Abominable Conjunctions and Gricean Conversation

Corine Besson

Introduction

One of Dretske's greatest contributions to epistemology is his account of knowledge in terms of sensitivity: for a proposition to be known, one's belief in that proposition has to be sensitive. An important feature of this account is that the so-called 'Epistemic Closure Principle' for knowledge is not valid. On Dretske's account it is not the case that knowledge is closed under known implication. Dretske takes to be a virtue of his account, especially in light of skepticism about the external word. This is because on his account, you may know that you have hands, although you do not know that you are not a handless brain in a vat. The account thus saves ordinary knowledge from skepticism: although you cannot know that you are not in a skeptical scenario, you can enjoy much knowledge of the external world.

As a correlate, the account also entails that there are what has come to be known as abominable conjunctions – conjunctions of the form 'I know I have hands but I do not know that I am not a handless brain in a vat'. These conjunctions are abominable in that they look false or in some way incoherent. Dretske suggests that the abomination is merely pragmatic and can be explain in terms of conversational features. More precisely he thinks that it can be explained in terms of the Gricean Conversation Principles and its associated Maxims of Conversation.

In this paper, I argue that no such Gricean explanation is forthcoming and that the abomination cannot be thought of as a merely pragmatic or conversational Gricean phenomenon. The abomination goes deeper. In section 1, I outline Dretske's account of knowledge. In section II, I show how it can be applied to skepticism. Section III and IV discuss the rejection of closure and how much of a cost it constitutes. In section V, I introduce the Gricean framework and, in section VI, I apply it to abominable conjunctions. Section VII concludes that the Gricean framework cannot be use to explain the abominable character of abominable conjunctions

I. Relevant Alternatives and Conclusive Reasons

In his famous (1970) article 'Epistemic Operators', Fred Dretske offers a version of what has become known as the 'relevant alternative' or 'sensitive' account of knowledge. On this account, knowing a proposition requires one to rule out relevant alternatives that are incompatible with that proposition:

> To know P, you have to rule out or be able to rule out *relevant alternatives* Q,R,S,... which are incompatible with P.

For instance, to know that (P) there is gruyère in the fridge, you have to rule out the alternatives in which (Q) it actually is cheddar in the fridge or (R) it actually is Camembert in the fridge. These alternatives are relevant because they are a natural 'set of contrasts' (1970: 1022): camembert and cheddar are a natural set of contrast to gruyère because they are cheeses and would naturally go in the fridge. They are also incompatible with it being gruyère in the fridge: for instance, nothing is both gruyère and cheddar. By contrast, grand pianos, Xerox machines, and cats do not form a natural set of contrasts to gruyère. So for instance, although it actually being a grand piano in the fridge is incompatible with it being gruyère in the fridge, the former is intuitively not an alternative relevant to the latter.

The fact that knowing requires ruling out relevant alternatives means for Dretske that only 'sensitive beliefs' are known. Thus you know P only if:

> If P were not the case (some relevant alternative Q is the case), you would not believe P.

To know that there is gruyère in the fridge, you have, for instance, to rule out the relevant alternative that it is cheddar in the fridge, where that means that: if it were not the case that there is gruyère in the fridge (it is in fact cheddar), you would not believe that there is gruyère in the fridge. Your belief that there is gruyère in the fridge is sensitive only if, if it were not gruyère, you would not have the belief that it is.

In a later paper, 'Conclusive Reasons' (1971), Dretske refines his account by appealing to what he calls 'conclusive reasons', which are reasons that counterfactually depend on the facts:

> Knowing P requires having a conclusive reason for P, and your reason R for P is conclusive iff:
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>> If P were not the case, R would not be the case.

This is to say that R is a conclusive reason when R counterfactually guarantees P – where P is the very fact that R is a reason for. Suppose that you know that (P) there is gruyère in the fridge. Suppose that you reason for this is (R) it smells of gruyère in the fridge. This reason is conclusive iff: if there were not gruyère in the fridge, it would not smell of gruyère in the fridge. In effect, having a conclusive reason R for your belief that P, means that you have ruled out the relevant alternatives to P. Your belief P is thus sensitive and so you know P.

II. Application to Scepticism

An important feature of Dretske's account is that it can be used to articulate a kind of solution to scepticism about our knowledge of the external world. We can see this with the famous zebra example famously he introduced (1970: 1016) in the literature on scepticism. Thus suppose that you are at the zoo with a friend. You are looking at various cages and you see a zebra. You come to believe that it is a zebra in the cage. One would naturally say that you know it is a zebra in the cage on the basis of perception of a zebra in the cage. Seeing a zebra seems to be a conclusive reason for your belief. If it were not a zebra in the cage (but some relevant alternative: a rhinoceros, or a tiger) you would not see a zebra in the cage.

