

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 5: Conclusive Reasons

Reading:

Dretske, F. (1971), 'Conclusive Reasons', in Bernecker and Dretske, ch. 6.

1. Dretske proposes a counterexample to Goldman's causal account:

S believes (P) that a nearby mountain M erupted, on the basis (R) that there is solidified lava all around. But not far from M is another mountain N, such that if M had not erupted when it did, N would have erupted instead, producing the same pattern of solidified lava.

According to Goldman's account, S knows P, because her belief that P is causally connected with the fact that P in an appropriate way.

But that seems to be the wrong answer.

2. Dretske diagnoses the reason why S in this case does not know P is that her reason R is not a *conclusive* reason for P. He defines:

R is a conclusive reason for P iff R would not be the case unless P were the case.

In the lava case, R is *not* a conclusive reason for P, because it is *false* that R would not be the case unless P were the case. R *might* have been the case, even if P were not the case – if M had not erupted, there *might* have been solidified lava around. In fact, in this case, R *would* have been the case, even if P were not the case – if M had not erupted, there *would* have been solidified lava around (because N would have erupted instead).

Other ways of saying that R would not be the case unless P were the case:

- Given R, P must be the case
- If P were not the case then R would not be the case

Ways of *denying* that R would not be the case unless P were the case:

- Given R, P might not be the case
- If P were not the case then R might be the case

Not the following (these are contraries, not contradictories):

- Given R, P must not be the case
- If P were not the case then R would be the case

3. Note that, according to this definition, R may be a conclusive reason for P, even if no one believes P, let alone has R as their reason for believing P. So Dretske defines:

S has conclusive reason for believing P iff, for some R:

- R is a conclusive reason for P
- S believes P (without doubt, reservation or question) on the basis of R
- Either S knows R, or R is some experiential state of S

4. Dretske then offers the following account of knowledge:

S knows P iff S has conclusive reason for believing P

That is (putting this all together):

S knows P iff, for some R:

- **S believes P (without doubt, reservation or question) on the basis of R**
- **R would not be the case unless P were the case**
- **Either S knows R, or R is some experiential state of S.**

5. How is this supposed to work? Consider the thermometer case:

S believes (P) that his child's temperature is normal, on the basis (R) that the thermometer reads 98.6F.

Does S know P? According to Dretske, S knows P iff R would not be the case unless P were the case (assuming that S knows R).

If the thermometer is working properly, then it is *true* that R would not be the case unless P were the case, so according to Dretske S *does* know P, which seems to be the right answer.

But if the thermometer gets stuck on 98.6F and never goes higher, then it is *false* that R would not be the case unless P were the case (R might be the case even if P were not the case), so according to Dretske S does *not* know P, at least not on the basis of R, which also seems to be the right answer.

6. Another case is the lottery case:

S believes (P) that she will not win the lottery, on the basis of (R) that she has only a one in a frajillion chance of winning.

Intuitively, S does not *know* P on the basis of R. Dretske gets the right answer: it is false that R would not be the case unless P were the case; it is false that she wouldn't have only one in a frajillion chance of winning unless she will not win the lottery – given that she has only such a small chance it still might be that she wins the lottery.

7. Dretske claims to fair better than Goldman in the eruption case:

S believes (P) that M erupted, on the basis (R) that there is lava all around. But, as we saw above, R is not a conclusive reason for P: it is *false* that R would not be the case unless P were the case. So S does not know P, at least not on the basis of R (which is the intuitively correct answer).

8. How well does Dretske's account handle the Gettier cases?

- a. Ten coins case. S believes (P) that the man who will get the job has ten coins in his pocket, on the basis (R) that Jones will get the job and Jones has ten coins in his pocket.
- b. Farmer case. S believes (P) that there is a sheep in the paddock, on the basis (R) that there looks to be a sheep in the paddock.

9. For S to know P on the basis of R, Dretske requires that R be a conclusive reason for P. He does not require that S *knows* that R is a conclusive reason. And he does not require that S be in a position to give R as his reason. Dretske rejects the KK thesis.