PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 10: Relevant alternatives with closure

Reading:
Stine, G. (1976), 'Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure', *Philosophical Studies* **29**, pp. 249-61.

1. Stine endorses Dretske's *relevant alternatives* account of knowledge, which she summarises as: "a claim to know that *p* is properly made in the context of a limited number of competing alternatives to *p*; to be justified in claiming to know *p* (or simply to know *p*) it is sufficient to be able to rule out alternatives relevant to that context" (p. 249). She calls it "a correct and heartening development."

2. But she thinks that Dretske can respond to the skeptical argument, without denying Closure.

3. She thinks that Closure is always true – that is, that the following is a valid argument for all P and Q:

   S knows that P
   S knows that if P then it follows that Q
   ∴ S knows that Q

4. She considers the following instance:

   John knows that the animal is a zebra
   John knows that if the animal is a zebra then it follows that the animal is not a mule disguised as a zebra
   ∴ John knows that the animal is not a mule disguised as a zebra.

5. She claims that to evaluate the argument for validity, we must keep the relevant alternatives *constant* throughout – otherwise the argument will be automatically invalid.

   Illustration: John knows that Lefty (rather than Bill) killed Otto.
   ∴ John knows that Lefty (rather than Bill or Ben) killed Otto.

   So, if it is not a relevant alternative in the first premise that the animal is a mule disguised as a zebra, then it is not a relevant alternative in the conclusion either.

6. Suppose that there are two relevant alternatives in the context of the first premise: that the animal is a horse, and that the animal is a donkey.

   If John knows that the animal is a zebra, then he can rule out that it is not a horse, and he can rule out that it is not a donkey (because he can rule out all the relevant alternatives).

   But then, in the context of the conclusion, he can rule out all the relevant alternatives as well, because they are the same as in the first premise.

   So John knows that the animal is *not* a mule disguised as a zebra. He can rule out all the relevant alternatives (even if he cannot rule out that it is a mule described as a zebra).

7. Stine explains: it might be *misleading* for a speaker to utter ‘John knows that the animal is not a mule disguised as a zebra’ unless it is a relevant alternative that the animal *is* a mule disguised as a zebra. So, upon hearing it uttered, we naturally assume that the speaker means for it to be a relevant alternative.

   But we must resist taking it to be a relevant alternative, because it is not a relevant alternative in the context of the first premise.

8. Alternatively, we *could* take it to be a relevant alternative, in the context of the conclusion, that the animal is a mule disguised as a zebra. In that case the conclusion is false.

   But then, for the argument to stand a chance of being valid, we must take it to be a relevant alternative in the context of the first premise as well, in which case the first premise is false is well.

9. Either way, if we keep the relevant alternatives constant throughout, the argument is valid – it is not possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false.

10. Stine discusses an important distinction: between the *assertibility conditions* and *truth conditions* of a proposition.

    Consider the proposition that Rollo is either at the beach or at the lecture.

    Here is a condition that must be met for the proposition to be *assertible* by a speaker S:

    S does not know that Rollo is at the beach, and S does not know that Rollo is at the lecture.

    But this is *not* a condition that must be met for the proposition to be *true* – the proposition can be true, even if this condition is not met.

    So there is a difference between the *assertible conditions* and *truth conditions* of the proposition.

    This is important to keep in mind when doing philosophy of language – we are prone to confuse one for the other.