Consider now the issue of sceptical scenarios, through the following three propositions:

(1) It is a zebra in the cage.
(2) It is not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.
(3) It is a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

(3) is a sceptical scenario. For all you know on the basis of your perception, it is not zebra in the cage but a cleverly disguised mule made to appear exactly like a zebra. You might think that your perception alone you cannot tell apart a zebra from a cleverly disguised mule, and so after all that you do not know that (1) it a zebra in the cage.

However, Dretske thinks that you do know (1). This is because (3) is not an alternative relevant to (1). If so, it is not something you have to rule out in order to know (1). The presence of a rhinoceros or of a tiger in the cage is an alternative relevant to that of a zebra. But this is not the case for the presence of a cleverly disguised mule or of a zebra-robot tele-commanded from Mars. These latter two are too far-fetched, and accordingly they are not natural contrasts to the presence of a zebra. So the situation is this: (1) is incompatible with the sceptical scenario (3). But given that (3) is not a relevant alternative to (1), you do not have to have to rule (3) out in order to know (1). Thus you can have ordinary knowledge, such as of (1), although you cannot rule out the relevant sceptical scenario.

Notice also that (1) entails (2), where (2) is the denial of the sceptical hypothesis (3). Now it would seem that (3) is a relevant alternative to (2), just as, for instance there not being gruyère in the fridge is a relevant alternative to there being gruyère in the fridge. The negation of a proposition is not a very interesting contrast, but it is a relevant alternative nonetheless. So it being a cleverly disguised mule in the cage is a relevant alternative to it being not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

So the thought here is that not-P is *eo ipso* a relevant alternative to P and *vice-versa*: so (3) is a relevant alternative to (2). But not-P is not *eo ipso* a relevant alternative to things that imply P: thus (3) is not a relevant alternative to (1) although (1) implies (2). This means that knowing P requires ruling out not-P but knowing things that entail P doesn't require ruling out not-P.

The question now is, given your reason for believing (2), can you rule out (3)? Is your reason for believing (2) conclusive so that you know (2)?

Let us first think in terms of Dretske's conclusive reason with respect to (1). According to him, you know (1) because you believe (1) on the basis of perception R: your perception of a zebra. Your perception of a zebra is a conclusive reason because if there were no zebra, you would not perceive a zebra. This means that you would not believe (1), if (1) were not the case. Your belief in (1) is *sensitive* and so you know (1).

Now consider (2). According to Dretske, you do not know (2) because you believe (2) on the basis of R: your perception of a zebra. You would still have that reason R, namely your perception of a zebra, if (2) were not the case – in particular if the sceptical scenario (3) were the case. If that is so, R is not in this case a conclusive reason. This means you would believe (2) even if (2) were not the case. Your belief in (2) is insensitive and so you do not know (1).

The upshot is then that you know (1) even if you do not know (2): you can know (1) even if you cannot rule out the sceptical scenario (3). In general, you can know ordinary propositions about the external world, even if you cannot rule out sceptical scenarios.

III. Epistemic Closure

One noteworthy consequence of Dretske's account of knowledge that is made manifest in his treatment of scepticism is that the epistemological principle of closure for knowledge invalid.[1]

Closure roughly states that you know anything that you know to be implied by what you know; or, alternatively, that you can extend your knowledge through competent deduction from known premises. This principle is extremely intuitive: a natural way to extend your knowledge is through drawing consequences from the things that you already know. In a recent paper, Dretske states the principle roughly as follows.[2]

> ### Dretske's statement of the Closure Principle for knowledge (CPK)
> (CPK) If S knows P and S knows P implies Q, then, evidentially speaking, this is sufficient for S to know Q.

The sensitivity account offered by Dretske entails the rejection of closure as follows.

Suppose that you know (on the basis of perception R) that:

> (1) It is a zebra in the cage.

Suppose also that you know through reasoning that:

> (4) If it is a zebra in the cage, it is not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

Given this, however, you do not thereby come to know – it is not, evidentially speaking, sufficient for you to know that:

> (2) It is not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

This is because for Dretske only sensitive beliefs, such as belief in (1), are known. Insensitive beliefs such as belief in (2) are not known. Thus, Dretske rejects closure because competent deduction can yield insensitive conclusions (e.g. (2)) from sensitive premises (e.g. (1)) – i.e. it can yield unknown conclusions from known premises. These insensitive conclusions do not inherit whichever conclusive reasons we had for the original premise (1). Some conclusive reasons for believing P simply do not transmit to conclusions that are known to be implied by P.

Dretske (2005: 30ff.) distinguishes between what he calls 'heavyweight' and 'lightweight' implications of what one knows: a heavyweight implication of the fact that it is a zebra in the cage is that it is not a cleverly disguised mule. A lightweight implication is, for instance, the fact that that the cage does not contain a rhinoceros. According to him, through epistemic closure, you may know the lightweight implications of what you know but not the heavyweight ones.

