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What is Non-Epistemic Seeing?

DARYL CLOSE

It was first suggested by Warnock¹ and later developed by Dretske² that there is no essential connection between seeing and knowing. Putting the issue of non-epistemic seeing this broadly lets us mention the topic of this paper without prejudice. For, as with many issues, more than one thesis goes by the name of non-epistemic seeing. What I should like to do, via portions of Dretske's account, is to sort some of the varieties of non-epistemic seeing and to consider which are uninteresting, problematic, and so on.

In Chapter Two of *Seeing and Knowing*, Dretske attempts to isolate and define a fundamental way of seeing which is the exercise of a 'primitive visual ability . . . common to a great variety of sentient beings, an ability which we, as human beings, share with our cocker spaniel and pet cat' (p. 4). Dretske argues that this way of seeing may be isolated from other ways of seeing in that it is devoid of any *positive belief content*. The fundamental way of seeing which has this characteristic is labelled 'non-epistemic'. Conversely, ways of seeing which are not devoid of positive belief content are said to be epistemic.

Dretske's reason for characterising non-epistemic seeing in terms of belief rather than knowledge is straightforward. He holds that knowing that *p* entails believing that *p*; hence, if, for any *p*, seeing something does not entail believing that *p*, then seeing that thing does not entail knowing that *p*. Since, however, the entailment between knowledge that *p* and belief that *p* is itself controversial, the short way with Dretske's notion of non-epistemic seeing is to deny the entailment. After all, one might very well wish to hold that all seeing is epistemic but that there is a way of seeing which is 'non-doxastic'. For example, one might

1 G. J. Warnock, 'Seeing', reprinted with 'Postscript, 1963' in R. J. Swartz (ed.), *Perceiving, Sensing and Knowing*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1965), pp. 49-67.

2 Fred I. Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Further references to Dretske are to *Seeing and Knowing*.

proceed along a line suggested by Bernard Williams.¹ Williams attacks the entailment between knowledge that *p* and belief that *p*, saying that ascriptions of knowledge may be made where ascriptions of belief are withheld entirely, e.g., in the case of machines. On such a view, controversy about seeing and knowing would most likely dissolve, to be replaced by a similar debate about seeing and believing. This signals the possibility of posing the question of non-epistemic seeing in a way that is essentially neutral to the debate about the entailment between knowledge that *p* and belief that *p*. For entailment or not, we may still meaningfully ask what relation there is between a creature's seeing something and that creature's being in, having been in, or being able to be in, some state which we could loosely describe as cognitive. Thus, Dretske's commitment to the entailment poses no serious problems for him.

Dretske's notion of belief content, then, is fundamental to his notion of non-epistemic seeing. A state of affairs has positive belief content if and only if the statement 'S . . .', which is a statement about a sentient agent S and which expresses that state of affairs, entails that S has some particular belief or set of beliefs (p. 5). What Dretske wants to show is that the state of affairs expressed by 'S sees D' is devoid of any positive belief content, that

A1 . . . there is a way of seeing such that for any proposition, P, the statement 'S sees D' does not logically entail the statement 'S believes P'. (p. 6).

So, says Dretske, ' . . . seeing a bug in this fundamental way is like stepping on a bug . . . ; Nothing one believes is logically relevant to what one has done' (p. 6).

Dretske seems to be denying that there is a logical connection between seeing something and having a belief about it. Presumably, this is just the thesis about non-epistemic seeing. Yet Dretske's specimen cases yield no such conclusion. Consider, for instance,

A2 . . . not only could S see his aunt and not believe that she was his aunt, but he might not believe that she was a woman, nor even that she was a human being. Depending on the lighting conditions, his attentiveness, and a host of

1 Bernard Williams, 'Deciding to Believe', in Howard Kiefer and Milton Munitz (eds.), *Language, Belief and Metaphysics*. (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1970), pp. 95-111.

other variables, he might mistake her for a mannequin, a shadow, or any one of a number of different things. (p. 7).

