position does not satisfy principle (A*) (as he seems to suggest it does) because, according to epistemological standards whereby one must have conclusive evidence, he does not know either his two premises or his conclusion.

4. A Successful *Tu Quoque* Argument?

This shows that Metz' own way to avoid a *tu quoque* argument is unsuccessful. Metz would avoid the logical incoherence claim, not because his conclusion is known, as are both of his premises, but because his conclusion is *not* known, as are both of his premises. According to such epistemological standards, Cottingham's position will avoid the logical incoherence claim for the same reasons. This would leave Metz and Cottingham's positions in the same boat, as regards the incoherence objection – but Metz' argument against Cottingham just *was* the incoherence objection. Problems do not end there, however. Cottingham might attempt to mount a successful *tu quoque* attack on Metz' naturalistic grounding of morality using fallibilist epistemological standards. At first, the prospects for this look bleak, as on fallibilism it appears as though Metz does know that natural properties exist, which is presumably the counterpart to the claim that Cottingham does not think he knows, namely that God exists. But suppose we restructure some of Metz' claims. We (fallibly) know that wrongness exists. We also know the following entailment: if

wrongness exists, then a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct.[14] So, to avoid violating (A*) (and bracketing my earlier remarks about the accumulation of epistemic risk over premises), we must know that a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct. Now, Metz only says that 'nature could plausibly ground such an [objective] ethic',[15] which suggests to me that, even on falliblism, he may not believe that he knows this conclusion (I myself find a number of propositions plausible, but I would want to stop short of saying that I (even fallibly) knew them to be true). And more generally, I do not think that many of us would want to say that we *know* that a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is correct, still less the rather complex Cornell meta-ethical realism that Metz thinks is the right one. Or, to speak in terms of comparability, I do not think my justification for believing Cornell meta-ethical realism to be correct is comparable to my justification for believing that torturing an innocent child for fun is wrong (even given Metz' arguments for the former). If this is so, then we display the same sort of incoherence as Metz claims Cottingham does. Of course it is open to Metz to claim that he never said he knew the entailment 'If wrongness exists, then a naturalistic theory of grounding wrongness is true'. This is essentially Cottingham's move, and so it will lead to dialectical parity.[16]

It seems to me that the reason why we have to restructure Metz' claims to produce the *tu quoque* argument lies in the difference between divine command ethics and naturalistic ethics. In the case of the former, if we, with Metz, leave Euthyphro problems aside, the difficulty is always liable to be the ontological claim (that God exists), rather than the grounding claim (that God grounds objective ethics). In the case of the latter, matters are reversed; the hard doctrine is not the ontological one (that natural properties exist), but the grounding claim (that natural properties can ground rightness and wrongness). When Metz outlines the position that he alleges Cottingham is incoherent in accepting he suppresses the less controversial grounding claim: 'Wrongness exists. If wrongness exists, then [theistic grounding is true, which entails that] God exists.

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[14] I take Metz' arguments (in particular, the incoherence objection) against both supernaturalist and non-naturalist attempts to ground wrongness to be attempts to establish this conditional, along with any arguments/presumptions in favour of naturalism as a metaphysical thesis.
[15] Metz (2013), p.97.
[16] Nevertheless, this would be a rather odd move for Metz to make, as it would seem to imply that the incoherence objection, by which he hopes to rule out alternatives to naturalistic grounding, is inconclusive.

Therefore God exists.' When I outline the position that I allege Metz is incoherent in accepting I suppress the less controversial ontological claim (given here in square brackets): 'Wrongness exists. If wrongness exists, then naturalistic grounding is true [which entails that natural properties exist]. Therefore naturalistic grounding is true.' Moreover, it is notable that both Cottingham and Metz offer arguments to support their respective grounding claims, and neither offer arguments to support their ontological claims (although elsewhere in his work Cottingham argues that God's existence is at least consistent with our total evidence, *contra* some of Metz' expressed reasons for doubting God[17]), which does put Cottingham in a dialectically weaker position: Metz is bolstering his vulnerable flank with arguments, whereas Cottingham is merely further bolstering his well-defended flank (although in doing so he is aiming arguments against Metz' grounding claim).