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[1] Dretske's rejection of closure does not merely concern knowledge. He rejects closure for all closure principles containing operators that are not 'fully penetrating'. See Dretske (1970).
[2] See Dretske (2005: 26). There is a plethora of accounts/statements of the epistemic closure principle for knowledge, and some have criticised Dretske's formulation. See for instance Hawthorne (2005) for a discussion of several formulations of the closure principle. It does not matter for the purposes of this discussion how we ultimately decide to fine-tune closure. So to keep things simple, we can work with Dretske's statement.

It thus appears that Dretske's way out of scepticism, regardless of its merits, has a significant cost: the intuitive epistemic closure principle for knowledge has to be rejected.

IV. The Least Costly Option

Dretske however thinks that rejecting closure is a cost worth paying in order to save ordinary knowledge from scepticism. He is also well aware that rejecting closure has never been a popular idea. Very few philosophers have recommended rejecting closure, regardless of the fact that it provides an answer of sort to the sceptic.[3] Here is a representative view, taken from Richard Feldmann (1995:95):

> To my mind, the idea that no version of the closure principle is true – that we can fail to know things that we knowingly deduce from other facts we know – is among the least plausible ideas to gain currency in epistemology in recent years.

Dretske however claims that philosophers tend to overstate this cost of rejecting closure. Although it is true hat in some cases, closure cannot be used to extend knowledge, in most cases it can: in most cases, competent deduction does extend knowledge.

Against those reluctant to reject closure rather than save ordinary knowledge from scepticism in the way he recommends, Dretske (2005: 32) replies that rejecting closure is the least 'costly' option; especially so, since there aren't in fact many options worth choosing from on the table. In the paper he considers the following three options:[4]

> (I) Scepticism: you do not know (1) and you do not know (3).
> (II) Contextualism is according to Dretske a kind of 'verbal *hocus pocus*' (2000: 38).
> (III) Rejecting closure: you know (1) and you do not know (3).

It is obvious why (I) is 'costly': we hardly know anything on that option.

We know some of the merits of (III): it enables us to save ordinary knowledge from skepticism, even if we cannot rule out skeptical scenarios. With the rejection of closure however comes the further cost in that it commits us to the possibility of there being 'abominable conjunctions' (DeRose 1996), such as the following:

> (5) I know it is a zebra and I do not know it is not a cleverly disguised mule.
> (6) I know I have hands and I do not know I am not a brain in a vat.
> (7) I know there are cookies in the jar and I do not know I'm not hallucinating them.

An abominable conjunction is the conjunction of a statement of ordinary knowledge about the external world and of a statement of lack of knowledge that the pertinent sceptical scenario does not arise – where 'pertinent' roughly means that, *prima facie*, lack of knowledge that that sceptical scenario does not arise would clearly seem to undermine the first conjunct. By way of a first diagnosis, which will be refined below, we can say that these conjunctions are abominable because they do not seem to be the sorts of things that should be true: they are not straight contradictions but

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[3] Another famous rejection of closure can be found in Nozick (1981).
[4] It is clear that Dretske does not take the list to be exhaustive, but he takes it to mark out the only serious players.

they involved two conjuncts that seem in some sense to be incompatible. These abominations are for Dretske the cost of endorsing (III).

What about contextualism? Why is it so unattractive according to Dretske? According to contextualism, if you know both that:

> (1) It is a zebra in the cage.
> (4) If it is a zebra in the cage, it is not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

You cannot thereby come to know that:

> (2) It is not a cleverly disguised mule in the cage.

This is not because closure fails, but because the deduction equivocates – 'knows' is being used with different meanings in it.

According to contextualism, 'knows' is a kind of indexical whose content may vary according to the context in which a given knowledge ascription is made. The verb 'knows' picks out different knowledge relations in different such contexts, depending on which standards for knowledge are in place in a given context. Sometimes the standards are high – which means that knowledge is hard to attain – and sometimes the standards are low – which means that knowledge is easier to attain. What determines whether the standards are high or low in a relevant context is which possibilities are salient or relevant in the context in which the knowledge ascription is made.[5]

For instance, on the contextualist account developed by David Lewis (1996), when sceptical scenarios are conversationally salient (i.e. mentioned) in a given ascription-context, the standards for knowledge are raised, so that 'knows' picks out a knowledge relation – call it 'know$_{high}$' – on which someone in that context (the ascriber) does not know that they have hands and does not know that there is an external world. In that context, such an ascriber has little knowledge. However, when sceptical scenarios are not salient, when the ascriber is in an ordinary context, 'knows' picks out a different knowledge relation – call it 'know$_{low}$' –, on which they both know that they have hands and that there is an external world. However this latter fact holds only so long as the ascriber does not consider sceptical scenarios. This is because considering sceptical scenarios makes them conversationally salient and so raises the standard, such that 'knows' comes to pick out know$_{high}$, on which the ascriber knows neither that they have hands nor that there is an external world. However in both cases, closure is preserved: knowledge is closed both for know$_{low}$ and for know$_{high}$.