Although it is unclear what S could believe he was seeing and still be said to see his aunt (a cigarette? an oasis? a bank robbery?), it is, in A2, clearly intended that S actually sees his aunt. But if the case is to exemplify S's seeing his aunt *non-epistemically*, then we must show that it is not a necessary condition for S to see his aunt that he have any belief at all. (As we shall see in a moment, this condition may be regarded as equivocal.) The case given in A2 fails us since there S is supposed to have some (mistaken) belief about his aunt, viz. that she is a mannequin or a shadow or the like. That is, the case given does not provide us with a counter-instance bearing on the putative entailment between seeing something and having a belief about it. It actually offers us a straightforward case in which S sees something *and* has a belief about it.¹

Though this objection does pose problems for one variety of non-epistemic seeing, Dretske's defenders may insist that the A2 case is still a case of seeing devoid of positive belief content. Dretske, they might hold, does not deny that there is a *general* logical connection between seeing and believing; he denies rather that there is a logical connection between seeing something and having some one *particular* belief.² (A note about the sense of 'particular' here: of course every belief is a particular belief; we could not say that S has beliefs, but that there is no particular belief that he has. We may say, however, that *if* such-and-such is true of S, then S must have *this* belief, i.e., there is a particular belief that he must have. Or we may say that if such-and-such is true of S, then S must have *some belief or other*, but that there is no particular one that he must have.) Dretske, then, is not to be taken as denying that

(Q) S's seeing D entails that S has some belief or other, or (more formally) that

S's seeing D entails that, for the set *s* of all beliefs ($b_1, b_2, b_3, \dots, b_n$), either S has b_1 or S has b_2 or S has b_3 , or \dots , or S has b_n .

Rather, Dretske is to be taken as denying that

- 1 The reader may note that a similar problem with respect to knowledge of appearance infects Warnock's 'Lloyd George' case, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- 2 Sibley draws what I believe is the same distinction, but with different results, in F. N. Sibley (ed.), *Perception: A Philosophical Symposium*. (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 84-85.

(R) S's seeing D entails that S has some particular belief,
or that

for the set s of all beliefs, there is some one belief, call it b_1
(where $1 \leq i \leq n$), such that S's seeing D entails that S has b_1 .

Clearly, Dretske denies (R), for A1 above is equivalent to the denial of (R). The only difference is that (R) quantifies over beliefs and A1 quantifies over propositions believed. (A1 also involves quantification into quotational contexts, but that problem need not concern us here.) Both A1 and the denial of (R), then, express the claim that there is a way of seeing which is devoid of positive belief content.

Although (R) entails (Q), the converse does not hold: (Q) is compatible with the denial of (R). As will be seen in A4 below, Dretske actually accepts (Q) (that it is a necessary condition for S's seeing D that S have at least one belief). But putting (Q) aside for the moment, consider the following statements:

- (Q') S's seeing D entails that S has some *visual* belief or other;
- (R') S's seeing D entails that S has a *particular visual* belief;
- (Q'') S's seeing D entails that S has some visual belief or other *about D*; and
- (R'') S's seeing D entails that S has some *particular* visual belief *about D*. (To obtain formal characterisations of (Q') and (R') similar to those of (Q) and (R), replace the set s with the set s' of all *visual* beliefs (s' being a subset of s); for (Q'') and (R''), replace the set s with the set s'' of all visual beliefs *about D* (s'' being a subset of s' and hence of s).

Before we consider which of these statements the non-epistemic theorist should affirm or deny, we should make explicit the logical relations holding among them. All entailments between (Q) and (R) and their variants—call these six statements 'Q-statements' and 'R-statements'—may be captured by the following rules: (1) an R-statement entails every other R-statement of a lower prime as well as every Q-statement of an equal or lower prime (the converse does not hold); and (2) the denial of a Q-statement entails the denial of every other Q-statement of a higher prime as well as the denial of every R-statement of equal or higher prime (the converse does not hold).

