

## DRETSKE'S THEORY OF RELEVANT ALTERNATIVES FROM A SKEPTICAL POSITION

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The dialogue between the skeptics and the non-skeptics has been continuing since Pyrrho in Western tradition. Skeptical tradition is also found both in Chinese and Indian traditions. The challenges thrown by skepticism have shaped the discussion on epistemology in all these traditions. Theories have been developed to meet these challenges. It is needless to say that in modern and contemporary philosophy we still find deliberations on skepticism. Such is the power of it. Here, an attempt has been made to explain Dretske's theory of relevant alternatives to see if it can meet the skeptical challenge that we do not know anything about the external world. Dretske and his critics Cohen and Sanford believe that the theory does meet the challenge. In contrast to what they believe, I would rather say that the theory calmly ignores the spirit of skepticism that Sextus Empiricus, Chuang Tzu, Nagarjuna and Nietzsche speak of. Dretske, of course, is not addressing the skeptical positions that can be made out of what they say. Nevertheless, Dretske need to address the issues raised by such skepticism in order to claim that one really knows what one has claimed to know.

### I

The Pyrrhonian skeptic's argument 'includes practically all the ingredients of what now a days is called "the argument from illusion"<sup>1</sup> and the thrust is to show that there is 'equipollence' between conflicting beliefs about reality, that there never is reason to adopt one such belief in preference to a rival one.<sup>2</sup> The Pyrrhonian skeptical position is not merely a tactical and methodological one to be adopted provisionally in order to be overcome later. It is not doubt but *aporia* - bafflement as to the very sense of making objective claims that the skeptic draws our attention to. Thus, a Pyrrhonian skeptic has a purpose different from the purpose of a Cartesian skeptic.

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<sup>1</sup> Benson Mates, *The Skeptic Way*, p.57 and quoted by Cooper, 1999, p.44.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper 1999, p.44.

Chuang Tzu observes that everyday judgements do not constitute knowledge of reality (if such there be). He considers a number of examples that show irresolvable disagreements in judgement, test and argues that attempts to resolve them always presuppose some prior prejudice. He uses a version of the argument from dreaming.<sup>3</sup> Further, language is a convenient artifice. Its utility for purposes of communication need not imply any correspondence between our statements and an independent reality.<sup>4</sup> Our knowledge of things is merely conventional. We know things by making distinctions conventionally; take these distinctions seriously and say that we have knowledge of the real things. A true knower accepts these distinctions and the knowledge of things there of for practical purpose while at the same time he is aware that there is no commitment to the knowledge of how things really are.

Nagarjuna observes that none of our claims about objects, persons can possess more than relative truth. This implies that we can not have genuinely objective knowledge. He raises several objections to *pramāṇa* theory. He argues that the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*) are ascertained through the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*). Further, the *pramāṇas* have to be objects of knowledge in order to be reliable. This means that some objects of knowledge are ascertained on the basis of themselves. This involves one in an undesirable circularity. The alternative is to fall in to an infinite regress. In order to avoid all these we have to forgo the concepts of the objects of knowledge and the means of knowledge. Once we do that, the prospect of knowledge is a bleak one.

Nagarjuna, further, points out that in *Nyāya* School; the *pramāṇa* is defined as one that enables the ascertainment of *prameyas*, objects of knowledge such as physical bodies. But the existence of such objects is then asserted on the evidence of *pramāṇas*. The *pramāṇa* theorist is caught up in a

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<sup>3</sup> 'I -----dreamt that I was a butterfly ----- but I could not tell, had I been Chuan Tzu dreaming I was butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming I was now Chuan Tzu', *ibid*, p. 61

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 61.

circle. The brilliance of Nagarjuna is appreciated by Cooper. For him, Nagarjuna was the first philosopher to raise in a precise manner doubts as to the very sense of a correspondence between two supposedly independent terms- thought and the world.<sup>5</sup>

In modern times Nietzsche says, ‘if Kant is right, then sciences are wrong.’<sup>6</sup> This is because scientific claims purport to be true of an independent reality, not a merely anthropomorphic world. He believes that we are condemned to skepticism towards claims about the independent reality and our truth claims about that reality is nothing but lies. For Nietzsche, the laws of logic or physics are our naturalistic compulsions in terms of specifically human desires, interests and welfare. Creatures with different drives would not be under similar compulsion to accept those laws.