Applied to our case, we get that the standards for knowledge may be different for (1) and for (3). In ordinary contexts, you may know$_{low}$ (1) and also know know$_{low}$ (3). However if you consider whether you know (3), then what was an irrelevant possibility becomes relevant, the standards for knowledge are raised, in a different – non-ordinary – context, in which you do not know$_{high}$ (1) and you do not know$_{high}$ (3). Closure is preserved and ordinary knowledge is saved from scepticism, at least in ordinary contexts, in which sceptical scenarios are not salient.

Now, according to Dretske, contextualism is 'more bizarre' (2005: 33) than rejecting closure. His ultimate dissatisfaction with contextualism seems to come from the fact that, given contextualism,

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[5] Contextualists have different ways of accounting for the mechanisms by which the standards get to be raised or lowered. Here I roughly follow Lewis (1996), as this seems to be Dretske's target. But see for instance DeRose (1995) and Neta (2003) for alternative accounts.

there is no talking about knowledge absolutely but only relative to contexts that are determined by what people consider or ignore conversationally. Contextualism preserves closure, and avoids abominable conjunctions by applying to some implausible linguistic machinery to 'knows'. This, according to Dretske, constitutes a bigger cost than the clean rejection of closure.

This paper cannot adjudicate fully between contextualism and Dretske's sensitivity account of knowledge. Its aim is rather to press Dretske's on the matter of abominable conjunctions. This, I hope, will in turn be helpful address the relative merits and costs of his account and the contextualist one.

Here is what Dretske ought to be able to explain with respect to abominable conjunctions:

> (a) Why these abominable conjunctions arise – what justifies their existence, why such conjunctions are true.

> (b) What the nature of these abominations is – what makes them abominations, what makes these conjunctions look so bad.

The explanation in (a) is given in terms of Dretske's relevant alternatives account of knowledge: we have a good explanation of why the abominations exist. But we need to look at what Dretske has to say about (b). In the second part of the paper, I thus focus on (b), which will enable us to assess better the merits of Dretske's account.

V. Gricean Conversation

Dretske's diagnosis on the abominable conjunctions is brief but it indicates the way in which he thinks an explanation ought to be developed to arrive at an answer to question (b). His main claim is that the abominations are not *logical* but merely *conversational*:

> Why is it ridiculous [t]o say one knows one has hands but doesn't know one isn't a handless brain in a vat? The second conjunct introduces possibilities normally assumed to be irrelevant (not counted as possibilities) by someone who asserts the first conjunct.

> This is only to say (Grice, 1967) that there are logical abominations (self-contradictory) and conversational abominations (perfectly consistent, and therefore possibly true statements, that violate conventional expectations). (Dretske 2005: 32)

For sure, we can grant that the abominations are not logical: they are the true consequences of a consistent theory. But is it the case that they are merely conversationally abominable because, while they may be true, they are odd things to say? Are they odd *merely* because they violate *conventional conversational expectations*?

It is clear from the quote that Dretske thinks that some Gricean story can be told to give an answer to (b), and give an account of the nature of the abomination. In what follows, I argue in detail that no such Gricean story can be told.

According to Grice (1975), ordinary conversation is regulated by what he labels the *Cooperative Principle*:

> Make your conversational contribution what is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

The thought behind the principle is that speakers cooperate in conversation in order to make their exchange as successful as possible, by making *appropriate* (as opposed to random, inorderly, or incoherent) contributions to the nature (topic, tone, evolution, etc.) of the conversation.

This principle is fleshed out in a series of maxims, which regulate this successful conversation:

> *Maxims of Quantity*
> 1. Make your contribution as informative as required.
> 2. Don't make your contribution more informative than is required.
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> *Maxims of Quality: Be truthful*
> 1. Don't say what you believe to be false.
> 2. Don't say what you lack adequate evidence for.
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> *Maxim of Relation: Be relevant*
>
> *Maxims of Manner: Be perspicuous*
> 1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
> 2. Avoid ambiguity.
> 3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
> 4. Be orderly.

Grice's view is that the cooperative speaker S – the speaker who wants the conversational exchange to be successful – follows these maxims in conversation: this is what it takes to adhere to the Cooperative Principle. You can think of these maxims as being presupposed in a conversation: the conversation proceeds with the implicit assumption that they are being adhered to by the participants.

