

Fred Dretske, a memorial

Fred Dretske died this summer, at the age of eighty. He was a philosopher of singular quality, inventive, lucid, and fundamental. His work in the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of mind, and his analysis of laws of nature, won him wide recognition and respect. He was a person of great charm, greatly loved by his friends. He came from Waukegan, Illinois, a Midwesterner through and through. He went to Purdue to become an electrical engineer, but he was waylaid by philosophy, and during two years in the service, stationed in New Mexico, he managed learn enough philosophy to be admitted—provisionally—to the graduate program at Minnesota. There he wrote a thesis on the relational theory of time under the supervision of May Brodbeck. In 1960 he took a position at Wisconsin. Married to Brenda Peters (who died in 1984), he would stay in Madison for twenty-eight years. His philosophical power and the quiet force of his personality made him the solid center of the department. He was a superb teacher, a stickler for ‘standards’ in academic matters; he could play the icy commander in his seminars. But there was no arrogance about him or vanity. His manner was modest and even retiring but not from lack of confidence. In philosophy he was very sure of himself. His writing is a model of hard-working philosophical prose, beautifully clear, down-to-earth, driven by example after example (—often featuring a certain Clyde, perhaps another guy from Waukegan).

Fred was entirely a philosopher, not a scholar of philosophy. He had no interest in the history of philosophy, which perhaps requires more patience with obscurity than Fred had, for he had none at all. He had no philosophical heroes. He spent little time criticizing the work of other philosophers. Instead, he devoted himself to working out his own views, in his own way, answers that extended the territory he already had a grip on. Not that he was a solitary worker; on the contrary, he loved good philosophical discussion not least for the society of it. He delighted in a good point, well made. And wherever he went, he enhanced the quality of philosophical society, its cohesion and openness and fertility,

and the pleasure of being a part of that society. At Wisconsin, Fred was the organizer of evening philosophical discussions, presiding over them with unobtrusive authority. Characteristically, these beer-lightened gatherings were never the 'reading groups' common in philosophy departments. They were trial runs of some idea being conceived in one or another of our heads, enriched by the discussion that followed if not mercifully smothered in its crib. A philosophical question was to be addressed face-to-face, not through the veil of someone's view of the matter, or ensnarled in 'the literature', or embalmed in various *isms*. Philosophical arguments were unrelenting but unfailingly good-natured. That golden age of the Wisconsin department was not all Fred by any means, but he was the heart of it. He moved on, in 1988, to settle with his new wife Judith Fortson in Palo Alto. John Perry recalls the ten years Dretske spent at Stanford as a golden age of that department as well. When Fred retired, and moved to Durham, it was not to quit philosophy. He continued to work productively, now in the company of the Duke philosophers. But the main thing was life with Judith.

Dretske called his last book *Naturalizing the Mind*, and the title fits the bulk of his work. His naturalism was less a thesis than a standard he worked by. An account that might satisfy him would employ only the concepts of enlightened common sense and those certified by natural science. Anything else was of no interest to him. He was, certainly, part of the great modern tradition that seeks to understand the place of the human being in the world as it is revealed to us by science—but the understanding he sought was philosophical. He did not think that epistemology or the philosophy of mind might better just deliquesce into some cognate branch of science. Nor did he think the proper methods of philosophy are those of science or that a philosopher's commentary on science was therefore philosophy. But he had a rare ability to put the proceeds of science to fertile philosophical use. The making of plausible models, biological or mechanical, was part of his method—models of the flow of information from the external world to concept and belief, to the movements of the

acting body somehow caused by the representational content of thoughts. (It was suggested that his seminar be re-titled the metaphysics of the thermostat.) He said that to really understand a thing you need to know how to build it.

Fred would be more than embarrassed by eulogy, as he forbade any memorial service when he died. But we may memorialize him in thinking through once again some main strands of his philosophy.

An early piece, in the waning days of phenomenalism, deplored the refusal “to admit that people have any direct perceptual contact with physical objects and events”, with “pencils and paperclips”. At the heart of this morass, Dretske saw a simple confusion, of ‘direct perception’, taken neat and in itself, with various conceptual and theoretical accretions to simply seeing or hearing a thing. (The claim was in fashion at the time that even the simplest seeing was so shot through with theory that at sunset Galileo and Aristotle never saw the same thing.)

Fred insisted on the elementary distinction between merely seeing an armadillo and seeing what the thing might be, seeing *that* it is an armadillo. This early distinction was back to work in his late attempts to pry apart the elements of *consciousness*, its objects and its qualities. But in the beginning, in *Seeing and Knowing*, it gave him a tractable question to attack: how do we ascend from simple ‘non=epistemic’ seeing to beliefs based thereupon, and even to knowledge?

