I DO HAVE REASONS TO BELIEVE IT IS A CHURCH. DRETSKE'S NEW CASE AGAINST CLOSURE VS. TRANSMISSION FAILURE

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Abstract. Fred Dretske's attack against the epistemic closure principle has sent the epistemology world into a serious spin; many philosophers argued that abandoning closure is a too high cost to pay for escaping the sceptic's standpoint. Recently, Martin Davies and Crispin Wright argued that inferences such as Dretske's famous Zebra ought not to be regarded as cases of closure failure, but rather as cases of transmission failure. This paper argues that, though we are indeed indebted to Dretske for putting his finger on this issue, his 2005 strategy for rejecting closure brings nothing new to the table set by Davies and Wright.

Key words: closure principle, Dretske, transmission failure.

Introduction

In his seminal work "Epistemic Operators" (1970), Fred Dretske provided a sophisticated argument against the skeptic standpoint, by denying that knowledge is closed under known entailment. Closure is the epistemological principle that states that

> *K*: If a subject S knows *P*, and S believes *Q* because S knows that *Q* is entailed by *P*, then S knows *Q*.

Dretske developed his main case against *K* in his early essays by denying that the reasons to believe *P* necessarily constitute conclusive reasons for believing *P*'s known implications. Dretske's account remains highly controversial however and, aside from a few notable exceptions (Nozick 1981, Heller 1999), for most epistemologists, the idea that deductive inference represents an epistemically safe way of extending one's belief corpus was simply too dear to be easily abandoned.

Yet, it seems that Dretske has certainly put his finger on something. More recent developments due to Crispin Wright (1985, 2003) and Martin Davies (2003), have shed new light on the matter; in short, what Wright and Davies argue is that Dretske's examples do not, in fact, constitute failure of knowledge closure, but rather incarnations of warrant transmission failure. Suppose one believes *P* on the basis of *w*, and knows that *P* implies *Q*. Transmission fails when *w*, while being a strong warrant for sustaining *P*, does not succeed to bring any support to *Q*.

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In more recent work though, Dretske (2005) offers fresh reasons for rejecting closure, and revives aspects of his previous case, arguing that given a proper understanding of our main ways of acquiring and preserving knowledge, we will come reject *K*.

The purpose of this paper is two-folded; first, I will argue that Dretske himself, in his early essays, confusedly argued for the failure of closure, while illustrating with cases of non-transmissibility of warrant. Second, after offering a short account of Wright's and Davies's arguments for transmission failure, I will argue that Dretske's more recent strategy against closure brings nothing essentially new to the table, but rather offers a unnecessarily detailed map of transmission failure within the context of different ways of acquiring knowledge.

1. Reasons for believing

In support of his attack on closure, Dretske offers his famous *Zebra* case: you go to the zoo, see several zebras in a pen, and on the basis of your perceptual information you believe that those animals are zebras. As you know what zebras look like, and these animals look just like that, you are certainly fully justified in your belief. But if the animals are zebras, then it follows that they are not mules cleverly disguised by the zoo authorities to look just like zebras. Does your perceptual justification entitle you to believe this latter claim? There is a strong intuition that it does not. In the light of this, Dretske claims closure of knowledge under known entailment fails.

He argues that epistemic operators are semi-penetrating, that is to say that, though they obviously penetrate to some of the necessary implications of a proposition, they fail to penetrate to all of them. To support this claim, he first appeals to more intuitive examples featuring the operator 'reason to believe that', in order to ease his way to the more problematic argument against the penetrability of 'to know' as such:

> *Empty Church*: Suppose you have a reason to believe that the church is empty. *Must* you have a reason to believe that it is a church? I am not asking whether you generally have such reason. I am asking whether one can have reason to believe that it is a church which is empty. Certainly your reason for believing that the church is empty is not *itself* a reason to believe it is a church; or it *need not be*. Your reason for believing the church to be empty may be that you just made a thorough inspection of it without finding anyone. That is a good reason to believe the church empty. Just as clearly, however, it is not a reason, much less a good reason, to believe that what is empty is a church (1971: 1012–1013).