However, it can also happen that the cooperative speaker S does not seem to cooperate because S is *violating* some maxim. Provided that we are still in a cooperative scenario, here is what the cooperative hearer H will then do: H will assume that S is still cooperating, such that, despite S' violation of a maxim, H will reinterpret what S says so that S comes out as cooperating – as having made an appropriate contribution to the conversation.

We can think of this process as an application of a kind of charity principle: each cooperating participant in a cooperative conversation makes their utmost so that the other participants come out as cooperating – i.e. as wanting to partake in a successful exchange, even in light of countervailing evidence, when it seems that one or more maxim is being flouted.

Thus, the violation of one or more maxim in a conversation, can give rise to what Grice calls 'implicatures': inferences that the cooperative hearer H draws to get to what the cooperative speaker S meant by intentionally violating a maxim by saying something apparently inappropriate to the conversation. In particular, H might ask herself why a given maxim was violated? To what effect? What is the speaker trying to draw attention to? She then relies on features of the context to find the content S is trying to convey.

For instance, suppose that to my question of whether you enjoyed the film, you reply: "the popcorn was tasty". This response is inappropriate and on the face of it, what you have violated the Maxim

of Relation: what you said is not relevant to the question of whether you liked the film or not. As I hearer, however, I work out that this is a euphemistic way for you to tell me that you did not like the film – by mentioning something else that you liked. Or, suppose that a father calls his teenage son's mobile phone because the son is late for dinner at home. The father asks: "Where are you? We're waiting for you"; to which the son replies: "Obviously, I am not home". This response is inappropriate in that it is violating the maxim of quantity: what the son is saying is not informative enough – indeed it is not informative at all because it is presupposed by both parties in the conversation. However by this, as the father works out, the teenage son indicates that he has no desire to disclose his location. Reinterpreted this way the son's contribution is appropriate (albeit teenage-rude).

What would it mean to appeal to Gricean conversation to answer (b) and explain the nature of the abomination? Clearly what Dretske has in mind is that we need to appeal to maxim violation. Stating (5), for instance, is in some sense inappropriate because it violates some Gricean maxim. So, as in the examples above, what we would expect is an explanation this inappropriateness of the following form: a cooperative speaker S utters an abominable conjunction. If so, there is a conversational maxim that S is flouting: this is what generates the abomination. We need to identify this maxim (both as theorists and as cooperative hearers). So, despite S' violation of a maxim by uttering an abominable conjunction, the cooperative hearer H reinterprets what S has said, so that S comes out as cooperating – as having made an appropriate contribution to the conversation. Once, the cooperative hearer H has recovered what is meant by the cooperative speaker S, we can consider what S meant to be an appropriate contribution to the conversation.

The success of such a Gricean explanation of why abominable conjunctions are abominable rests on two things: first we are able to find the source of the inappropriateness by identifying a relevant maxim that is violated; second we are able to reinterpret abominable conjunctions so that they make an appropriate contribution to the conversations they are a part of.

The following issues should however be highlighted. The Gricean model of cooperation just outlined works with the idea that once the hearer H understands what the speaker S really meant when they violated some maxim, what S initially said should no longer sound inappropriate. For instance, the statement 'The popcorn was tasty' should no longer strike the hearer as an inappropriate answer to their question of whether S liked the film.

Is this plausible in the case of Dretske's abominable conjunctions? Dretske suggests that abominable conjunctions are inappropriate because they are in some way odd or 'ridiculous' things to say. But he does not seem to suggest that they can be made to sound less ridiculous: perhaps for him these 'conversational abominations' cannot be made conversationally non-abominable through a Gricean mechanism of implicatures. So the hearer cannot make the abomination go away: there is a maxim violation on the part of S, but no natural implicature that the hearer H can derive. We would thus have a scenario in which both S and H are cooperating, S flouts a maxim but there is no implicature that generates a more appropriate interpretation of what S meant.

The issue here is complicated for two reasons. First, it is unclear how exactly Dretske ultimately wants to use the Gricean model: as merely explaining the existence of abominable conjunctions in terms of maxim-violation or as also explaining, in terms of implicatures, how abominations can be made less abominable. Second, even if abominations could not be made less abominable through the process of implicatures in this way, it could still be the case that they can me made to be appropriate contributions to the conversation. Perhaps it will always sound a bit weird to state (5)

even after the process of reinterpreting (5) so as to make it an appropriate contribution to a conversation.

Here, I will first show that there is no Gricean maxim that can explain why the abomination arises – so the Gricean model cannot be used to give an answer to (b), questions concerning the nature of the abomination. And that is that: the question of whether implicatures can be derived does not even get to be raised. However, I will nonetheless also show how we could think of applying the notion of implicature to abominable conjunctions, as a way of making an abominable conjunction an appropriate contribution to a conversation. This will enable us to make a useful comparison with contextualism and to assess better the relative costs of the Dretske's and the contextualist's views.

