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REVIEW

Author: Fred Dretske

Title: Perception, Knowledge and Belief: Selected Essays

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Fred Dretske has during several decades been preoccupied with some of the most pressing problems within epistemology and the philosophy of mind. The new book, a volume of previously published, selected articles, extends over his entire production with contributions from 1970 to 1999. The scope of the volume makes it most welcome, since it allows the reader to get an overview of Dretske’s philosophical position and how it has developed over the years. The fifteen articles in the volume are well kept together and gathered around a few central issues. Dretske’s style is very lucid, which permits the reader not only to quickly enter into Dretske’s universe of thought, but also to quite rapidly discern points of disagreement.

Dretske’s theories have had, and continue to have, a major impact on the contemporary discussion in epistemology and philosophy of mind as well as in cognitive science. They form an essential part of the general program of naturalizing philosophy. Dretske aims at giving a naturalistic theory of the mind. To Dretske, this endeavour means to articulate the application conditions of perplexing concepts in order that the concepts can be used in scientific theories, theories about whatever it is that the concepts apply to. Examples of such concepts are belief and experience. The articles in the volume are good examples of how naturalised philosophy may proceed.

The book has three parts, each devoted to a particular area. The areas are knowledge, perception and experience, and thought and intentionality, in that order. The order mirrors the development of Dretske’s philosophical interests. The articles in the first part, which concerns epistemological questions, are characterised by a change of perspectives on traditional problems. For instance, in one article Dretske’s concern is to explain why understanding what it is to have a belief is as difficult as understanding what it means to have knowledge. Belief is, as Dretske sees it, a state that often is taken to be unproblematic in traditional epistemology, while knowledge is considered to be the hard problem. Dretske thinks, however, that belief requires exactly the same skills as knowing. If you have the cognitive capacity to believe, you also have the cognitive capacity to know. This means that whenever an agent has a belief, it is in that agent’s power to know whether that belief is true or not.

The claim is based in a theory about how concepts are acquired. Beliefs are a special kind of representation. When we know how the content of representations is determined, then we can know whether the representations are reliable. A creature can have beliefs about different things to the extent that it is sensitive to information about those things. If it is sensitive to such information, it will also be in the position to know whether a certain representation that relies on the information in question is true or false. Whether the creature is sensitive or not is determined by the informational pickup and processing capacities of the creature, more specifically, its capacity to learn. Knowledge makes it possible to trust one’s senses, and arises when information, by learning, is forged into concepts that underlie belief.

The sceptic declares that we cannot know whether what we believe is true, but should instead, according to Dretske, be saying that we do not believe what we think we believe. The reason is that if we do not have the appropriate conceptual capacity to know something, we do not have the capacity to form a belief about it either.

In another article, Dretske attacks traditional scepticism more directly, arguing that traditional sceptical arguments exploit such consequences of a proposition to which epistemic operators do not penetrate. Dretske holds that epistemic operators, such as know that, see that, have reason to believe that, et cetera, do not penetrate to all known consequences of a proposition. Sceptical arguments exploit irrelevant alternatives or consequences of what is known. Not everything that is presupposed by a proposition is involved in the claim that the proposition is true. And not more than what is involved can reasonably be questioned.

Typical of Dretske’s way of doing philosophy is a constant urge to underline the similarities in the cognitive processes of animals and humans. He does not see a principled difference in, for instance, what is means to know something relative to animals or to humans. We know different things, but the way we know is the same.

In the second part of the book, the focus is on perception and experience. Dretske starts from the assumption that there is a difference between perception and conception, between sentience and sapience. Furnished with this basic distinction, he can go on to explain how there can be seeing without believing, and conscious experiences without the subject’s being conscious of them. First, simple, or non-epistemic, seeing is functionally independent of cognitive mechanisms, which require learning. It only requires that the sensory system delivers information, not that the information is further processed. Thus we have perception without belief.

Further, a state is conscious by making the subject aware of whatever the state is about. That does not require that the subject is aware of the state itself. As Dretske puts it, a difference in the world (that is perceived by a subject) makes a difference to the subject even if the subject is not aware of the difference as such. To the contrary, creature consciousness, that is, when the subject is conscious of itself and its mental states, not only of that which the states are about, requires concepts. It depends on the subject’s capacity to perceive facts as opposed to things. /Generality & categorisation!/

Dretske’s discussions about perception and consciousness have a tendency to end up in a kind of black and white picture of the mind. Either you have nothing or you have it all. What drives Dretske in these matters is nevertheless exactly a desire to overcome such a picture. He is opposed to, and argues against, those who claim that cognition in a broad sense requires concepts, and that only those who have a linguistic capacity can use concepts. Instead he draws a picture according to which also animals can know, experience and be conscious, in which the continuity between sentience and sapience is emphasised.

Still, one might wonder if there is not room for something in between simple seeing and epistemic seeing, in between instant and punctuate state consciousness and the lucidness of creature consciousness. One factor that Dretske does not bring up, but if introduced probably would point to a more complex picture of the mind, is the importance of memory to cognition. There are many kinds of memory, and they all support different kind of information processing, in relation to as different things as what kind of information is stored, how it is stored, for how long time, for what purpose, and so on.

If we want to do justice to the full range of human cognition, and still accord some kind of cognition to animals, infants, et cetera, it seems necessary to differentiate among kinds of cognition. There is not only a distinction to be upheld between the phenomenal and the conceptual sphere. There also is a distinction between the non-conceptual and the conceptual to be made. Learning naturally plays an important role in this. Dretske, however, does not devote enough attention to the complexities of learning, nor to the interplay between learning and memory functions, to be able to give the full picture.

In the articles of the third part of the book, the global aim is to explain how reasons can be causally efficacious. This is a crucial question for a naturalized philosophy of mind. Dretske explains how information (and not only the signals that carry it) can have causal effects by means of a theory of discrimination learning. The idea is the following. Let us say that there is an internal structure in the subject that under normal conditions carries information about a certain condition P that is to be discriminated. During learning this particular structure acquires control functions it did not formerly have. In Dretske’s words, the structure is converted into a switch for the behaviour that through the learning becomes co-ordinated with condition P. Thus the structure is recruited as a cause for the behaviour.

Thus it is not the information-carrying structure that is responsible for the causal effect on behaviour. It is the information *per se* that has a causal impact. It can have such an impact because that which is responsible for a certain internal structure’s being selected to cause a certain behaviour in the first place are the semantic properties of the structure. These semantic, or relational, properties do not supervene on intrinsic neurophysiological properties. The semantic properties are explained in terms of correlation and co-occurrence between the internal structure and some condition P. Thus the causal effects of a signal depends on what it carries information about.

This is a neat account of so-called mental causation. Whether one accepts it or not depends on, among other things, whether one is prepared to accept the semantic theory that it relies on. It is well-known that there are problems with this semantics, but that should not discourage anybody from reading Dretske.

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