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On Seeing
That Others Have
Thoughts and Feelings

Abstract: We sometimes use perceptual language in connection with the minds of others. In this paper I explore the extent to which we can take our language here at face value. Fred Dretske separates out a knowledge-that and a knowledge-what question in connection with our knowledge of others, and claims that we can give a perceptual account of the latter but not the former. In this paper I follow Dretske in separating out questions here, but argue that Dretske does not go far enough when saying why it is that we cannot answer the knowledge-that question. I suggest we follow Wittgenstein and say that the knowledge-that question is misguided. The difference between myself and Dretske lies in the way in which we think of what needs to be in place (in the background) in order for us to give an account of what another thinks or feels.

Introduction

The philosophical problem of other minds is one that philosophers have been grappling with in one way or another at least since the time of Descartes. It is often taken to be an epistemological problem: how do I know that others have minds, that they have thoughts and feelings? Consider, in this connection, the following passage from Descartes’ Second Meditation:

[1] It is often but not always taken this way. There are those who argue that the problem is primarily conceptual. See Avramides (2001) and Bilgrami (1992).

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But then if I look out of a window and see men crossing the square, as I just happened to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves… Yet do I see more than hats and coats which could conceal automatic machines…? (Descartes, 1641/1984)

This passage occurs as part of Descartes’ discussion of the errors to which my mind is prone. And some of the errors we fall into he puts down to our being ‘almost tricked by ordinary ways of talking’. We say we ‘see’ things when in fact we ought to give quite another account of what is going on.2 One question that we might ask is whether there is any way of taking what we say here at face value.

Traditionally, philosophers who have considered the question of how I know that another has a mind have tended to ignore our ordinary ways of talking. It is common in philosophy to find that our knowledge of the mind of another comes about as the result of reasoning. The most familiar lines of reasoning are to be found in (i) the argument from analogy, (ii) the argument from induction, and (iii) the argument from best explanation. It is less common (at least in analytic philosophy3) to take our talk seriously and to consider the possibility that we come by our knowledge of another mind through perception. It is this possibility — or at least one version of it — that is the main focus of this paper.

The idea that perception yields knowledge of mind was not an immediately popular one in analytic philosophy. Alvin Plantinga refers to Thomas Reid, the eighteenth-century philosopher, who wrote: ‘The thoughts and passions of the mind are invisible, intangible, odourless and inaudible.’ To this Plantinga offers that we may add: ‘And they can’t be tasted either’ (Plantinga, 1966, p. 441). The very idea that perception can yield knowledge of another mind had little support around this time in analytic philosophy.

Nevertheless, the idea did find a voice in some quarters. One notable support for the idea comes in John McDowell’s paper ‘On the Reality of the Past’ where he writes:

We should not jib at, or interpret away, the commonsense thought that, on those occasions which are paradigmatically suitable for training in the assertoric use of the relevant part of language, one can literally

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[2] The contrast Descartes wishes to draw here is between seeing and judging. For the purposes of this paper, I leave Cartesian scholarship to one side. It is Descartes’ observation about what we ordinarily say here that interests me.

[3] This is an important qualification. The argument from analogy enjoyed a longer history in the analytic tradition than in the phenomenological one. Max Scheler, for example, rejected that argument in the early part of the twentieth century, and many philosophers working in this tradition have followed Scheler. It is important to remember that in this paper I am following the analytic tradition.
perceive, in another’s facial expression or his behaviour, that he is [for instance] in pain, and not just infer that he is in pain from what one perceives. (McDowell, 1978/1998, p. 305)

The idea is also to be found in the writings of Fred Dretske (1966) and Quassim Cassam (2007). It is the work of these philosophers — and in particular Dretske — that I shall concentrate on in this paper.

There is much in common between these proponents of what I shall refer to as the perceptual model of our knowledge of other minds, but there are also important differences. The disagreement is not over whether we can use perception to come by knowledge of another’s mind (this is agreed by all who accept the perceptual model), but over just what we can come to know by this method. Dreske and Cassam separate out the following two questions:

**Q(i)** Is it possible to know what another is thinking or feeling?

**Q(ii)** Is it possible to know that others think and feel?

However, while Cassam holds that we can use the perceptual model to yield a reply to both Q(i) and Q(ii), Dretske believes that model can only yield a response to Q(i).