6. Abominable Conjunctions and Gricean Maxim Violation

Consider again (5):

> (5) I know it's a zebra and I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule.

Dretske suggests that (5) is abominable because it violates some Gricean Maxim(s). There is an apparent lack of cooperation on the part of the speaker uttering (5). This requires you, the cooperative hearer, to reinterpret them as meaning something different. But which maxim (s) is(are) violated? I can think of four ways of appealing to the maxims:

> (a) Appeal to a violation of the Maxim of Relation
> (b) Appeal to a violation of both Maxims of Quality
> (c) Appeal to a violation of both Maxims of Quantity
> (d) Appeal to a violation of the first two Maxims of Manner

I consider (a), (b), (c) and (d) in turn and conclude that none of them can be appealed to in order to explain why abominable conjunctions are abominable. So Dretske's Gricean strategy fails.[6]

6(a). Abominations and the Maxim of Relation

This is clearly the option favoured by Dretske. Recall that he claims that (5) is an abomination because it violates conventional conversational expectations, in that:

> The second conjunct introduces possibilities normally assumed to be irrelevant (not counted as possibilities) by someone who asserts the first conjunct. (2005: 32)

Let us first find a kind of ordinary conversation in which it would be appropriate to utter 'I know this is a zebra'.[7] Suppose that we are at the zoo, and we are playing the game where you tell me what you know about the animal that you are looking at. The normal expectation is that if you say 'I

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[6] In the discussion below, I will not consider variants of (5) in order to assess whether they would be any less abominable. For instance, one could consider, replacing 'and' by 'but', or have two consecutive sentences rather than a conjunction, third-person ascriptions rather than first-person ones, or inverting the two conjuncts. One could also consider: whether the oddity remains if we stick different epistemic operators or cases of conjunctions that are odd but do not involve skepticism. Although doing all of this would certainly be illuminating, I take it that the brief is to be able to account for the abominable character of (5) in its current dress.

[7] As Hawthorne notes in his (2005), more often than not it is odd to assert 'I know this is a zebra'. One would rather simply assert: 'This is a zebra'.

know this is a zebra in the cage', and you are following the maxim of Relation, what you say next is something that is *conversationally relevant* to the topic of knowing what is in the cage or knowing that something is a zebra. You do not switch to a different topic – at least not without some kind of flagging.

The supposed explanation here is that we get an abomination because in asserting the second conjunct 'I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule', you have asserted something that is not conversationally relevant to your assertion of 'I know its' a zebra'. You have somehow changed the topic.

On this interpretation, and supposing that we have such a maxim violation, as a cooperative hearer, upon hearing the second conjunct, I first retain my hypothesis that you are a cooperative speaker and so I try to make sense of what you have just said as making an appropriate contribution. If it is a violation of the Maxim of Relation, I must try to recover some kind of content whereby the second conjunct is relevant to the first one. This is hard, but perhaps given that we are talking about knowledge, I could derive the following as what you meant:

> (8) <With respect a certain body of evidence> I know it's a zebra and <with respect to another body of evidence> I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule.[8]

But notice that very few hearers will go for (8) – it is very demanding. They will presumably rather assume that you are not cooperating or that although you are cooperating no implicature can generate a reinterpreted content.

Of course we might be having this conversation as epistemologists, well versed in abominable conjunctions, and upon hearing (5), I might just interpret you as saying:

> (9) <With respect to a given set of relevant alternatives> I know it's a zebra and <with respect to another set of relevant alternatives> I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule.

Recall, on the relevant alternatives view: being a cleverly disguised mule is not an alternative relevant to being a zebra. So maybe it is the kind of violation of the Maxim of Relation that only makes sense in the context of the philosophy seminar.

The key problem with this Gricean interpretation is that (5) cannot plausibly be said to violate the Maxim of Relation: there is no plausible conversational sense of relevance on which the second conjunct is not relevant to the first: whether we are in an ordinary conversational context or in a specialised one. If we are at the zoo, and we are discussing what animals are in the cages or what we know to be in the cages, then it seems that by asserting the second conjunct I have asserted something that is relevant to the first. If we are epistemologists discussing Dretske's views on closure, or the topic of relevant alternatives, the second conjunct would also be conversationally relevant to the first.

So a violation of the Maxim of Relation cannot be what is happening here from a conversational perspective: 'relevant' is simply used in two different ways by Dretske and by Grice. On a Gricean account, the second conjunct is relevant – *conversationally* – to the first. They clearly speak to the same topic. On Dretske's relevant alternatives account, the second conjunct is not relevant –

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[8] I use the pointy brackets to indicate aspects of what is meant by the speaker that are not said but implicated.

epistemologically – to the first. But, on the face of it, epistemological irrelevance cannot simply be cashed out as conversational irrelevance. If so, a violation of the Maxim of Relation cannot explain the abominable character of abominable conjunctions.