Logic is merely slavery within the fetters of language writes Nietzsche.<sup>7</sup> There is arbitrariness and contingency in our linguistic and hence conceptual categorisation. Had we developed a very different language, we would have ended up with very different conceptual categorization altogether. Language is metaphorical to such an extent that we use a single word for many different things. The so-called truths are mere metaphors. Nietzsche allows, however, the possibility of truth and falsity, knowledge and error at the pragmatic level of human existence. Social activities like communication and cooperation demand that we designate things. Such conventional designations are there of course for Nietzsche. So does their failure as falsity, and the knowledge and error that arise out of successful or unsuccessful acquisition of the fact about those.

These four great skeptical positions are drawing our attention to the limitations of our reason, our language and our senses, in short, to our anthropomorphic situation with regard to our prospect for the knowledge of

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<sup>5</sup> Cooper, 1994, p. 88

<sup>6</sup> As quoted by Cooper from ‘the Philosopher’, in *Philosophy and Truth*, Aron Breazeale, 9th ed), p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> Cooper, 1994, p. 194.

the world itself. These serious limitations that hang upon us due to our anthropocentric existence can never be avoided. This is a predicament. The skepticism that emerges out of reflection on this is what I will call *the skepticism from the anthropocentric predicament*.

## II

Now the question is this - can the theory of relevant alternatives resolve this skepticism that arises from the anthropocentric predicament? I find two responses from Dretske. One is to accept the power and the influence of skeptical attitude. He says, for example,

“Perhaps we cannot know the exotic things that the skeptic says we cannot know that we are not tricked by cunning demons or misled by extraordinary circumstances.”<sup>8</sup>

The second response is to down play the importance of skeptical considerations and make it irrelevant for securing everyday knowledge, the knowledge of ordinary objects. This is obvious from his saying. He writes,

How can you make the evidence conclusive (thus securing an absolute conception of knowledge) while, at the same time, admitting that there are possibilities it does not exclude (thus making it relationally absolute)? A theory embodying relevant alternatives, with the consequent denial of closure, is, I think, the only way.<sup>9</sup>

Not only Dretske, but Cohen and Sanford too believe that the theory of relevant alternatives has the potency to withstand the onslaught of skeptical Challenges. Before evaluating this let us consider that theory. A visually irrelevant alternative, for Dretske, is something incompatible with what one knows (by seeing) to be the case but which one cannot know (by seeing) to be the case<sup>10</sup>. Thus, for example, if one sees a duck swimming in a pond and thereby knows that a duck is swimming in the pond, and a hypothesis that he is dreaming or that he is being deceived by evil demon or that a cleverly designed machine is in the water, then such hypothesis cannot be seen to be

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<sup>8</sup> McLaughlin, 1991, p. 191.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid* p.196

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p.186

not the case. Such hypothesis is incompatible with the knowledge that a duck is swimming in the pond. That hypothesis one cannot know to be not the case in visually irrelevant to know that a duck is swimming in the pond. Further, an alternative, irrelevant to S's seeing that P may be relevant to knowing that P.<sup>11</sup> In the light of what has been said about irrelevant alternatives for seeing that P we may formulate the following for knowing that P.

A proposition *Q* is an irrelevant alternative to *P* if S knows that *P* and *Q* is incompatible with *P* If  
S knows that *P* and *Q* is incompatible with *P* and S can not know that not *Q*.

Now any version of skeptical hypothesis, be it dreaming, evil demon or brain-in-vat hypothesis becomes, an irrelevant alternative according to this formulation because it is not possible for any knower to know whether he is a brain-in-vat, dreaming or deceived by an evil demon and since any of the hypothesis is incompatible with knowing any empirical proposition.