5. Psychological Doubt vs. Rational Doubt

Another possibility might be for Metz to say that he has given arguments for his conditional and for the existence of wrongness, and the evidential force of these arguments transmit, in accordance with (A*), to his conclusion; it is irrational not to say that one knows it given this. As I said above, it seems that Metz would not want to say this, but he could change his mind – as could Cottingham (alternatively they could both change their minds and say that the application of (A*) would just provide us with reason to doubt that wrongness exists). Were the latter to regiment his claims so as to conform them to (A*), he would present something very much like a moral argument for the existence of God of the type used, for example, by William Lane Craig (although Craig typically says that his premises are just more worthy of belief than their denial, and so transmit the commensurate level of evidence).[18] In a footnote, Metz considers the suggestion of Roger Crisp that this possibility can be applied to Cottingham, but I do not follow his response: he seems to indicate that this

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[17] Metz (2013), p.243.

[18] Craig outlines his moral argument for God in his (2008), pp.172-183. It is interesting to note that, if we were to take this regimentation of claims in response to Metz' use of the incoherence argument against supernaturalism about *meaning*, we could say that Metz has devised a new argument for the existence of God from meaningfulness! It is also necessary to carefully assess other reasons for and against believing in the existence of God; Metz perfectly understandably does not want to spend time doing this, but a proper discussion (rather than an appeal to what many philosophers think – Metz (2013), p. 146) cannot be postponed indefinitely.

possibility cannot be used by Cottingham as most of us are unsure of the claim that if wrongness exists, then God exists. Further, continues Metz, Cottingham's work gains importance insofar as it defends that claim so powerfully. But surely whether we are unsure of the conditional claim is not a problem for *Cottingham*, as, on Metz' interpretation, the former does take himself to know this? Moreover, as Metz observes, Cottingham has given us arguments to *establish* that we know this conditional, and so it may be unjustified to be unsure of the claim, depending on how successful those arguments are. Metz' main objection against Cottingham's conditional is his incoherence objection, which the possibility we are currently considering is a response against; it thus would beg the question to assert that this response fails because of the incoherence objection alone.

One way of mitigating some of the counterintuitive nature of these sorts of 'newly discovered knowledge' responses is to note the difference that the tweaks that alter Metz' principle (A) to principle (A*) make; specifically, the difference made by altering the principle from a closure principle to a transmission principle (perhaps Metz will disagree with this alteration to a stronger principle, but I cannot see on what grounds he would). This makes a difference when we consider the difference between psychological doubt and rational doubt; supposing Kripkean semantics to be true (as Metz does[19]), it may be possible for me to psychologically doubt that water is H_2O, but it is not possible for me to rationally doubt it (the reason for this might be explained by, for example, using David Chalmers' distinction between prima facie and ideally conceiving that water is not H_2O; we can do the former, but not the latter[20]). If we baldly ask someone whether they know all of the three claims Metz attributes to Cottingham, in accordance with closure (Metz' own un-tweaked principle (A)), but omitting any mention of evidence transmission, they might find it easier to psychologically doubt the claim Metz singles out for doubt than if we made evidence transmission salient (in accordance with the tweaked principle (A*)), even though they cannot rationally doubt the conclusion in either case (assuming we set aside accumulation of epistemic risk). Further support for this may come from considering that Metz' argument is one based on *logical* incoherence, and logical modelling of our epistemic practices frequently has to deal with the problem of (lack of) logical omniscience; epistemic agents typically do not follow through the logical consequences of all their beliefs or knowledge (as

[19] Metz (2013), p.91.
[20] On Chalmers' distinction, see his (2002), pp.147-149.

was indicated by the first tweak I had to make to (A)), and so certain conclusions may come as a surprise to them, and as initially counterintuitive. However, in being taken through their reasoning and showing how the evidence transmits, it may be that the epistemic agent will realise that they cannot rationally doubt the surprising conclusion, and, seeing how it follows from other propositions they have good reason to believe or to think they know, their initial sense of dubiousness about that conclusion will dissipate. Hence, I am suspicious of how much weight we can place on subjects' initial impressions of what they think they know out of a set of propositions we express baldly, tied together by a very simple epistemic closure principle: such a scenario leaves a lot of room for impressions tinted with a merely psychological doubt that may only be dissipated by allowing the epistemic agent to ruminate and 'live with' his or her new-found recognition of the connections between propositions (I think Cottingham might agree with this sort of point).