Dretske goes on to argue that not only epistemic operators are semi-penetrating, but they specifically fail to penetrate to some of the contrast consequences of a proposition, such as that present in the skeptic argument. To this aim, he appeals to the similarities epistemic operators have with what he calls 'explanatory operators' (such as 'explains that'), in that both are semi-penetrating. Bill and Mary loving each other explains that Bill and Marry got married, and also

explains that Mary got married. But, for instance, something explaining why Mary takes her lunch to work does not necessarily explain why Mary goes to work. So 'explains that' is a semi-penetrating operator. But, more than that, 'explains that' specifically fails to penetrate to some contrast consequences of a proposition. My red walls clashing with my green couch explains why I decided to paint my walls green, but fails to explain why I did not, instead, replace the couch. Mary being on a diet might explain why she did not order desert, but does not explain why, instead, she did not order it and throw it toward the waiter (1971: 1021–1022).

By analogy, Dretske claims that, due to the similarities epistemic operators have with explanatory operators, they too should be rather thought of as not penetrating to contrast consequences, such as, for instance, the brain in a vat scenario.

Dretske himself recognizes that arguing by analogy is not a particularly strong way to argue, but he states that he finds it at least revealing, and even convincing, because of the "same logic" explanatory and epistemic operators share with regard to their penetrability.

2. Transmission failure vs. closure failure

In response to Dretske's widely debated rejection of the closure principle, in a 1985 British Academy lecture, Crispin Wright drew attention, for the first time, to the distinction between closure and transmission of warrant. The closure principle, Wright argues, is the weaker principle (2003: 58); an argument complies with closure "provided that if there is warrant for its premises, there is warrant for its conclusion too." Adding the extra requirement that the very warrant supporting the premises should provide, perhaps for the first time, warrant for accepting the conclusion, makes for the stronger principle of transmission. Hence, Wright argues, cases like *Zebra* and the like do not exhibit failure of knowledge closure (in fact, Wright explicitly expresses his skepticism regarding the very existence of genuine counterexamples to closure), but of transmission of warrant failure. In such question-begging cases, where there is warrant for the premises in the first place only because the conclusion is antecedently warranted, closure will hold, while transmission of warrant may fail.

Wright (2003: 59-63) identifies two incarnations of transmission failure: first, cases involving information dependence of warrant (where a body of evidence, *e*, is an information-dependent warrant for a belief *P* if *e* only warrants *P* depending on collateral information): "At work at my desk in Philosophy Hall, I hear a thunderous rumble and sense a vibration in the building. Is that evidence of an incipient electric storm? Yes, if the sky has darkened and the atmosphere is heavy and still. Probably not, if the sky outside is clear blue and my office overlooks Amsterdam Avenue with its regular cargo of outsize trucks" (Wright 2003: 60).

This first template only engages the transmission of inferential warrant. In non-inferential cases, like *Zebra,* when beliefs are directly justified via some cognitive processes, like perception or memory, Wright argues that, obviously, my belief that the animals in the pen are not disguised mules cannot be justified on the basis on my visual experience. So, indeed my warrant for believing that they are zebras does not transmit. Still, it does not follow from this that I have no justification at all for believing the conclusion, like the trustworthiness of the zoo, for instance. Even more, according to Davies (2003: 30), the warrant for my believing the animals are zebras in the first place, "cannot be rationally combined with doubt about the truth of the conclusion" stating that they are not cleverly disguised mules. Thus, even though one's reasons for believing *P* do not transmit to a known consequence *Q*, one must still know *Q* (on the basis of other reasons) in order to know *P*.

Hence, Wright concludes: „Dretske [...] originally presented these cases as failures of closure. I have just presented them as failures of transmission. Once the distinction is on the table—as it was not in Dretske's discussion—I think it is clear that the latter is the correct diagnosis"(2003: 61).

Returning to Dretske's early case against closure, it can be argued that his own appeal to the operator 'reason to believe that' points in the very direction later identified by Wright. Let us revisit *Empty Church* in this respect. What Dretske's example appeals to is the strong intuition that the reason one might have for believing that a church is empty (inspecting it thoroughly and not finding a single soul inside) fails to be a good reason for believing that it is, in fact, a church. This, however, does not say anything about one's knowledge in this respect, but only about transmission of a certain warrant through entailment. Intuitively, as Davies argues, any doubt that the building one is inspecting is, in fact, a church, is incompatible with knowing it is an empty church in the first place. Just like any doubt with regard to, for instance, the trustworthiness of the zoo, impedes one from concluding via perception alone that the animals in the pen are zebras.

3. The new strategy

In a 2005 article, though, Dretske argues that, while non-transmissibility does not itself imply the failure of closure, "once one appreciates the wholesale failure of evidential transmission, the failure of closure is, if not mandatory, easier to swallow"(2003: 15). He starts by rejecting Davies's thesis, arguing that it implies that one must have previous warrant for knowing one is not being fooled by a clever deception in order to know there are zebras in the pen, or cookies in the jar, or that he had eggs for breakfast. Thus, Dretske argues, the resistance to abandoning closure throws us back into the skeptic's trap.