The skeptical hypothesis that may be granted out of the consideration of the anthropocentric predicament does not arise from doubt or possibility of error as understood is ordinary epistemic situation. It may be granted that Dretske is not addressing this type of skepticism. Nevertheless, it can be argued that like the Cartesian skeptical hypothesis, this type of skeptical hypothesis questions the possibility of knowledge. The skepticism emerging from the consideration of this predicament gains its strength by questioning the suitability of our knowing apparatus to capture the truth. Moreover, our language fails to express the truth. One who reflects on the limitations of the senses, reason and language and ends up with a kind of skepticism that presupposes conceptions of knowledge and truth radically different from the conceptions of those who believe in our capacity to know truths. Dretske belongs to the second category of thinkers. For him, the concept of knowledge exhibits a kind of contextual relativity and in any epistemic situation, the

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid* p.187

evidence for knowing a proposition excludes all the relevant alternatives that compete with P. Further, in normal epistemic situation, philosophic skeptical hypotheses do not count as relevant alternatives.

What counts as a relevant alternative to proposition P depends on the background condition in which P is known and relevancy varies from case to case. Take for example the case of a refrigerator being empty. The proposition that a packet of ice-cream is in the refrigerator is an alternative to the proposition that the refrigerator is empty. So is the alternative that some parts of the refrigerator are there. But the former alternative will be a relevant one for one who is looking for refrigerator parts. For the food seeker's knowing that the refrigerator is empty, his evidence need not exclude the possibility of whether the refrigerator contains parts. Whether any food is available in the refrigerator is a relevant alternative that must be excluded before attributing the food seeker with the knowledge that he knows that the refrigerator is empty.

In the context of the food seeker, absence of any food makes the refrigerator empty. In the context of the parts seeker absence of any part makes the refrigerator empty. In both the cases the refrigerator is absolutely empty provided no specific desired item is present there. At the same time the refrigerator is absolutely empty relative to the context. The refrigerator with no food is not empty for the parts seeker. Dretske also gives another example of relationally absolute concept - the flatness of a road. A road may be flat according to one standard because it has no bumps, say for vehicles while a table may not be flat from the standard set by microscopic vision. Dretske thinks that the concept of knowledge exhibits similar but no identical contextual relativity. He says after the discussion of a visual perception.

There is every reason to suppose that the concept of knowledge exhibits the same contextual relativity, the same sensitivity to a range of understood contrast, as the verbs that describe the way we reached that

knowledge.<sup>12</sup> The context depends on the purpose and interest of the knower, not of the attributor. Cohen, interpreting Dretske assumed that the purposes, intentions, presuppositions, etc., of attributors of knowledge - speakers and listeners - play a role in setting the standards of relevance.<sup>13</sup> Dretske, however, restricts the dependency of context on the purpose and interests of the knower. The reason for such restriction lies with the intention to block that the skeptic's standard is relevant. Otherwise it would imply that the ordinary knower does not know what is ordinarily said to be known by him. This implication of Cohen's construal, Dretske is not ready to accept because he supposes that Skepticism as a doctrine about what ordinary people know cannot be made true by being put into the mouth of a skeptic<sup>14</sup>. Why not? The reason, Dretske gives, is intuitions on our ordinary knowing.

Someone with very high standards, someone who considers almost any alternative relevant- a skeptic, for example - will, I think, speak falsely if he denies that you and I, in perfectly ordinary circumstances, know the things we take ourselves to know<sup>15</sup>. Now, considering the skeptic's view and Dretske's we have to agree that there is fundamental disagreement between them. The skeptic believes those skeptical considerations such as that arise from the anthropocentric predicament are too important to be ignored and hence make knowledge of the external world questionable and questions the ontology that emerges from such alleged knowledge.

Dretske, on the other hand, assumes the knowledge of external world and analyses the concept of knowledge in such a way that the knowledge of empirical world remains secure and whatever doubt we may have from philosophical considerations becomes irrelevant. I do not find any philosophically compelling reasons to prefer the Dretskian perspective to skeptic's perspective or the other way. There is an insight to Dretske's

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*-p. 187.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid* p.191

<sup>14</sup> *ibid* p.192

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* p.192

approach to the concept of knowledge - that it operates with, some presuppositions about ourselves and the world around us and his suggestion that concept of knowledge be treated within that perspective is welcome for we want to believe that we know many things. The skeptic, banking on an insight reminds us the limitation of our knowledge, what we know, possibly what we do not and in some sense, we cannot know.

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