According to Dretske (2005: 32), (5) is analogous to (10), below, which is also an abominable conjunction, and which too violates conventional conversational expectations in that it introduces a possibility normally considered irrelevant in the second conjunct. Thus, suppose that I assert – perhaps wanting to sound clever or polemical or outrageous:

> (10) The refrigerator is empty but it has lots of things in it.[9]

In uttering (10) what I mean is that there is no food or other items normally stored in refrigerators but it may nonetheless be filled with lots of gas molecules:

> 'In describing an object as a refrigerator [o]ne is led to expect that the things that are in [i]t are the sorts of perishable items normally stored or preserved in refrigerators. To then include (second conjunct) gas molecules as things in refrigerators is to flout this entirely reasonable expectation about what sorts of things are to be counted as things for purposes of describing the contents of refrigerators.'

I think that Dretske is correct in thinking that a maxim has been flouted here. But it is not the maxim of relevance. It is not as if the topic of conversation has been changed here: we are still talking about what is or is not in the fridge. What is happening is rather that the speaker has, without warning, imposed two different sorts of restrictions on the quantifiers 'empty' and 'lots of', such that what is meant is rally:

> (11) The refrigerator is empty <of macroscopic objects> but it has lots of <microscopic objects> in it.

This is to say that the maxim flouted here seems to be the Maxim of Manner, presumably 1: you are being unclear about which objects you are quantifying over when you use the expressions 'empty' and 'lots of'. And indeed once that is clarified, as in (11) the oddity of (10) goes away and (11) can be seen as an appropriate contribution to our conversation concerning what is in the fridge.

So appeal to the Maxim of Relation seems to work neither for (5) nor for (10). However, (10) may be explained in terms of flouting one of the Maxims of Manner, and I will discuss later whether (5) can be explained in the same terms.

6(b). Abominations and the Maxims of Quality

Appealing to the Maxims of Quality might be tempting, especially the second one, because it has a distinctive epistemological flavour. But the problem is that, by Dretske's lights, none of these maxims is flouted when you assert an abominable conjunction: both conjuncts in (5) are true and both are supported by adequate evidence – these are consequences of Dretske's view.

So it cannot be that either of these maxims is flouted and so the abomination cannot be explained in this way. Having said that, of course, upon hearing the second conjunct, a hearer might think that

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[9] Notice here that (5) and (10) are not analogous in at least one dimension: in (5) the 'it's a zebra in the cage' entails 'it's not a cleverly disguised mule'. However, in (10) we have no such entailment between the two conjuncts.

the Maxims of Quality has been violated. Indeed, upon hearing the second conjunct, it is natural to think that when the speaker uttered the first one, they said something they believed to be false. Equally, concerning the second Maxim of Quality. Upon hearing the second conjunct, it is natural to think that when the speaker asserted the first one, they said something for which you lack adequate evidence. While all this is true, in fact the abomination cannot be traced back to a violation of the Maxims of Quality: if you are Dretske, you take yourself to know that (5) is true, and can assert it as sincerely as anything.

6(c). Abominations and the Maxims of Quantity

Let us now turn to the Maxims of Quantity. Suppose that we are still at the zoo discussing your knowledge of animals in the cage. You assert: 'I know it's a zebra'. Your contribution is adequately informative and the hearer takes it to be so, as a default. Then your utter: 'and I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule'. If we are appealing to the Maxims of Quantity, it must be the case that somehow, you have not said enough or you have said too much. But it is hard to see why that would be: it is hard to see why saying 'and I don't know it's not a cleverly disguised mule' would be adding too much information. Perhaps this could be so if we had stipulated that you are not allowed to talk about things you don't know. But then 'I know it's a zebra in the cage but I don't know what the animal next to it is' should present us with the same kind of abomination. But this is of course not the case.

Be that as it may, as a hearer, I might however think that you have violated one of the Maxims of Quantity in uttering the second conjunct. I might think that you should have been more informative and said something like (8) or (9). Perhaps, that would have indeed been better. But this is not because I have not been informative enough: on Dretske's account, 'knows' does not need to be relativized to any parameter such as bodies of evidence or sets of relevant alternatives. That would make the view akin to contextualism. The verb 'knows' does not need any qualification, and so (5) is adequately informative.

6(d). Abominations and the first two Maxims of Manner

In our zoo exchange, for you to have flouted one of the first two Maxims of Manner, you would have had to either use an ambiguous word or express yourself in an unclear way, perhaps using unfamiliar words or familiar words in an unfamiliar or unobvious way.