We may return now to the defence of Dretske's thesis. His

defenders may, as we were saying, agree that A₂ does not support the denial of (Q) but insist that it does support the denial of (R)—which is what Dretske intended. But in that case, they achieve nothing but a Pyrrhic victory; for Dretske's position would be stronger failing at providing a counterinstance to (Q) than succeeding in the rejection of (R) (and hence, the rejection of (R') and (R'')). For, to be devoid of positive belief content (expressed as the denial of (R)) is entirely trivial. Name any belief you will, it is surely not necessary that S have *that* belief in order to see something.¹ More specifically, for any visual belief about D, it is not necessary that S have *that* belief in order to see D. This would seem to be a perceptual fact of the most fundamental order. Oddly enough, N. R. Hanson seems to adopt something close to (R''): 'To see an X-ray tube is at least to see that, were it dropped on stone, it would smash.'² At any rate, lack of positive belief content is hardly sufficient to isolate a way of seeing which is non-epistemic in any philosophically interesting sense of the word.

The point at stake is that *all* of the Q- and R-statements express a logical connection between seeing and believing. If all one had to do in order to show that seeing and believing are logically independent was to show that the three R-statements are false, then, of course, the thesis would be utterly trivial since the 'epistemic' theorist, that is, the theorist who rejects non-epistemic seeing, will also deny the three R-statements. If there is to be a debate about non-epistemic seeing, it must involve consideration at least of the three Q-statements, even though all three affirm a logical dependence between seeing and believing. It may, of course, be unfair to require the non-epistemic theorist to demonstrate the falsity of all three Q-statements. (Q), in fact, is a fairly plausible claim. We need not be surprised, therefore, to find that Dretske accepts (Q).³ He says in a footnote:

A₃ I have not said that S . . . can see something without any beliefs; I have only said that no *particular* belief is

- 1 Perhaps it is remotely plausible to hold (R) alone. E.g., one might hold that S's seeing D entails that S believes that he (S) exists or is conscious.
- 2 N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*. (Cambridge University Press, 1958), p. 21. That Dretske comments on this particular passage suggests that he believes the denials of the R-statements to be uniquely characteristic of non-epistemic seeing.
- 3 See Sibley, *op. cit.*, p. 85. Contrary to what I shall say, Sibley attributes to Dretske a 'totally non-epistemic' position, i.e., a position involving the denial of all the Q-statements as well as the R-statements.

essential to the seeing . . . it may be essential (especially in the case of human agents) that he have some beliefs in order to qualify for such 'mentalistic' predicates as 'sees so-and-so'. (p. 17).

In spite of its plausibility, the admission of (Q) presents a problem for Dretske. Dretske, it should be remembered, promised to isolate a way of seeing which humans share with dogs and cats. So the question arises of how to show that 'sees' is univocal in sentences like 'The man sees the bicycle' and 'The dog sees the bicycle'. The way suggested by Dretske is to show that seeing is devoid of positive belief content. This strategy seems promising initially because it suggests that, by showing that seeing and believing are logically independent of each other, one can avoid the problem of attributing perceptual beliefs to lower animals when ascribing seeing to such animals. However, this plan would work only if Dretske were denying *all* logical connections between seeing and believing. But as we have seen, to hold that seeing is devoid of positive belief content is to deny the R-statements only. Although the admission of (Q), in A₃, is compatible with a lack of positive belief content, (Q) is incompatible with the strategy suggested because it reintroduces the problem of belief-ascriptions to lower animals. The non-epistemic theorist thus faces the unenviable choice between affirming (Q) and undercutting the strategy involved in pressing the univocity of 'sees', or denying (Q) and increasing the implausibility of his position.

So far, then, Dretske's position seems indistinguishable from that of an 'epistemic' theorist. Both deny the three R-statements and affirm (Q). But the epistemic theorist also holds (Q') and (Q''). Hence, if the non-epistemic theorist is to distinguish his view, he must deny both (Q') and (Q''), or, at the very least, deny (Q''). Put in terms of belief, the question of non-epistemic seeing turns on the question of whether (i) S's seeing D entails that S has some visual belief, and (ii) whether S's seeing D entails that S has some visual belief about D.