Dretske never doubted that if we know a proposition to be true then that belief cannot possibly be false. If the guarantee of its truth must be written in the mind’s inner sanctum, of its *a priori* endowments and logical powers, it will forever be doubted; indeed, it will be doubted whether we ever have reasons for believing any proposition about the external world so conclusive that we could not possibly be wrong. But perhaps that guarantee is accomplished by the laws of nature, governing even what happens in the human mind, and what actually *can* happen and under what conditions. For the present circumstance, the one that actually prevails, may

be such that those laws entail, for example, that it could not possibly look to me as if this is a hand if it were *not* a hand, and if so, then that perceptual reason is a conclusive one for my belief that this is a hand. I can still *conceive* that I might be wrong, of course, but that does not mean that I could be wrong in fact. I may not know (and maybe I even *could* not know, as Dretske thought) that I am in such circumstances, or that there are such governing laws. But that means only that I do not know that I know, and why should I need to know the harder thing to know the easier one? Dretske buttressed this line of thought with studies of the distinctions on which it depends: between ‘epistemic operators’ that do and those –like *knows* –that do not ‘penetrate’ to all their implications; and the related, controversial distinction between knowing that an animal is a zebra, and knowing that it is a zebra and not a small mule painted with zebra stripes. This material, put forth in his 1970 and ’71 papers “Epistemic Operators” and “Conclusive Reasons” formed the foundation of the more broadly conceived centerpiece of his corpus, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* of 1981. Now the perceptual knowledge that *s* is *F* was conceived as a belief caused by the information that *s* is *F*, and for the information that *s* is *F* to be carried by a perceptual signal *r* – a reason—the conditional probability, given *r*, of *s* being *F* is no less than 1. Such a belief, then, could not possibly be wrong. Working from this basis, he developed an account of mental content or meaning. “In the beginning there was information. The word came later”.

Fred’s advances were often launched by his seeing a crucial distinction and why it matters. Philosophy may be born in wonder, but it is bred in confusion, in our blindness to differences. In *Explaining Behavior: reasons in a world of causes*, the question was how the airy content of a thought can set brute matter in motion—the thought containing a reason, the motion being an action. The key was a seemingly uninteresting distinction between a motion that is caused by a thought and a thought’s causing a motion. We are to explain how a thought’s content, say its representing it as being the case that this stuff in our hand is food, might cause such a piece of behavior as the motion involved in eating this stuff. Now the

external fact that *x* is food may serve, in Fred's terms, to 'recruit' thoughts that cause eating for that role (for given that fact, that it is food, the thought's effects will satisfy the need or desire for food). But if *x* turns out to be mud, the thought that it is food will have caused the same behavior, and in the same way. So what property *internal* to the (perhaps false) thought that this is food—in the way that its sense is internal to a term—might explain the thought's causing the motions of eating *x*? Not just the property of occurring *when* *x* is food. That is merely the thought's *indicating* the presence of food, as flies might indicate the presence of food. Dretske proposed that the cause is instead the state's *functioning* to indicate some state of affairs, and identified this with the state's *representing* it as being the state of affairs that obtains. (This accommodates an essential mark of the *semantic* content one is trying to model, that the thought may be false -- a *misrepresentation*: for a thing may fail to do what it is its function to do.) His view was that having representational content, having the function of indicating something, is an 'historical' property of such a thought, in that its role in the etiology of behavior is structural: content is not the occasional or 'triggering' cause of the motions but rather the cause of the thought's *causing* the motions -- that is, its causing just *such* motions. Content does not cause bodily motions; rather, it causes inner states to cause these motions. (As the structure of the gun causes the pulling of the trigger to cause the bullet's motion to the target.) Now if 'behavior' designates (not motions caused by a thought, but) the thought's causing those motions, then Dretske has an answer to the question. He has explained how by virtue of the representational content of a thought --*i.e.*, its functioning to indicate some state of affairs—a thought may cause behavior. How it may cause, that is, the *causing* of motion by the thought, motion appropriate to that state of affairs. And that *is* content causing behavior. It is of course only an *entrée* to the labyrinth, an opening through which information flows from our direct perceptual contact with physical objects and events.

How can reasons, how can semantic content, cause behavior? The answer to the puzzle turns on finding precisely the *explanandum*, and precisely the *explanans*, that fit together, the right nut for the right bolt. And then: take it as a fact that representational content explains behavior. If a theory explains how a state's functioning to indicate something can explain the state's causing motions, then, that's what representing *is*, and that's what behavior *is*, respectively. The model of belief was dovetailed with an account of desire, as a state that causes effects that reinforce its tendency to cause such effects. Dretske was not cavalier about *a priori* conceptual intuitions: they had first say. But if the analyses required by his finished theory should stray a bit from the pure concepts (of desire, or representation), he would let the theory have its way.

This memorial has wound down from a tribute to a mere revisitation of his philosophy. Fred would think that's just as well. But thinking through his ideas again is an evocation of him. And how it does make one want to sit down with Fred himself, and argue about these things again, in his amiable, irreplaceable company. Over Beefeater martinis.

--Dennis W. Stampe

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