Once we tease out two questions here, we can look back over the literature on other minds and we can identify what we might label a ‘thin’ and a ‘thick’ problem. We can then say that Q(i) is related to what I want to call the *thin* problem of other minds and Q(ii) is related to what I want to call the *thick* problem. The thin problem is associated with a more everyday problem. People do, in the ordinary course of things, claim to know what those around them think and feel. One problem is to say how this is possible. The thick problem, on the other hand, is a distinctively philosophical problem. It is a problem removed from the everyday, and one raised by the philosophical sceptic, who raises similarly thick problems in other domains (in particular, concerning our knowledge of the external world). If we look back on the history of this so-called problem and consider traditional responses to it (analogy, induction, best explanation), we can now ask: ‘which problem were these arguments addressing?’ I believe the answer is that the arguments were designed to answer both questions.

What is interesting about Dretske’s work is that it drives a wedge between these two questions. Many will find this to be an unintuitive and unattractive aspect of Dretske’s work. I believe that this is a help-

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[5] That one can drive a wedge between these two questions in the way Dretske does is a highly controversial aspect of his work (see footnote 7, below). I do not want so much to
ful distinction and I hope, in what follows, to explain why this is so. The main focus of my concern in this paper will be Q(ii) and its relation to Q(i).

Dretske’s Account of Seeing and Knowing

I want to approach Dretske’s perceptual account of our knowledge of other minds by first looking at Nozick’s tracking account. Nozick and Dretske hold a ‘relevant alternatives’ account of knowledge. They both hold an account of knowledge that incorporates an all-important sensitivity condition, and it is this sensitivity condition that determines that they give different answers to Q(i) and Q(ii).

Nozick’s account of knowledge (1981, Chapter 3) is as follows:

A subject knows that p iff

(i) p is true
(ii) S believes that p
(iii) If p were not the case, S would not believe that p
(iv) If p were the case, S would believe that p.

(iii) is the all-important sensitivity condition.6 Nozick illustrates his account with the following example:

Suppose a terrorist bomb explodes nearby and I am singed by the heat. I rush forward to help and find someone on the ground bleeding, writhing, and screaming... I know the person is in pain... I believe it because of what I see and other things I know, for example, that I am not in Los Angeles on a movie set. The person is in pain, and my belief that the person is tracks the fact that he is. If the person were not in pain he wouldn’t be behaving like that, and so I wouldn’t believe he was in pain... (Ibid., p. 218)

In this imagined scenario, conditions (i) and (ii) are satisfied: the person on the ground is in pain and I believe that he is. Furthermore, the important condition (iii) — the sensitivity condition — is also satisfied: if the person were not in pain he wouldn’t be behaving like that and I wouldn’t believe he was in pain. Nozick concludes that I can know that this other person is in pain and that I do this by tracking the fact that he is. This is Nozick’s reply to Q(i): it is possible to know what another is feeling if my belief tracks the fact that s/he is.

But Nozick’s account of knowledge does not yield a reply to Q(ii). This is because, in this case, condition (iii) is not satisfied. If the

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[6] For the purposes of this paper, I set aside condition (iv).
person on the ground were a zombie or automaton — a creature who behaved just like someone in pain — I would still believe that he was in pain. Nozick concludes that it is not possible to know that another is not a zombie. Concerning this, perhaps surprising, conclusion Nozick writes:

Do I really mean to say I don’t know my children are not feelingless automata? (How will they feel when they read this?) I know their feelings when they are happy, sad, proud, embarrassed, frightened. I track these feelings, and sometimes cause them… But do I know that the skeptic’s [scenario] doesn’t hold, in which, among other things, I have automata children?… Of course not. How could I? Do I believe it doesn’t hold? Of course. (Don’t worry children.) Would I stake my life on its not holding? I have. (Ibid., p. 219)

Q(ii) is the sceptic’s question, and what Nozick’s analysis of knowledge does is leave this question unanswered. What his account of knowledge manages to do is separate out a distinctively philosophical question which, he admits, his account of knowledge is unable to accommodate. But rather than see this as a defect of this account, Nozick takes it to be an advantage. It is an advantage of this account that it yields an answer to the question: ‘how do I know what others think and feel?’

