

## HAS DRETSKE REALLY REFUTED SKEPTICISM?

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In this paper, I want to examine a particular challenge to skepticism which seems to be gaining some degree of popularity in current philosophical literature,<sup>1</sup> and which, I believe, fails to establish its case against skepticism in virtue of its trading on a crucial ambiguity.

Suppose Ivan claims to know the following:

(1) The wall of my office is beige.

Now, in order to cast doubt on Ivan's claim to know (1), a skeptic might point out that (1) entails the following proposition:

(2) The wall of my office is not white, and cleverly illuminated to appear beige.

The skeptic could argue, at this point, that Ivan cannot be certain that the wall of his office is not white, and cleverly illuminated to look beige (or at least, that Ivan has taken no special precautions to insure that it is not), so for all Ivan knows, (2) might be false. But (2) is entailed by (1), so if (2) might be false, then (1) might also be false. And in that case, assuming that Ivan is aware that (1) entails (2), Ivan would be quite presumptuous in claiming to know (1).

This sort of skeptical argument might be advanced in order to raise doubts about Ivan's claim to know (1), and the intent of such an argument might be to raise sufficient doubt to cause Ivan to withdraw his claim to know (1). However, we are not especially concerned here with what a person claims to know, for what a given individual claims to know on some particular occasion might depend upon factors which are irrelevant to our present concerns. (For example, a person's knowledge claims might be affected by such factors as whether or not he is drunk, whether he has wagered a great sum of money on his claim, whether his life depends upon the truth of his claim, and so on.) In what follows, then, we shall be interested solely in what a person does (or does not) know, regardless of what he might claim in a given situation.

Let us, therefore, consider another example. Suppose Ivan claims to know the following:

(3) The tomato on my table is red.

Again, a skeptic might point out that (3) entails the following proposition:

(4) The object on my table is a tomato, and not an imitation, very cleverly disguised to look like a tomato.

The skeptic can then proceed to argue that Ivan does not, in normal circumstances (or perhaps in any circumstances), know (4), for Ivan presumably lacks adequate evidence for the truth of (4); but since (3) entails (4)--again, assuming that Ivan knows that this entailment holds--Ivan cannot know (3) without knowing (4). Hence, Ivan does not know (3).

In response to this sort of skeptical argument, Dretske<sup>2</sup> (and others,<sup>3</sup> following Dretske's line of argument) has attempted to short-circuit the conclusion of the skeptic's argument by denying one of its premises--the principle of demonstration. That is, Dretske claims that although (3) entails (4), a person could know (3), and know that (3) entails (4), yet fail to know (4). This is so, presumably, because (4) is simply a presupposition of (3), and one's knowing (4) may be quite irrelevant to one's justification for knowing (3).

Dretske offers a number of examples purporting to show that (what I have called) the principle of demonstration is not a necessary condition for justifying what one knows. In each example, Dretske argues that someone can know a given proposition, and know that this proposition entails a second proposition, yet fail to know the second proposition. I intend to argue that all of Dretske's examples are suspect, and each for the same reason: each trades on an ambiguity whose clarification casts doubt on the validity of Dretske's argument.

In each of Dretske's examples, it is the first proposition (that someone supposedly knows) which is problematic. In the last example which we have cited, (3) is such a proposition. If it seems obvious that the meaning of (3) is clear, let me point out what I take to be the crucial ambiguity.

It is not, in this case, at all clear what sort of linguistic function is intended to characterize the definite description in (3). I have in mind here Donnellan's distinction between the referential use, and the

attributive use, of definite descriptions.<sup>4</sup> Depending upon whether the definite description in (3) is used referringly or attributively, different sorts of justification will be required for one's knowing (3). Hence, whether one's knowing (3) requires one's knowing (4) remains unclear. The difficulty, moreover, takes on the form of a dilemma: If, on the one hand, the description in (3) is used attributively, then (3) clearly entails (4), but the principle of demonstration holds; if, on the other hand, the description in (3) is used referringly, then the principle of demonstration fails to hold, but only because (3) no longer entails (4), and thus the example is irrelevant to the principle of demonstration.

