

PHIL 2606: Knowledge, Reason and Action
Lecture 9: Denying closure

Reading:

Dretske, F. (1970), 'Epistemic Operators', *Journal of Philosophy* **67**, pp. 1007-23.¹

1. Recall the skeptical argument that we have been considering:

P₁ You don't know that you are not a BIV.

P₂ If you don't know that you are not a BIV then you don't know that you have hands.

C Therefore, you don't know that you have hands.

2. Dretske argues that we should reject the second premise. He thinks that we *can* know that we have hands, *without* knowing that we are not (handless) BIVs.

3. How can that be? He makes two key claims:

First claim. By 'We know that we have hands' we mean, 'We know that we have hands (rather than that we have stumps, or that we have hooks, or ...)'. The claim is made relative to a background of *relevant alternatives*.

What is an alternative? An alternative to the proposition *p* is any proposition *q* such that *p* and *q* are incompatible (they can't both be true)(*p* and *q* are *contraries*).

It is an alternative to our having hands that we are (handless) BIVs, but in normal contexts this is not a *relevant* alternative. (It might be relevant in some *special* contexts, but it is not in *normal* contexts).

Second claim. To know that *x* is F (rather than that *x* is G, or that *x* is H, or ...), we must know that *x* is not G, that *x* is not H, and so on – that the *relevant alternatives* are false. But we need *not* know, of any *irrelevant* alternative, that it is false.

Maybe we don't have to *know* that they are false, but just have to be able to *rule them out*, or have *evidence against* them.

4. Putting these together: to know that we have hands, we must know that we do not have stumps, that we do not have hooks, and so on. But we need *not* know that we are not (handless) BIVs.

5. Dretske rejects the closure principle:

(Closure) If S knows that P, and S know that if P then it follows that Q, then it follows that S knows that Q.

6. Dretske agrees that Closure is *sometimes* true (i.e. it is true for some S, P, and Q). He agrees that the following is true:

If S knows that grass is green and snow is white, and S knows that if grass is green and snow is white then it follows that grass is green, then it follows that S knows that grass is green.

¹ For another early relevant alternatives theory, see Goldman, A. (1976), 'Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge', *Journal of Philosophy* **73**, pp. 771-91.

7. But Dretske denies that Closure is *always* true. He denies that the following is true:

If S knows that *Lefty* killed Otto, and S knows that if *Lefty* killed Otto then it follows that *Lefty killed Otto*, then it follows that S knows that *Lefty killed Otto*.

8. Dretske calls ‘S knows that ...’ a *semi-penetrating* operator.

Why ‘operator’? Because ‘S knows that ...’ *operates* on a sentence to produce a sentence. It operates on the sentence ‘Grass is green’, for example, to produce the sentence ‘S knows that grass is green’.

Why ‘semi-penetrating’? Because, for any given P, Closure is true for *some* Q but not *all*.

9. He contrasts it with operators that he takes to be *fully penetrating*, and operators that he takes to be *nonpenetrating*:

Fully penetrating: ‘It is true that ...’, ‘It is a fact that ...’, ‘It is necessary that ...’, ‘It is possible that ...’.

Nonpenetrating: ‘It is lucky that ...’, ‘It is strange that ...’, ‘It was a mistake that ...’, ‘It was accidental that ...’.

10. So what reason does Dretske give us for thinking that ‘S knows that ...’ is not fully penetrating? He argues by analogy (which he admits to being a weak kind of argument):

One can explain why *Lefty* killed Otto (because *Lefty* was the local hit man), without explaining why *Lefty* killed *Otto*.

One can have good reason to believe that *Lefty* killed Otto (he was found with a bloody knife), without having good reason to believe that *Lefty* killed *Otto*.

So too, one can know that *Lefty* killed Otto, without knowing that *Lefty* killed *Otto*.

11. His semantic claim about sentences of the form ‘S knows that P’ is crucial here. By the sentence ‘S knows that *Lefty* killed Otto’ we might mean any of the following things:

- S knows that *Lefty* (rather than someone else) killed Otto.
- S knows that *Lefty killed* (rather than did something else to) Otto.
- S knows that *Lefty* killed *Otto* (rather than someone else).
- S knows that *Lefty killed Otto* (rather than did something else).
- S knows that *Lefty* killed *Otto* (rather than two other people being involved).

12. Challenge for Dretske: what makes some alternatives relevant and others not? **Dretske**: “A relevant alternative is an alternative that might have been realized in the existing circumstances if the actual state of affairs had not materialized.” **Goldman**: a relevant alternative is one that we have some reason to think is true.

13. Problem for Dretske: the account allows there to be true *abominable conjunctions*: ‘I know that I have hands, but I do not know that I am not a (handless) BIV.’^{2,3}

² See De Rose, K. (1995), ‘Solving the Skeptical Problem’, *Philosophical Review* **104**, pp. 1-52.

³ For criticisms of the relevant alternatives approach, see Sosa, E. (2003), ‘Relevant Alternatives, Contextualism Included’, *Philosophical Studies* **119**, pp. 3-15, and Vogel, J. (1999), ‘The New Relevant Alternatives Theory’, *Philosophical Perspectives* **13**, pp. 155-80.