But many will insist that Nozick cannot separate out questions (i) and (ii). To do so simply flies in the face of a principle we all (tacitly) accept: the principle of epistemic closure. According to this principle, one can derive knowledge that another is not a zombie from one’s knowledge of what the other is thinking and feeling. The principle can be formulated thus:

\[(EP) \quad \text{If I know that } p \quad \text{And if I know that } (if \ p \ \text{then } q) \quad \text{Then I know that } q\]

Nozick denies (EP). Dretske follows Nozick here. Dretske also proposes an account of knowledge that incorporates a sensitivity condition and, thus, leads to a denial of the principle of epistemic closure.7

Dretske is concerned to defend an account of seeing and to explain how we can use this to get clear about what we know and how we know it. There are, according to Dretske, epistemic uses of the verb ‘to see’, and it is these that he aims to capture in his account of what he calls primary epistemic seeing. There are types of situation, says Dretske, which are both ‘epistemic in character and essentially visual

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[7] For one debate on this issue see the papers by Dretske and John Hawthorne in Steup and Sosa (2005).
in nature’, which type of situation represents ‘the acquisition of knowledge by visual means’ (Dretske, 1966, p. 80). So, where Nozick gives us a tracking account of knowledge, Dretske gives us an epistemic account of ‘S sees that p’. As we shall see in a moment, these two accounts share certain important features — features which effect how one who accepts either account responds to Q(i) and Q(ii).

As Dretske is interested in perception and what we can know by means of it, he is also concerned to separate out epistemic seeing from what he calls ‘simple’ seeing. Simple seeing involves no epistemic element; it involves a simple relation to things (seeing a bug, says Dretske, is like stepping on a bug). Epistemic seeing, by contrast, has positive belief content and involves recognition or identification of what is seen. Epistemic seeing is seeing that. These two kinds of seeing can come apart. Thus, there can be simple seeing without epistemic seeing. This is what you get in some of the lower animals. There can also be epistemic seeing without simple seeing. This is what you get in the case of perception of other minds, as we shall see in a moment.

Dretske introduces one further distinction, between primary and secondary epistemic seeing. To understand this distinction, let’s begin with the analysis of primary epistemic seeing (PES) and come to understand secondary epistemic seeing (SES) in relation to this. This is Dretske’s analysis of PES:

A subject S sees that b is p in a primary epistemic way if:
(i) b is p
(ii) S sees (simple) b
(iii) The conditions under which S sees b are such that b would not look the way it now looks to S unless it was p
(iv) S, believing the conditions are as described in (iii), takes b to be p.

[8] Dretske acknowledges that not all uses of the seeing-that locution describe the acquisition of knowledge by visual means. However, he believes it is possible to identify situations where the use of the locution can be defended as correct.

[9] There are important differences in the two accounts that there is not space for me to highlight. For a quick summary of how Dretske distinguishes his account from Nozick’s, see Dretske (2005, p. 24, footnote 4).

[10] A note of caution: epistemic seeing lines up with Q(i) and not Q(ii), despite the ‘that’ locution here.

[11] I should add here that I do not mean that Dretske thinks there can be epistemic seeing without any simple seeing. The point is just that a certain sort of simple seeing is not required, as should become clear. See, also, footnote 16 below.
Fulfilling conditions (i)–(iv) is an epistemic achievement as well as a visual one: S sees that b is p and thereby knows that b is p. Seeing is, thus, a way of knowing.

Let’s apply this to a couple of examples. Sally can see that the cake is in the shape of a heart, and thereby know it. And she can see that the metal rod is bent, and thereby know it. These are two examples of primary epistemic achievements. Sally sees that the cake is heart-shaped and that the metal rod is bent in a direct, first-hand, or eye-witness way. But not all seeing is so direct. When the seeing takes place in an indirect manner, we have what Dretske calls secondary epistemic seeing. Here are two example of SES:

(i) I see that the cake is cooked by inserting a toothpick and seeing if it comes out clean.
(ii) I see that the metal rod is hot by reading a thermometer that is attached to it.

When we consider (ii) we may notice that there is another way of coming to know that the metal rod is hot: I can see it glow in the manner characteristic of hot metal. If I do come to know that the metal rod is hot in this way, then this counts as a case of primary epistemic seeing. I come to know that the metal rod is hot in a manner that we could say is eye-witness, or the result of first-hand observation and the direct testimony of the senses. SES, by contrast, is not direct and proceeds by way of intermediaries such as thermometers and toothpicks. Thus, what differentiates PES from SES is the manner in which we come to know.