First, it however does not seem that you have been unclear in asserting (5). Consider (10) again. I diagnosed (10) as being abominable because it flouted one of the Maxims of Manner: the first one concerning clarity. (10) was unclear because the quantifier restriction is different in both conjuncts: we are quantifying over two different sorts of things but not clearly stating that this is the case. Thus, (10) goes against expectations because if you are quantifying over macroscopic objects in the first conjunct, we expect you to be quantifying over the same things in the second.

Concerning (5), the only plausible candidate for ambiguity or unclarity would be the word 'know'. But for Dretske it is not the case that 'know' is used in an unclear way or differently in the two conjuncts. For him, 'knows' does not come with some kind of domain restriction. So it is very different from a quantifier.

This incidentally shows that (10) after all is not analogous with (5), contrary to what Dretske claims: they are not instances of flouting the same maxim, and definitely not the same maxim of Manner. So a violation of the fist Maxim of Manner cannot explain the abominable character of (5).

The abomination in (5) cannot either be explained as a case of flouting the second Maxim of Manner: Avoid Ambiguity. The only plausible candidate for ambiguity would be the word 'know'. But on Dretske's view, 'know' is not ambiguous, and it is used with the same meaning in both conjuncts.

Actually, it would be unwelcome news for Dretske if the abominable character of (5) were to be explained in terms of an ambiguity in (5). It would make the explanation dangerously close to the 'verbal *hocus pocus*' of contextualism: contextualists are indeed happy to say that 'know' is ambiguous in that it can pick out different knowledge relations in different conversational contexts. Dretske should shy away from any kind of ambiguity in the word 'know' if he is to avoid adding the cost of 'verbal *hocus pocus*' to that of abominable conjunctions in his overall account of knowledge.

So I conclude that neither of the first two Maxims of Manners can be appealed to in order to explain the abominable character of abominable conjunctions.

7. Concluding Remarks

To explain the abominable character of abomination in Gricean conversational terms, I have considered four Gricean avenues:

    (a) Appeal to a violation of the Maxim of Relation
    (b) Appeal to a violation of both Maxims of Quality
    (c) Appeal to a violation of both Maxims of Quantity
    (d) Appeal to a violation of the first two Maxims of Manner

None of these can help explaining the abominable nature of Dretskean abominable conjunctions. No other Gricean Maxim could be plausibly appealed to in order to explain their nature. I thus conclude that, contrary to what Dretske claims, abominable conjunctions cannot be explained in terms of the Gricean framework of Maxim violations. In particular, Dretske's favoured choice of explanation, in terms of a violation of the Maxim of Relation, does not work. And so, so far as Gricean conversation goes, the abominations are left unexplained.

There might be other ways of giving a pragmatic explanation of the abominable conjunctions: perhaps alongside so-called 'Moorean Paradoxes' (see Moore 1942), provided that these are not given an explanation in Gricean terms, or in terms of the pragmatics of assertion and other speech acts. I leave discussion of these for another occasion. However, it is important to stress that if the abominations cannot be explained as a merely pragmatic or conversational phenomenon, as I suspect that they cannot, this will mean that the abomination goes deeper… into the semantics. And this will be bad news for Dretske because it will point to a flaw in his account of knowledge. This would be definitely more costly than Dretske ever envisaged.

To make this more palatable, we can reflect on the discussion of (5), (8) and (9) in Section 6(a). When considering whether an implicature could be derived from (5), I suggested (8) and (9) as possible candidates. Now, as has been shown in Sections 6(a)-(d), no Gricean maxim has been violated in stating (5), and so no implicature can be derived. But be that as it may, it is clear that it is much better, conversationally speaking, for someone to utter (8) or (9) than it is to utter (5). Why

is that? Recall (10) again. That was abominable but the abomination could be explained away once seen as a violation of the first Maxim of Manner and reinterpreted as (11).

The same holds in the case of (5): (8) and (9) feel much better than (5) conversationally speaking because they feel like explicitations or disambiguations of (5). If we want to think in terms of Gricean maxims here, we should thus certainly think in terms of the first two Maxims of Manner, just as we did for (10).[10]

Now given that no Gricean explanation is in fact forthcoming, it seems to me that the sheer fact that we, as competent hearers, think that (8) and (9) would have been better things to say than (5) betrays both a pre-theoretical lack of sympathy for Dretske's account of knowledge and a natural tendency to want to reinterpret his views on knowledge in terms that are close to contextualism. It could thus turn out that something like contextualism is the natural fall-back position to explain away the abominable nature of abominable conjunctions, if no pragmatic explanation is forthcoming.[11]

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[10] Notice however, that the relation of (10) to (11) is still not quite the relation of (5) to (8) or (9). (11) does not feel odd at all in the relevant context. However (10) and (11) still do feel odd in their contexts. They may be acceptable contribution to a conversation but that does not take away all their oddity.

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