Dretske's new strategy against closure comes, though, as a surprise; he argues that, considering that most of our ways of acquiring knowledge are not closed under entailment, our trust in the closure principle for knowledge itself is at least odd:

> Not only is [perception closure] false, none of our nonperceptual ways of coming to know, none of our ways of preserving knowledge, and none of our ways of extending it are closed under known implication... If all this is so, if none of our ways of knowing, extending knowledge or preserving knowledge are closed, it seems odd to suppose that knowledge itself is closed. How is one supposed to get closure on something when every way of getting, extending and preserving it is open (2005: 13–14)?

Dretske provides an analysis of a small sample of our ways of acquiring knowledge with regard to closure: perception, testimony, proof, memory, indication, and information. I will not consider here, for the sake of concision, all of the discussed ways of coming to know, as Dretske's argument is roughly similar for every item in the list.

Let us consider information; Dretske maintains that, normally, when a thermometer registers 32 degrees on a Fahrenheit scale, it carries the information that *Temp*: the temperature is 32 degrees Fahrenheit. Now, *Temp* entails that the following proposition, *Broken*, is false*:* The temperature is 100 degrees Fahrenheit and the thermometer is broken. Dretske denies that the thermometer carries the information that *not-Broken* holds, and this looks intuitively right. Dretske understands information in terms of conclusive reasons**,** so that *R* carries the information that *P* is true only if, were *P* false, *R* would not hold.

But all this example seems to show is that, to put it more straightforwardly, information does not provide conclusive reasons for all the implications of a belief it warrants; which is to say that, basically, conclusive reasons do not transmit via entailment. So, again, all Dretske does is provide us with a long, sophisticated argument for transmission failure. In other words, the fact that the thermometer registers 32 degrees constitutes warrant for believing the temperature is 32 degrees, but the warrant does not transmit to the implied belief that the thermometer is not broken. We are in *Zebra* all over again, and nothing new seems to be added to the 1970 argument in order to reject Wright's and Davies's account. As Wright puts it, just like in *Zebra* and *Empty Church*, the argument above is valid, but not cogent, since knowledge of the conclusion is presupposed in one's supposed introspective knowledge of the premises. Thus, it is a counterexample to transmission, but fails to pose any threat to closure.

Dretske himself, for that matter, points again to transmission failure in explaining the mechanisms of what he takes to be closure failure: "Even when instruments (and this includes the human senses) are in perfect working order, they do not – they cannot – carry information that what they are providing is genuine information and not misinformation. That isn't an instrument's job"(2005: 22). Thus, Dretske argues, perception cannot provide conclusive reasons for the reliability of perception, the external world does not provide any conclusive hints towards its real existence, and neither does my memory warrant the real existence of the past.

In Wright's words, again, such arguments, from first-hand knowledge to heavyweight implications, are valid but not cogent. A cogent argument is "an argument, roughly, whereby someone could/should be moved to rational conviction of the truth of its conclusion—a case where it is possible to learn of the truth of the conclusion by getting warrant for the premises and then reasoning to it by the steps involved in the argument in question"(2003: 57). It is a fact that the truth of the conclusion *Q*: This instrument is working properly, cannot be warranted by the information the instrument itself provides; thus, it is a fact that we cannot learn the truth of the conclusion by first getting warrant for the premise *P*: This instrument displays *p*, and then reasoning to it by the steps involved in the argument. But, as Wright puts it, a valid argument with warranted premises is one thing, and a cogent argument is another. The fact that an argument is not cogent, does not entitle one to question its validity, nor the justification for its conclusion, but only the quality of the transmission of the warrant supporting the premises to the conclusion.

Conclusion

Not knowing the consequences of a justified belief is one thing. Failing to get support for the conclusion of an argument from the reasons warranting the premises is yet another. Fred Dretske himself pointed to transmission failure and not closure failure in his early essays on the matter; in supporting his case against the penetrability of 'to know' by appealing to examples featuring the operator 'reasons to believe that', he cleared the way for Davies's and Wright's argument for transmission failure.

Also, I have argued, his recent attacks against the closure principle bring nothing new to the debate, offering nothing more than further support for the transmission thesis. Dretske's thorough analysis of our ways of aquiring, preserving and extending knowledge, does not do much to support his claim that, insofar as none of the latter are closed under entailment, neither is knowledge, but rather offers a extended mapping for the failure of the stronger principle of transmission.

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