Now we can ask, when I come to know that you are in pain, is this knowledge the result of PES or SES? To answer this we need to ask whether I know that you are in pain by seeing your bodily movements (in the manner of knowing that the rod is hot by reading the thermometer), or by seeing you behave in a manner characteristic of someone in pain (in the manner of knowing that the rod is hot by seeing it glow). What Dretske wants to defend is the idea that some cases of knowing what others think and feel are the result of PES, and that some of what we ordinarily say about how we come to know another’s state of mind (i.e. ‘I saw that she was embarrassed’, ‘I could see that she wanted to leave the party’, and the like) is not just a matter of loose talk that philosophy must somehow teach us to reconstruct. There is, Dretske believes, a defensible philosophical position that allows some of my

[12] Although one does need to be careful here. There are some uses of ‘see that such-and-such is the case’ which amount to nothing more than ‘realize’. For example, ‘I can see that you have a fever by touching your forehead’ (cf. Dretske, 1966, p. 80).
knowledge of what another thinks and feels to be a matter of perception, and directly so.

Defending this philosophical position is a tricky business, but one can begin to appreciate it if one first notes that, for Dretske, it is an individual who is angry, has a headache, wants things, and the like. What Dretske distances himself from is the idea that it is something called a *mind* that is angry, is in pain, wants things, etc. This is reflected in condition (ii) of the analysis of PES. In line with appreciating this, it is important to understand that when I see that you are in pain, I do not see your pain. The analogy Dretske offers here is this: I can see that Sally is wealthy without seeing her wealth. It should be noted that this is a qualification of our ordinary ways of speaking, but it is not one Dretske thinks matters all that much. What he is keen to emphasize is that our knowledge of another mind is on a par with our knowledge of ordinary things in the world, like our knowledge that the table is cluttered or that Sally’s hand is under the table. In both cases what we have is a case of primary epistemic seeing. In so far as I can see that you are in pain without seeing your pain, we have here a case of epistemic seeing without simple seeing.

Dretske has thus given us an analysis of PES, and what it yields is a response to Q(i); I can see — and thereby know — what you are feeling or thinking. But, as with Nozick’s account of knowledge, Dretske’s does not yield a response to Q(ii). The reason Dretske gives for why his account of PES does not yield a response to Q(ii) is a little complex, but it is in essence similar to why Nozick’s account does not yield a response here. To understand Dretske’s position let us concentrate on conditions (iii) and (iv) in the account of PES, above. Condition (iii) requires that the conditions under which S sees b are such that b would not look the way it looks now to S unless it was p. Take the case of you being in pain, and consider this condition. There is some way that you look to me which is such that the conditions under which I see you are such that you would not look that way unless you were in pain — say, as in Nozick’s terrorist scenario, you are writhing and groaning. Dretske is insistent that the relationship between the way b

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[14] Again, it is important to remember that seeing that you are in pain is in line with a response to Q(i): knowing what you are feeling.
[15] Thus, where we might sometimes say that we see another’s anger, Dretske points out that we could just as well capture this by saying that we see that the other person was angry.
[16] The qualification referred to in footnote 10 should now be clearer: it is the person’s *pain* that one is in a position to epistemically see but not simple see. That there is *something* that one simple sees even in this case is not denied.
looks to S and b’s being p must be an empirical regularity. And, in particular, it must be the case that nothing else would result in b’s looking the way it does to S other than b’s being p. Furthermore, what (iv) tells us is that S, when she believes that the conditions are as described in condition (iii), takes b to be p. What (iv) ensures is that, not only are the conditions ripe for seeing that b is p, but S believes that they are. What satisfaction of both conditions (iii) and (iv) allows is that, despite the fact that, under these conditions, b would not look the way it does unless it was p, and despite the fact that S believes things are this way, there are still some possibilities that have not been ruled out here (for example, that it is not b that one is seeing). Thus, I can see, and thereby know, that you are in pain, but I do not see that it is you that is in pain (as opposed to someone pretending to be you, or a zombie). It is important to see that Dretske is primarily interested in understanding what needs to be in place for there to be knowledge that, for example, you are in pain. When considering the ‘knows that’ operator, Dretske insists that it is only semi-penetrating, rather than fully penetrating. Dretske explains this at one point by writing that this operator only penetrates ‘to those contrast contexts which form part of the network of relevant alternatives structuring the original context in which the knowledge claim was advanced’ (Dretske, 1999, p. 143). According to Dretske, that others are not zombies cannot be said to form part of the contrast contexts that structure those contexts in which our knowledge claims are advanced. And it is because such a contrast is not relevant that Dretske can both acknowledge that his proposed account of PES does not yield a response to Q(ii) while still allowing that it does yield a response to Q(i).