Regarding the first alternative—that of holding (Q')—Warnock's account¹ is instructive. Warnock claims that in order for S to see D, S must be *able* to identify D in some respect, he must be *able* to have a belief (of the visual sort) about D. And it is plausible to suppose that a necessary condition for this ability is

1 Op. cit., pp. 66–67.

that S have made visual identifications, have acquired visual beliefs, in the past. Hence, we may infer (Q'). Two points may be made here with respect to (Q'). First, I do not attribute (Q') to Warnock. Rather, what I suggest is that (Q') captures an essential feature common to a group of (possible) views, of which Warnock's position seems to be a member. In general, the Q- and R-statements stand to actual positions somewhat as material implication stands to uses of 'If . . . then . . .' in ordinary language: they capture a minimal element common to each in a family of views. Second, one might regard (Q') as equivocal. On one reading, (Q') could be taken as expressing that if S does see D, then he will, in the process, acquire some visual belief or other—perhaps one completely unrelated to D. It is not clear, it should be said, that the last qualification even makes sense, let alone that anyone would want to hold it. The other reading is that S's seeing D *presupposes* that S has acquired visual beliefs in the past (though this is is amenable to adjustment). It is possible (barely) to regard all of the Q- and R-statements as being equivocal in the same sort of way that (Q') is. However, in each case the preferred reading is obvious. (Q) and (Q') take the 'presupposition' reading; the rest take the other reading, that beliefs are acquired in the process of seeing.

However, Warnock rejects (Q''): S's seeing D does not entail that S actually makes an identification of, or has a belief about, D on that occasion. That is, the ability to have a belief about D need not be exercised in order to see D. As we shall see below, denying (Q'') is the last refuge for the non-epistemic theorist, for his position really becomes problematic if he fails to deny (Q'). If the non-epistemic theorist accepts (Q') or something related to it—Warnock's requirement—then even if, on some occasion, a creature non-epistemically sees something, a condition necessary for non-epistemic seeing is epistemic seeing itself. Since being *able* to have beliefs or to perform certain acts of visual cognition is a necessary condition for seeing something non-epistemically, one could not be said to see something non-epistemically unless he epistemically see things, that is, has seen things epistemically and, in the context in question, is able to see things epistemically. For anyone who, like Dretske, wishes to analyse epistemic seeing in terms of non-epistemic seeing, the denial of (Q') is essential.

If S's seeing D non-epistemically is a necessary condition for S's seeing D in an epistemic way (S's seeing *that* D is ϕ), and

if S's being able to see D epistemically is a necessary condition for S's seeing D non-epistemically, the proposed analysis would be circular.

Warnock's position thus reveals another non-epistemic variation: a theory in which all the R-statements are denied and (Q) and (Q') are affirmed. But this, too, seems indistinguishable from what the epistemic theorist would hold. It appears that if non-epistemic seeing is to be viable at all, the defence must show (Q") to be false. The non-epistemic theorist may, of course, deny our charity and deny all three Q-statements; but that possibility has not been presented by Warnock or Dretske—in the interest of plausibility.

The non-epistemic theorist, then, retreats to attack the weakest claim made by the epistemic theorist, viz. (Q") that S's seeing D entails that S has some visual belief or other about D. Let us, for argument's sake, grant that a case in which the denial of (Q") obtains is a case of non-epistemic seeing. Are there such cases? A₂ (Dretske's case in which S takes his aunt to be a mannequin) clearly fails to support the denial of (Q"). For, grant that A₂ is a case of seeing: since S takes his aunt to be a mannequin, he certainly believes, *of* his aunt, that she is a mannequin (S believes that what he sees is a mannequin); hence, this is not a case of seeing in which S has no visual beliefs at all about what he sees. It may be recalled that Warnock in effect denies (Q") when he says that although the percipient must be able to identify what he sees (have a belief about it) *he need not have exercised that ability* in order to have seen it. However, like Dretske's A₂ case, Warnock's own paradigm fails to support the denial of (Q"). There, a percipient visiting Mme Tussaud's mistakenly identifies Lloyd George, disguised as a wax model of Winston Churchill, as a wax model of Winston Churchill.