One way of marking this distinction between psychological and rational doubt would be to tie it to the familiar epistemological distinction between our doxastic warrant and our propositional warrant. This latter distinction is useful as it is a common observation that what we are justified in believing and what we take ourselves to be justified in believing are two different things. I have propositional warrant for p iff, given the evidence I possess, believing p is rational. I have doxastic warrant for p iff, on the actual evidence I take to myself to have for p, believing p is rational. With this distinction in place we can posit the possibility that someone who thinks they know that wrongness exists and that if wrongness exists then God exists, but does not think they know that God exists can coherently hold all of this if we are talking about knowledge insofar as it is doxastically warranted, but not insofar as it is propositionally warranted. Neither (A) nor (A*) are applicable to knowledge insofar as it is based on doxastic warrant. Of course, once we make that individual aware that their propositional warrant, which should conform to (A*), does not conform to it, they will want to make it so conform. But there is no set way as to *how* they go about doing that, at least, not without bringing in further substantive considerations that will affect that propositional warrant.

We might add that incoherence objections based on transmission principles like Metz' are dialectically quite strange. If one just states that, if one knows the premises of an argument but not the conclusion, then there must be something

wrong with one of the premises, this seems to license dogmatism.[21] We must ask *why* one doubts the conclusion. If one cannot give a reason, then one's doubt in it is likely to be merely psychological. If one can give a reason (and Metz believes that he himself can), then one must transmit one's doubt to one of the premises, and furthermore, give reasons for one's doubt in that premise. Otherwise one would be doubting that premise, rather than another premise, or the premises of the reasons one has given for doubting the conclusion, irrationally, and this is just as bad as doubting the conclusion irrationally. Now, if one has reasons for one's doubt in the premise, one should give them, but Metz does not do this. His argument is the incoherence objection, but if, as the foregoing suggests, the incoherence objection will only have force if one has some substantive reasons against one of the premises anyway, the former objection drops out as irrelevant.

6. Transmission Failure

Earlier, I promised to return to the issue of transmission failure, and how it might affect the incoherence objection. The literature on transmission principles is steadily growing, and, within the confines of this article, I can only sketch some of the ideas and how they might relate to Metz' argument. In doing so my plan is to follow some of the discussion in Martin Davies' 'Two Purposes of Arguing and Two Epistemic Projects', which has the benefit of being both fairly self-contained and wide-ranging. We can begin by using Davies' distinction between the two epistemic projects mentioned in the title of his article to situate Metz' argument. Metz' account of what we take our epistemic attitudes to his three propositions to be seems closer to what Davies calls the epistemic project of 'deciding what to believe' than the epistemic project of 'settling the question'. That is to say, when we examine these propositions we are trying to tease out of the consequences of some of our beliefs, specifically here our belief that we know (1) and (2) and that we do not know (3). Metz' claim, remember, is that if we think we know (1) and (2), we must also say we know (3) in virtue of (1) and (2) transmitting their warrant to (3). However, this will only be true if the argument that has (1) and (2) as premises and (3) as a conclusion (henceforth: 'Argument (1)-(3)') does not exhibit transmission failure. Whether it does or not

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[21] Cf. Harman (1977), p.148, for the similar Kripke-Harman paradox of dogmatism.

will depend on how we understand transmission failure. Take Davies' first criterion for transmission failure based on Copi:

> (C1) The warrant, W, to believe premise P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if W depends on an antecedent warrant to believe Q.

Strictly speaking, I do not think Argument (1)-(3) does suffer from transmission failure according to this criterion. Whichever premise we take as P1, I fail to see that the warrant for (1) 'Wrongness exists' or (2) 'If wrongness exists, then God exists' requires an antecedent warrant to believe (3) 'God exists', at least in any obvious way.