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[17] Dretske makes it clear that a highly probable correlation will not suffice. He writes, ‘Seeing that \( b \) is P is not an achievement which leaves room for the qualification “…but, of course, \( b \) sometimes looks this way under conditions which it is not P”. For such a qualification immediately raises the question, “How, then, can you see that it is P under these condition?” You may have excellent grounds, given these probabilities, for supposing that \( b \) is P, but you did not see that it was. When one asserts that one has seen that \( b \) is P, one does so with the firm conviction that the possibilities for \( b \) not being P have been ruled out. One may always be mistaken in this conviction, of course, but nonetheless, the conviction is there that something resembling condition (iii) has been satisfied and not simply some probabilistic alternative’ (Dretske, 1966, p. 87).

[18] The point is a complex one and one about which Dretske has written a great deal. For an extended discussion see Dretske (1966, pp. 93ff).


[20] Of course, to say that the possibility that others are not zombies is not a relevant contrast is not something everyone will accept. For Dretske, that it is a person and not a zombie that I see is part of what he labels the ‘background condition’. See reference in footnote 18, above.
Relating to the sceptic’s observation in connection with the external world, Dretske writes:

To claim to have found out, by looking, that there are cookies in the jar is not to claim to have found out, by looking, that there is a material world… you can’t see that you are not dreaming. (Dretske, 2005, p. 14)

Transferring this to the case of other minds, we get this: to claim to have found out, by looking, that another is in pain is not to claim to have found out, by looking, that you are not a zombie; you can’t see that solipsism is false.

It is at this point that some will appeal to the principle of epistemic closure to get an answer to Q(ii). I see (and thereby know) that you are in pain; I know that (if you are in pain then you are not a zombie/solipsism is false); therefore, I see (and thereby know) that you are not a zombie/solipsism is false. But Dretske, like Nozick, rejects this principle. And Dretske points to a reason to reject the epistemic closure principle: I can have no way of knowing that others are not zombies or that solipsism is false. 21

Thus far I have explained Dretske’s perceptual account of our knowledge of another mind and explained why this account only yields a reply to Q(i). I want in what follows to explain what I see as the significance of drawing a distinction between Q(i) and Q(ii).

The Importance of Distinguishing between a Thick and a Thin Problem

Earlier I drew a distinction between a thin and a thick problem of other minds and I associated the former with Q(i) and the latter with Q(ii). It should now be clear that Dretske is largely interested in the thin problem of other minds. But we might well ask what his attitude is towards the thick problem. What Dretske says is that we cannot know, by seeing, that others think and feel. This, as we have seen, is a distinctively philosophical problem, and Dretske believes that we can tease out this problem so it does not get in the way of our answering Q(i). That we cannot address this thick problem here need not be taken to stand in the way of our addressing the thin problem. I can know what others think and feel without having to know that the sceptical scenario does not hold.

That said, Dretske does have something to say that one might take to be connected with the thick problem. What Dretske rules out is that we can know that solipsism is false or that all others are not zombies.

It is the sceptic who asks that I justify my belief that another has a mind, and it is the sceptic who associates this with an ability on my part to rule out the possibility that others are not mindless zombies. Justification is what the sceptic takes to be required for knowledge. Dretske’s response to the sceptic is to distinguish justification from entitlement, and to say that it is the latter, and not the former, that is required for knowledge. The idea of entitlement is associated with the idea of an epistemologically responsible agent: entitlement is reserved for beliefs that an epistemologically responsible agent could not avoid forming in the circumstances. Dretske then adds that perception seems like a plausible source of entitlement (Dretske, 2000). Dretske’s idea of entitlement is designed to be quite independent of the sceptical problem. Even if solipsism were the case, one could be entitled to the belief that others think and feel so long as one is being epistemically responsible. Of course, if solipsism were the case, then one would not know what others think and feel. For there to be knowledge there must also be what Dretske calls ‘proto-knowledge’. When Dretske first introduced the idea of proto-knowledge in *Seeing and Knowing* (1966, p. 96), he used it to refer to a body of information that S exploits in making identifying reference to what S sees to be p. Some years later he explained that he introduced this technical term ‘to describe things that have to be true for what you perceive to be true but which (even if you knew that they had to be true) you couldn’t perceive to be true’ (Dretske, 2005, p. 14). For it to be possible that I see that Sally is in pain, the possibility that Sally is a robot/zombie must be ruled out. But, although the possibility that Sally is a robot/zombie must be ruled out, Dretske does not believe that it can be ruled out on visual grounds. That it is ruled out is a matter of proto-knowledge. In one place, instead of writing of ‘proto-knowledge’ Dretske writes of ‘presuppositions’ that are associated with certain statements. A presupposition of the statement ‘I see that Sally is in pain’ is that Sally is not a robot/zombie.