The ambiguity of (3) can be equally illustrated in terms of the de re / de dicto distinction, (and drawing out the ambiguity of propositions like (3) in these terms will apply even to propositions containing no definite descriptions). In the example under consideration, it is not clear whether Ivan's knowing (3) amounts to de re or de dicto knowledge. Thus:

- (5) The x on Ivan's table is a tomato, and (Ivan knows that x is red);
- (6) Ivan knows that (the x on his table is a tomato, and x is red).

Once again, the difficulty here takes the form of a dilemma: If, on the one hand, Ivan's knowing (3) amounts to de dicto knowledge, then (3) entails (4), but the principle of demonstration holds; if, on the other hand, Ivan's knowing (3) amounts to de re knowledge, then the principle of demonstration fails to hold, but only because (3) no longer entails (4), and thus the example is irrelevant to the principle of demonstration.

Now, it could be argued that Dretske succeeds in refuting at least one sort of skeptic, viz., the skeptic who holds that nothing can be known; for on Dretske's account, many things can be known, in spite of the difficulties which he encounters in denying the principle of demonstration. In response to such a suggestion, I have three comments: First, it is not clear that there are any such radical skeptics, and if not, then a refutation of such skepticism would be a straw-man argument. Second, even if there were such radical skeptics, one would not need to deny the principle of demonstration, as Dretske does, in order to effect a refutation of such skepticism. And finally, the sort of skeptic who is apt to appeal to the principle of demonstration to strengthen his challenge is not a skeptic who holds that all knowledge is impossible, but more likely a skeptic who argues

that we can have no perceptual knowledge, or a skeptic who argues that we can have no knowledge of an external world.

In what follows, I shall consider a skeptic--call him Doubting Thomas--who denies the possibility of knowledge of an external world, and I shall try to indicate how he uses the principle of demonstration to strengthen his challenge. I do not want to suggest that such skepticism is unassailable, but I shall argue that Dretske's line of argument has no force whatever against such a skeptic. That is, whatever may be wrong about Doubting Thomas' argument is untouched by the sort of attack levelled by Dretske.

Let us, then, consider one of Doubting Thomas' typical arguments. Suppose Ivan claims to know the following:

(7) Some tables are brown.

This proposition, Thomas asserts, entails:

(8) Some tables exist.

Assuming that Ivan knows that (7) entails (8), Thomas argues that Ivan cannot know (7) unless he knows (8), and further, that Ivan cannot know (8).<sup>5</sup> Hence, Ivan cannot know (7).

Now, in accordance with Dretske's line of argument, someone could attempt to short-circuit this skeptical challenge by arguing that Ivan can indeed know (7), and know that (7) entails (8), yet fail to know (8).<sup>6</sup> This would be possible, presumably, because one's knowing (8) is irrelevant to the justification for one's knowing (7). Or is it?

Consider proposition (7). Like the previous cases we have examined, (7) is plagued by a troublesome ambiguity. It is not at all clear what sort of status the proposition is supposed to have. On the one hand, it might be intended as an ontological claim. If so, (7) might be understood to assert the following:

(7a) 'Brown table' has a veridical use.

On the other hand, (7) might equally well be intended as a grammatical claim. In this case, we might understand (7) to assert:

(7b) 'Brown table' has a correct use.

Note that there is no corresponding ambiguity about proposition (8). This proposition is intended (by Thomas, at least) as an ontological claim, and may be understood as asserting that 'table' has a veridical use.

Now, Thomas proceeds to argue, the extension of correctly applied denoting terms may be identical with the extension of veridically applied denoting terms, but whether there is any such extensional identity is a purely contingent matter. For the concept of correct linguistic usage is not identical with the concept of veridical linguistic usage. Whether or not a term is applied correctly depends upon whether it is applied in accordance with a given set of syntactic and semantic rules. And whether or not a term is applied veridically depends upon whether the object named by that term exists. It is always possible, Thomas asserts, that we apply our terms in accordance with all of the semantic criteria at our disposal (i.e., we apply our words correctly), yet fail to apply our words veridically. Hence, the truth of (7a) and (8) requires the existence of an external world--specifically, the existence of brown tables; the truth of (7b) does not. It is clear, Thomas argues, that (7a) entails (8), and equally clear that (7b) does not--for it may be true that 'brown table' has a correct use, but false that 'table' has a veridical use.

