

Dretske on introspection

1. Dretske’s thesis

In *displaced perception* “We learn that k is F by perceiving that h is G. The perceptual fact is displaced from the perceptual object”.

Introspection, I submit, is an instance of displaced perception. What one comes to know by introspection are, to be sure, facts about one’s mental life, facts about internal events and processes. The objects and events one perceives to learn these facts, however, are seldom internal and never mental. One does not become aware of the fact that one is having a certain sensation by peering inward at the sensation itself. To see the facts that reside within, one has to look at the objects that tell you what is going on within, and these objects are all outside. (Dretske 1994: 263)

Dretske’s use of “internal” is potentially misleading, as is “outside”. *Seeing an artichoke* is partly internal and partly external. Also, an event taking place in, say, your foot might be one of the things that (according to Dretske) tells you that you are in pain, but it’s not “outside”. Dretske clears this up in footnote 2.

2. The relevance of representation

[Dretske’s thesis] is a consequence of thinking about the mind in representational terms—as, so to speak, the representational face of the brain. Since I do not think I can convince anyone that they *should*—let alone that they *must*—think about the mind in this way, I cannot demonstrate that the mind’s knowledge of itself is an instance of displaced perception. Nevertheless, I can, I think, show that the conditional is true—that if one thinks of sensation and thought as modes of representation, as ways the brain has of representing external affairs, then introspection is as straightforward and unproblematic—well, almost so—as finding out how much one weighs by looking at a bathroom scale. (264)

This suggests that Dretske is also going to treat knowledge of thought, but in fact he just discusses knowledge of perception. (He includes perceptual judgments (266-7) but it’s not obvious how the official theory is supposed to work for those.)

3. Object vs. fact-perception, conceptual vs. sensory modes

There is a difference between seeing an artichoke—an object—and seeing that it is an artichoke—a fact. One can see the object, the artichoke, without seeing the fact that it is an artichoke, and one can see the fact (by reading a label, say) without seeing the object. (264)

Also: “seeing x” is clearly perceptual, whereas “seeing that p” has at best a loose connection with perception.

On a representational theory of the mind, object-perception and fact-perception involve two different modes of perceptual representation. There is a sensory mode of representation the way sense experience represents *objects*, and a conceptual mode, the way belief (judgment, thought) represents *facts* about objects. One can

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know the stick is straight—conceptually represent it this way—while, at the sensory level, experiencing it as bent. (265)

But doesn't the fact/object distinction cut across the sensory/conceptual distinction? Isn't "experiencing the stick as bent" to be related to something fact-like? (Not a *fact*, of course, if the stick *isn't* bent, but this is a distraction since Dretske could have used an example where the stick *is* bent.)

4. Connecting beliefs

In order for displacement to occur, the perceiver must, at some level, be assuming or taking for granted something about the connection between k and h. Those who do not believe that k is (or is probably) F when h is G will not see that k is F when they see that h is G. You have to assume something about the connection between the scale and yourself if you are going to see how much you weigh by looking at the scale. Those who do not come to the perceptual situation with a connecting belief (as I will call it) will perceive the same objects (bathroom scale) but not the same facts (that they weigh so many pounds). (265)

So: "connecting beliefs" is needed in the case of introspection, although Dretske isn't very explicit about what they are.

5. Instruments

Consider a thermometer. It represents the temperature of whatever medium it is in. Put it in your coffee and it tells you how hot your coffee is. Hang it on the wall in your living room and it represents the temperature of your living room. Put it in your mouth and it tells you whether you have a fever. It isn't the function of this instrument to say what it is—coffee, living room, or you—whose temperature it registers. The volume of mercury says something, yes. It has a content. It says how hot this is where this is whatever the thermometer is 'in'. The thermometer does not, however, represent the relationship that makes it this rather than something else, the coffee rather than the living room, that it represents as being hot. Thermometers are charged with the task of providing information about temperature, yes, but not the task of saying what it is that has this temperature. If you want to know what it is whose temperature is 98°, you have to find out where the thermometer is. Thermometers do not represent their own location. (268)

This is supposed to be a general claim about "representational devices". But there seems to be a slide from "doesn't represent the living room *as such*" to "doesn't represent its own location". And in any case, doesn't my Nest represent that the temperature is 66° *downstairs*? At any rate, that's what it says.

"Content" is usually used interchangeably with "proposition", but that is not Dretske's usage:

In thinking of what a representational device—pressure gauge or visual experience—represents, then, it is important to distinguish the object it represents from the way it represents that object—what I have been calling *the content* of the representation. (269)

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6. Knowing what instruments represent

How might we find out what was going on in the representational ‘mind’ of a pressure gauge? It might seem that the answer to this question is simple: just *look*. (269)

But this is the “wrong answer”. Perhaps “not the most perspicuous answer” is better. Anyway, here’s Dretske’s answer:

So what an external observer needs to know to determine how a system is representing an object is what its reaction to that object means, and what the reaction of an instrument means is what that reaction is a reaction to when the instrument is functioning properly. Given that it is in state \oplus , what *would* reality be like if the system were working the way it was supposed to? If a gauge’s reaction to tank T is \oplus , and, when functioning properly, \oplus is its way of reacting to a pressure of 10 psi, then the gauge is representing T as having a pressure of 10. If the pressure in T is actually 14 psi, then the gauge, in registering \oplus , is *misrepresenting* the pressure in T. (273)

OK, but how does this help gauge G introspect, and come to know “how it represents the pressure in T, what representational state it is in?”. G “has no resources for telling that it is in proper working order” (etc.) (274). There is, however, a crucial asymmetry between the external observer and G itself:

[T]he gauge need only look at the world to find out what \oplus means. The world (i.e., the tank whose pressure it is registering) tells the gauge something it does not tell me. The world tells the gauge, but not me, what the world would be like if the gauge were functioning properly because the world causes in the gauge, but not in me, a state (\oplus) which represents the world the way it would be if the gauge were functioning properly. So in representing the world as 14psi—whether correctly or incorrectly—the gauge occupies a state which tells it what the world would be like if it were functioning properly—exactly what it needs to know to know what its internal state means. (275)

7. Finally, introspection

The last section of Dretske’s paper makes two claims. First:

[E]ven if the ‘seeing’ goes awry, even if you are, in this way, misperceiving h, you can (contrary to the Veridicality Principle) come to know a fact about how you represent h (as G), by seeing h as G. With displaced representational facts, the intermediate perceptions of h do not have to be veridical. (276)

But what is Dretske’s argument for this? (Cf. the “no false lemmas” lesson from Gettier cases.) Second: “We need what I earlier called an appropriate set of *connecting beliefs*” (277). *Exercise*: what are they, and how are they known?

References

Dretske, F. 1994. Introspection. *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society* 94: 263-78.

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