That others are not zombies is not a matter of knowledge but of proto-knowledge, and while knowledge results from perception, proto-knowledge does not. Indeed, what falls under the category of proto-knowledge does so precisely because it cannot fall under the category of knowledge. Perception can only take one so far and no further. As the suffix indicates, *proto*-knowledge can be thought to be prior to knowledge, or more primitive than knowledge, or what must be the case in order for there to be knowledge. What Dretske says is that it, proto-knowledge, is required for knowledge while not being available to the knowing subject. We could say that entitlement yields
knowledge, and it does this against a background of proto-knowledge. Thus, I can know that my daughter is in pain, despite the fact that for this to the case it has to be true that solipsism is not the case and I cannot know this. Proto-knowledge may be thought to provide a background to the thin problem of other minds that largely interests Dretske. Thus we can see that, while not believing we can solve the thick problem, Dretske does allow that the problem exists. Instead of explaining how there can be knowledge in line with Q(ii), Dretske rejects the idea that we can have knowledge that others are not zombies. Where the sceptic challenges us to provide knowledge, what Dretske puts in place is proto-knowledge.

It is in his response to the thick problem that Cassam parts company with Dretske. While Cassam accepts Dretske’s analysis of PES, and while he agrees with Dretske that I can see what another is thinking/feeling in a primary epistemic manner, Cassam insists that I can know that others are not zombies. This is because Cassam wants to say that, when I see that you have a headache, there is ‘a sense’ in which I do see your headache (Cassam, 2007, p. 164). And if it is the case that I see your headache, then I do see (and thereby know) that you are not a zombie. Of course, no sceptic would accept this, but this is because the sceptic insists that one rules out the possibility that others are not zombies in advance and independent of knowing that they are in pain and the like. But Cassam simply rejects this sceptical ordering principle — I do not have to rule out that others are not zombies in advance and independent of knowing that they are, say, in pain. Once we reject this sceptical ordering principle, we are in a position to build on Dretske’s teaching: once I know that you have a headache, then I just know that you are not a zombie.

I here telescope another complex argument, but the point I want to draw from it is this: Cassam believes there is a way of using the perceptual model to give an answer to both Q(i) and Q(ii). Cassam holds that I can know both that you are in pain and that you are not a zombie. For the purposes of this paper, I want to agree with Dretske against Cassam here: I cannot see that you are not a zombie. However, I want to suggest that there may be another way of thinking about the back-

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[22] There is a certain obligation for Cassam to say more about the sense in which I can see another’s headache. An anonymous referee has pointed out that if one can see another’s headache the following possibility can arise: I might see this ‘without having the slightest clue what I am looking at’. Of course, this problem does not arise for Dretske — or, at least, it does not arise with respect to seeing the headache.
ground conditions for our knowledge. In what follows I want to offer an alternative way of thinking about the background here. 23

The Background

It is interesting that Dretske chooses to call what operates in the background proto-knowledge. As I already explained, Dretske does not altogether reject the thick problem. He just does not believe that it is possible to solve it; it is only the thin problem that we are in a position to address. Instead of showing how we can solve the thick problem, what Dretske does is show how we can have knowledge despite it. But I want to suggest that there is a way of understanding what must operate in the background to our knowledge in such a way as to allow us to bypass the thick problem altogether. It is not that the sceptic is basically correct but knowledge is still possible. So long as one allows the sceptic to talk in terms of knowledge here, it looks like we must accept that what cannot be knowledge for us may be possible knowledge for some other creature (or possible creature). But we might ask, what would it take to know that one is not a brain in a vat or that others are not zombies? How could any being have this knowledge? Dretske has teased apart issues and questions here so that we can appreciate that knowledge-what questions need to be thought about independent to knowledge-that questions. But he has failed to appreciate just how curious the knowledge-that question is. Perhaps it is nearer the truth to say that the knowledge-that question itself is misguided. This is what I want now to suggest, and also to offer an alternative way of thinking about how the background to knowledge here. It is a corollary of this alternative way of thinking about the background that there is no thick problem here to be either acknowledged or solved.

For this alternative way of thinking about the background to our knowledge that others think and feel, I suggest we turn to the writings of Wittgenstein and, in particular, *On Certainty (OC, 1969).* To begin, consider *OC* 378 where Wittgenstein writes, ‘Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement’. It is this idea of acknowledgement that I believe can be used to develop an alternative to proto-knowledge as a way of thinking about how the background to knowledge operates.