That said, Davies offers a second criterion for transmission failure based on Copi which I think does apply to Argument (1)-(3), *viz*:

> (C2) The warrant, W, to believe premise, P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if W depends on an antecedent warrant to believe B, and there is a direct argument from B plus acceptance of P2 to Q.[22]

First, why does Davies propose this criterion when he already has (C1)? Well, one factor that makes an argument less-than-well-suited (although not wholly unsuited) to the project of deciding what to believe is if it exhibits 'epistemic indirectness', that is, if it takes a gratuitous detour to its conclusion – it is needlessly indirect. Such an argument involves departing from the 'norm of conforming the structure of one's network of beliefs to the structure of the abstract space of warrants'.[23]

Assuming we adopt (C2), Argument (1)-(3) fulfils the criterion in the following way. Take the premise (2) 'If wrongness exists, God exists'. I submit that the warrant brought forward for this premise is such that it depends on an antecedent warrant to believe a certain proposition, and there is a direct argument from that proposition to 'God exists'. So what is the warrant that is advanced for (2)? Metz provides a handy capsule summary of Cottingham's

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[22] Note that I have generalised Davies' formulations of (C1), (C2) and (J) to cover two-premised arguments, as the argument under discussion, Argument (1)-(3), is of this type.
[23] Davies (2009), p.373.

warrant for believing premise (2) in section 5.4 of *Meaning in Life*: the moral norms that allow for attributions of wrongness or rightness must be universal in scope, objective, necessary and normative, but only God has the required attributes to ground moral norms with these characteristics. I will not examine how certain attributes of God serve to ground certain of these characteristics of moral norms, with the exception of the one relevant to showing how Argument (1)-(3) exhibits transmission failure. Metz claims that, if God exists necessarily and could not change His mind, then any commands He gives that ground moral norms would be necessary, and so those norms would also be necessary. Such a claim is meant to provide warrant for (2). However, this warrant depends on an antecedent warrant to believe the proposition 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists'. Since there is a direct argument from 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists' to (3) 'God exists', the conclusion of Argument (1)-(3), that argument meets the criterion for transmission failure according to (C2).

Let us look at these last two claims in more detail. Why does the warrant adduced to believe (2) require antecedent warrant to believe 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists'? Well, if it is not possible that it necessarily be the case that God should exist, then it is not possible that God should, by means of the attributes He possesses, ground the necessity of moral norms. God, not being even possibly necessary, will not exist in some worlds, whereas moral norms, being putatively necessary, exist in all of them. A result of this is that God cannot be said to be an adequate ground of necessary moral norms (after all, Metz followed Cottingham in appealing to God's necessary existence as the attribute required to effect His capacity to ground them). If this is so, then we have no warrant to believe (2) 'If wrongness exists, then God exists'. Now, as for the second claim, acceptance of the proposition 'A necessary being possibly exists' amounts to conceding the controversial premise of the modal ontological argument proposed by philosophers such as Plantinga,[24] the conclusion of which is 'God exists', that is, (3). Assuming the majority view that the modal system of S5 captures the logic of our claims about metaphysical possibility and necessity, the following argument is valid: (O1) It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists, (O2) (Therefore) God exists.[25] (O2) is the same as (3). So there is a direct argument from 'It is possible that it is

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[24] Cf. Plantinga (1974), Chapter X.
[25] Cf. Oppy (1995), p.70.

necessarily the case that God exists', which is (necessarily part of) the warrant for (2), to (3), namely the conclusion of Argument (1)-(3). Hence Argument (1)-(3) conforms to (C2), and so fails to transmit warrant.

Before moving on to consider the implications of this, I also note that, for similar reasons, Argument (1)-(3) meets a different criterion for transmission failure that Davies bases on Jackson's work, rather than Copi's, *viz*:

> (J) The warrant, W, to believe premise P1 of a valid argument with conclusion Q, is not transmitted from premise to conclusion if doubt about Q plus acceptance of P2 would directly rationally require acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for W.