When Doubting Thomas appeals to the principle of demonstration, and argues that a person cannot know (7) without knowing (8), he (Thomas) is claiming that a person cannot know (7a) without knowing (8)--that is, assuming that he knows that the entailment holds. Thomas' reason for appealing to the entailment is understandable: he wants to argue that we cannot know that brown tables exist unless we know that tables exist.

On the other hand, to deny the principle of demonstration, (in this case, to argue that someone can know (7) without knowing (8), even granting that they know the entailment holds), seems to amount to a claim that a person can know (7b) without knowing (8). If, after all, we should be asked to justify Ivan's knowing (7), what would count as a justification is not immediately obvious. If we responded by pointing out that Ivan knows what 'brown' means, or that Ivan has the appropriate criteria for applying 'brown', Thomas might understandably argue that we have merely justified Ivan's knowing that 'brown table' has a correct use; for under the circumstances, we have said nothing which would justify Ivan's knowing that 'brown table' has a veridical use.

Thomas' position, then, is that his skeptical challenge is unscathed by Dretske's line of argument. For one can, at best, support only the thesis that a person can know that 'brown table' has a correct use without knowing whether 'table' has a veridical use. Thomas is willing to grant this argument, because he is quite willing to allow us knowledge about correct linguistic usage. But his argument, he points out, is irrelevant to the principle of demonstration, since (7b) does not entail (8).

When Doubting Thomas argues that we cannot know (7), and know that (7) entails (8), without knowing (8), he is actually arguing that we cannot know (7a) without knowing (8). This is why it is so important to him to appeal to the entailment between (7)--or rather, (7a)--and (8). The reason we cannot know (7), on Thomas' account, is identical with the reason we cannot know (8)--we cannot, he thinks, know that an external world exists. If this were not Thomas' thesis, then it would be quite beside the point to appeal to any entailment between (7) and (8), for our knowledge (or lack of knowledge) about correct linguistic usage, on Thomas' account, is irrelevant to our knowledge (or lack of knowledge) about veridical linguistic usage. Thomas, then, is likely to view Dretske's line of argument as a non sequitur to his skeptical challenge.

I do not suppose that Doubting Thomas will have an easy task in trying to defend his skeptical thesis. Nevertheless, it seems clear that whatever problems Thomas might have, he need not be troubled by the sort of argument levelled by Dretske.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Fred I. Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LXVII, No. 24 (Dec. 24, 1970), pp. 1007-23; and Elizabeth H. Wolgast, "Knowing and What It Implies," Philosophical Review, Vol. LXXX, No. 3 (July, 1971), pp. 360-70.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Wolgast, *ibid.* In what follows, I shall address myself only to Dretske's paper; the force of my comments, however, will apply equally well to Wolgast, and any other philosophers who have adopted Dretske's line of argument.

<sup>4</sup>Keith S. Donnellan, "Reference and Definite Descriptions," Philosophical Review, Vol. LXXV, No. 3 (July, 1966), pp. 281-304.

<sup>5</sup>Let us suppose that Doubting Thomas' reason for claiming that Ivan does not know (8) is as follows: (8) entails a further proposition, viz., "There is no evil genius who is causing me to have false beliefs that material objects exist." Thus, Thomas argues, assuming that Ivan knows that (8) entails this latter proposition, he cannot know (8) unless he knows the latter proposition; and Ivan cannot know the latter proposition.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, this is not the only method of dealing with such a skeptical challenge. One could always argue, e.g., that (8) cannot be known simply because it fails to express a legitimate proposition. I am not, here, interested in such a reply, mainly because it bypasses the principal point of my paper, viz., that whatever difficulties a skeptic might have in denying any knowledge of an external world, his challenge is nevertheless unaffected by the sort of argument levelled by Dretske. Moreover, it is not so clear to me that (8) does not have an intelligible meaning simply because it does not have an established use in normal discourse. Cf. John R. Searle, Speech Acts (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 141-6 ff.