Throughout *OC* Wittgenstein is occupied with Moore’s so-called proof of the external world. While Moore insists that he can prove that

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[23] For the purposes of this paper I am simply using Cassam as a foil for Dretske. I do, however, mention a reason for siding with Dretske over Cassam at the end of the following section.
the external world and other minds exist, Wittgenstein is at pains to show what is wrong with Moore’s project. From the outset, Wittgenstein tries to show us just how curious that project — that of knowing here is a hand — is. Although he largely confines himself to the case of the external world, Wittgenstein also wants his observations to extend to cover the project of knowing that another has thoughts and feelings (cf., for example, OC 10). In connection with such knowledge claims Wittgenstein points out: ‘Grounds for doubt are lacking. Everything speaks in its favour, nothing against it’ (OC 4). What, one may ask, is the ‘everything’ that speaks in favour of my knowing here is a hand or Sally is in pain? The answer that Wittgenstein gives is that the ‘everything’ here is nothing less than my life: ‘my life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and so on…’ (OC 7). Wittgenstein points out that philosophers want to use the words ‘I know’ in these connections in an effort to secure a guarantee of what is known. He rightly understands that philosophers who use the term ‘know’ use it to include the idea that knowledge guarantees what is known and that in knowing one knows that one knows.24 But Wittgenstein takes this idea to be a will-o’-the-wisp. In the place of such a super-knower, Wittgenstein writes of the ‘reliable man’ (cf. OC 21). Wittgenstein holds that there is a point at which we must eschew the idea of a cognitive relation in favour of a more primitive kind of engagement with the world and with others (cf. Wittgenstein, 1968, Pt. II., p. iv). In a situation where my daughter is writhing and groaning in the aftermath of a bomb exploding (cf. Nozick’s scenario), we might ask — echoing Wittgenstein — what would it be to make a mistake here when I react to my daughter by treating her as one who is suffering? If I were to stop and ask, ‘but how do I know that this child isn’t a zombie?’, this would indicate a decidedly odd frame of mind — perhaps one requiring that concern be aimed not just at my daughter (who is in pain) but at me as well. My question would indicate that there is something wrong with my engagement with my child.25 And here we see that it is my engagement with others that Wittgenstein takes to provide me with a framework within which I can talk of knowledge of what others think and feel. In OC 534 Wittgenstein writes:

But is it wrong to say: ‘A Child that has mastered a language-game must know certain things’? 

[24] It must be remembered that Wittgenstein was writing these remarks in the years before his death in 1951.

If instead of that one said ‘must be able to do certain things’, that would be a pleonasm, yet this is what I want to counter the first sentence with.

For Wittgenstein, action comes before knowledge. And consider here OC 538:

The child, I should like to say, learns to react in such-and-such a way; and in so reacting it doesn’t so far know anything. Knowing only begins at a later level.

And the reaction to which Wittgenstein here refers is a reaction to the world of bodies as well as the world of others like ourselves. And in so far as the others to whom we respond are like ourselves, we are able to strengthen our reactions and to build on them. That others are like us plays a very important part in how we build our knowledge. We can say that it is a condition of our coming to master a language game, or of establishing all of our activity in the world, that we share a common nature with the others with whom we engage. The child reacts to her world in the company of an adult (think of the infant and its mother or primary caregiver). The child and the adult react to the world and to each other in a manner that is similar — similar enough for the one to teach the other and for the other to strengthen its own reactions and to build on them. One way we build on our reactions is when we learn to say that others are ‘in pain’, ‘angry’, ‘have a headache’, and the like. It is not implausible that we do this by perceiving something about how the other looks. But where Dretske takes the knowledge we acquire through perception to operate against a background of proto-knowledge, the suggestion here is that we should see it as operating against a background of shared engagement.

We could say that Wittgenstein does not accept that there is any thick problem of other minds. Correspondingly, he would reject Q(ii). Q(ii) is the question to which G.E. Moore thought he could give a reply, and it is clear that Wittgenstein took Moore to be mistaken in his efforts here. I have already explained that Dretske also rejects Q(ii).

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[26] Stanley Cavell has suggested that we understand the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein as having the aim of putting the human animal back into philosophy (Cavell, 1979, p. 207). I take it that at least part of what Cavell has in mind here is that, while we understand that Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to what we say and do, he is also, and importantly, drawing attention to the nature of those that engage in these activities. It is when natures are shared that productive engagement can ensue. It can, perhaps, be added that both the acknowledgment and the shared nature can come in degrees.