Dretske, on the other hand, does offer a further case¹ which might conceivably support the denial of (Q"). There, S is visually confronted by a cuff link in a drawer. Perhaps the cuff link has been missing and perhaps S was searching for it. We don't know; Dretske gives no details. All we know is that S claims that he did not see the cuff link when it is later pointed out that the cuff link had been right before his eyes all the time. If this is a case of *seeing*, it looks as if it supports the denial of (Q"). Dretske himself realises that here, the problem lies in proving that S did in fact

see the cuff link. But although he affirms again and again that S does actually see it, his arguments are far from compelling.

Dretske first tries to show that S *sees* the cuff link by explaining why we are justified in *saying*, in such cases, that S 'must have seen it.' He says that

A4 . . . we say such things in the face of a person's disbelief; we say it when we are convinced that, despite . . . whether he thought he saw anything at all, the physical and physiological conditions were such that the object must have looked some way to him. (p. 18).

Obviously, we *are* often inclined, in such cases, to say that the percipient *must* have seen the object. But, so saying, we may mean only that we just do not *understand how he could have failed to see it*. It does not follow that S did indeed see the cuff link. Of course, if it is true that S *must* have seen the cuff link, then it is true that S saw the cuff link. But Dretske's argument is designed to show only why we might *say* that he must have seen it. That certain physical and physiological conditions obtain does not, in any clear way, entail that the cuff link *did* look some way to S (hence, that S did see the cuff link).

Secondly, Dretske suggests that if we lead S back to the drawer and point the cuff link out to him, we may argue by analogy

A5 . . . that since, in all likelihood, the conditions affecting the visibility of the cuff link are the same now as when he formerly looked in the drawer, and since it is clear that he now sees the cuff link, it is plausible to suppose that he also saw it beforehand without, of course, realising it. (p. 19).

Some interesting considerations arise here. First of all, introducing A5 is tantamount to an admission that A4 is indecisive. Also, allowing the analogy does not explain how the notion of non-epistemic seeing is affected. For if seeing something non-epistemically is equivalent to having an object before one's eyes in good light, having one's occipital lobe in working order and so on, then the concept is devoid of philosophical interest: there would then be no point in canvassing ordinary instances of seeing. If the non-epistemic theorist's thesis is to be interesting, there must be some necessary condition C for S's seeing D, above and beyond whatever physical and physiological conditions may be

specified. Clearly, condition C cannot be S's having some visual belief about D, for that would preclude non-epistemic seeing itself. All obvious cases of seeing involve the percipient's having beliefs about what he sees. But, if so, to save non-epistemic seeing, we need to be able to demonstrate that condition C may be satisfied in some way other than by S's acquiring a belief about D. If we could remove the belief, as in the cuff link case, then, *if* we had a clear case of seeing, we should be able to formulate C—which is to say, we should be able to formulate a theory of non-epistemic seeing.

But the cuff link case is *not* an obvious case of seeing. If one disagreed with the non-epistemic theorist here, little could be done to resolve the dispute. The non-epistemic theorist may try, as Dretske does in A5, to show by analogy that the cuff link case *is* a case of seeing. But then, automatically, he fails to serve his original purpose, viz. showing that S's seeing the cuff link (non-epistemically) does not require that S have some belief or other about the cuff link, since when we lead S back and point the cuff link out to him, S *does* have a belief about what he sees (he believes that the cuff link is before him, or some such thing). Similarly, the epistemic theorist cannot demonstrate that the cuff link case is *not* a case of seeing without begging the question about belief. Hence, the issue comes to a stalemate. Neither side can do more than fault the other for failing to demonstrate his claim. The non-epistemic theorist cannot show that (Q'') is false, and the epistemic theorist cannot conclusively demonstrate its truth. Still, the argument favours the epistemic theorist on the whole. For, even if the non-epistemic theorist were to show (Q'') false, accepting either (Q) or (Q') compromises the effort to show that seeing and believing are logically independent of one another; also, no one, to my knowledge, has yet supported the argument in its strong form, that is, by denying all six Q- and R-statements.¹

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