Davies seeks to show that any argument meeting (C2) will meet (J). It will be enough to note that where W = 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists' (plus any other ancillary propositions that need to be added to this to constitute warrant for (2)), P1 = (2), P2 = (1) and Q = (3), doubt about (3) will indeed directly rationally require acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists'. Why so? Well, if it is the case that God, if He exists, necessarily exists, then doubts about God's existence, that is, doubts about (3), will be doubts about it being necessarily the case that God exists. But if it must necessarily be the case that God exists if He exists at all (which must after all be true if God is to ground necessary moral norms), then a doubt about whether it be the case that God exists will be a doubt about whether it is possible that it necessarily be the case that God exists – in S5, if a necessary being does not exist in a given world, it will not exist in any possible world, and so will not possibly exist. Thus doubt about (3) leads to acceptance of a defeating hypothesis for 'It is possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists', namely, 'It is not possible that it is necessarily the case that God exists', and hence Argument (1)-(3) fits (J).

Davies also notes that, just as any argument that meets (C1) or (C2) will also meet (J), so any argument that meets (J) will meet (C1) or (C2)[26] provided that we also accept a certain thesis, (AW): If warrant to doubt a proposition B (warrant to believe not-B) would defeat the prima facie warrant to believe P provided by a putative warranting factor, F, then F can constitute a warrant to

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[26] Davies (2009), p.374.

believe P only given an antecedent warrant to believe B. As we have seen Argument (1)-(3) meets (J), and so if we accept (AW), it will also meet (C1), contrary my initial impression.

There is a great deal more that can be said here, such as discussion of the credibility of (AW), comparison of Davies' accounts of transmission failure with others on the market, such as Crispin Wright's or Moretti and Piazza's, or examination of which kind of warrant is transmitted. But as I said earlier it will not be possible for me to outline or treat all of the aspects of the debate over transmission of epistemic warrant and how they relate to Metz' incoherence objection. My discussion here can only really be a first pass, which others may decide to take up or refine for themselves. Given this caveat, I will now go on to sketch what moral I think we can draw from the fact that Argument (1)-(3) is an example of transmission failure.

At first blush, it seems as though this fact will not help Cottingham (or anyone who takes the same view as him) very much. After all, if the warrant for 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', which Cottingham thinks he knows, entails 'God exists', then he also must know that God exists, and so there is indeed an incoherence in Cottingham's view, as Metz suggests (unless we take the points about epistemic risk above).[27] Argument (1)-(3) is an example of transmission failure because warrant is transmitted to its conclusion in a needlessly indirect way, rather than because no warrant is transmitted to it at all. But observing the non-transmissivity of Argument (1)-(3) allows the possibility of a different type of *tu quoque* objection to be issued against Metz: that he himself exemplifies a certain kind of logical incoherence. For Metz, like Cottingham, believes wrongness to exist, and to exist by necessity, and he takes Cottingham to be claiming that the existence of wrongness entails the existence of God, which would mean that God would exist by necessity also. So the concept of God that Metz ascribes to Cottingham is that of a metaphysically necessary being (rather than, say, a Swinburnian metaphysically contingent God).[28] However, Metz only seems to doubt the existence of this God, not to

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[27] Note that it will not help for Cottingham to say he merely believes, rather than knows, the proposition 'If wrongness exists, then God exists', as all that is needed to run the ontological argument is the coherence of the concept of God as a necessary being. That this is Cottingham's concept follows from the necessity of moral truths and the view that God grounds those truths, both of which it seems Cottingham holds. Maybe he can rebut this charge by denying that wrongness is necessarily grounded in God, or necessarily grounded in anything – rather it is just most plausibly grounded in God.

[28] See, e.g., Metz (2013), p.94.

find the concept of such a God incoherent (if he thought the latter was the case, there would be no need to use his argument based on the (A*) principle).[29] As we have seen, to find the concept of a necessary being coherent is to grant the contested premise of Plantinga's modal version of the ontological argument, by which it would follow that Metz is committed to claiming knowledge of God's existence, contra his expressed doubts. Hence it may be possible to charge Metz with incoherence insofar as he allows the possibility of God as a necessary being, yet doubts that God exists in actuality.

7. Conclusion

None of the issues I raise in this article strike me as dispositive of Metz' incoherence objection. Rather they appear to me to need a number of iterations, developing, countering and re-framing, before their actual impact can be adequately assessed. Nevertheless my hope is that this treatment provides at least a starting point for the process of such an assessment.[30]

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[29] Support for this interpretation seems to come from Metz (2013), p.91, pp.242-243.

[30] My thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to clarify some of the thoughts in this paper.

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