[27] I should point out here that, for Wittgenstein, ‘the way the other looks to me’ may be thought to include not just the other’s facial features, but her overall bodily demeanour.

[28] This difference is not isolated, but brings with it many other differences with Dretske’s way of thinking. Working through these further differences must be the work for another occasion.
But, as I explained earlier, Dretske does not reject that there is any thick problem of other minds. What he rejects is that philosophers are in a position to give a reply to this problem. I want to suggest that, while both Dretske and Wittgenstein reject Q(ii), it is Wittgenstein who offers the greater insight into why we cannot have knowledge here. Before there can be knowledge there must be action in the world and interaction with others with whom we share a nature. Understanding this gives us another way of understanding what Dretske is trying to get at with ideas like ‘proto-knowledge’ and ‘presupposition’. But whereas Dretske’s way of understanding the background allows that the sceptic has a legitimate question, Wittgenstein’s way with the background shows us the error of the sceptic’s ways. It is also the case that the Wittgensteinian position here introduced can be used to argue against Cassam. While Cassam believes that he can ‘dissipate’ the radical sceptic’s objection and thereby show that we can have knowledge that others are not zombies, Wittgenstein’s position would question the recognition of Q(ii) and, thereby, the response given by Cassam to that question.

Conclusion

If we return to the passage from Descartes’ Meditations quoted in the introduction, we see that Descartes was himself writing of his seeing the men in the street, and he worries that there may be automata under the hats and coats. Of course, seeing men without their clothing would not help with the problem to which Descartes is drawing attention. In the light of the distinction between Q(i) and Q(ii), we can now say that Descartes was concerned with Q(ii). Given that Q(ii) is Descartes’ concern, we can say that Dretske would have to agree with Descartes that we are ‘almost tricked’ by our language here. What Dretske would say is that what our language tricks us about is precisely what it is that we see here. Descartes is correct to say that we do not see the men — we do not see that these are men and not automata walking in the street. But Dretske’s point is that, should a bomb explode in the street and he observes much screaming and writhing, we can say that

[29] For more on this reading of Wittgenstein see Marie McGinn (1989). It should be noted that, if one were convinced by this way with the sceptic, then this would also add to one’s reasons for rejecting the principle of epistemic closure.

[30] On the idea of dissipating the sceptic’s objection, see Cassam (2007, Chapter 5).

[31] It should be clear from the contrast that Descartes introduces that by ‘men’ he means ‘human beings with minds’. For more on Descartes and the problem of other minds see Avramides (2001, Pt. I, Chapter 2).
he sees that these men are in pain and are suffering. In *this* our language does not trick us.

Plantinga draws attention to a distinction between how we know that another is in pain and how we know that he has red hair. He writes, ‘unlike his hair, his pain cannot be perceived’ (1966, pp. 441–2). Plantinga’s position here is at odds with Dretske’s. Dretske thinks we should not take it that I know that another is in pain in a manner different from that in which I know that he has red hair. In both cases I can know these things by seeing that they are so. But, just as knowing that he has red hair does not yield knowledge that I am not a brain in a vat, so knowing that he is in pain does not yield knowledge that he is not a zombie/automaton. Dretske takes Descartes to be correct when he writes that I cannot see that others are not automata.

But while Descartes may have been correct to hold that I cannot see that others are not automata, it is not at all clear that he was correct to insist that philosophers must find a way to respond to the sceptical challenge here. Dretske follows Descartes in allowing the sceptic to state his challenge in the form of Q(ii). But it is not clear that he was right to do so. Perhaps Wittgenstein is right to say that we need to turn away from the idea that it is a matter of knowledge that others are not automata. Let us return to Nozick and his question about how his children will feel when they read that he does not know that they are feelingless automata. Notice that, despite not knowing that his children are not automata, Nozick does tell his children not to worry. And he claims that he would, and has, ‘staked his life’ on his children not being automata (Nozick, 1981, p. 219). What Nozick has, in effect, realized here is that it is a certain sort of engaged activity that underpins what he knows about his children. Nozick’s mistake, however, like Dretske’s, is to allow that, although he cannot know that his children are not feelingless automata, Q(ii) remains a good question. This is also the sceptic’s mistake. But we need not go along with the sceptic even to the extent that Nozick and Dretske do. At the end of the day, the only good question there is to answer is Q(i).

References