

Seeing a goat, seeing that there's a goat, and knowing by sight that there's a goat

The purpose of this post is to stake out a view on the tripartite distinction between *seeing a K*, *seeing that there's a K*, and *perceptually knowing that there's a K*. Suppose that I visit a local farm and upon arrival, a goat appears before my eyes, plainly in view. In ordinary circumstances, three things will become true all at once: (S1) *I see the goat*; (S2) *I see that there's a goat*; and (S3) *I perceptually know that there's a goat*. But the main question is: under what (extraordinary) circumstances might these three states come apart (if they can)? What are the relationships between them?

Seeing that and knowing that

Let's start with the obvious. (S1) to (S3) are clearly ordered in strength from weakest to strongest. By this, I mean that the following entailments uncontroversially hold: (S3) *entails* (S2) and (S2) *entails* (S1). You can't know by sight that there's a goat without seeing that there's a goat, and you can't see that there's a goat without seeing a goat. So far, so good.

It is also fairly uncontroversial that (S1) does *not* entail (S2). It is possible to *see a K* without thereby seeing *that* there is a K. Case in point: I can see a goat in the distance and mistake it for a sheep. In that case, I see the goat but I do not see *that it is a goat*. We'll come back to the relation between (S1) and (S2) shortly.

Before we explore the labyrinth path from (S1) to (S2), I'd like to say a brief bit about the relation between (S2) and (S3). I understand that it is a matter of controversy as to whether (S2) entails (S3). For instance, Timothy Williamson claims that *seeing that P* is a *way of knowing that P*. And if so, then *seeing that P* entails *knowing that P*. On the other hand, Duncan Pritchard argues that *knowing that P* can be *based on seeing that P*. But for this basing claim to be epistemologically interesting, states like (S3) can't be mere entailments from states like (S2).

Pritchard argues that the two can come apart in the presence of defeaters. Suppose that when I arrive at the farm, the attendants misleadingly tell me that there are no actual goats present and that all the apparent goats are actually cleverly disguised facsimiles. This is completely false — there are plenty of goats present — but regardless, I now have a defeater towards any potential goat-knowledge that I might otherwise have gained by sight. In that event, Pritchard holds that I can see that there's a goat without thereby knowing that there's a goat; I can't know it because of the presence of the defeater.¹ Pritchard's ultimate conclusion, then, is that seeing that P places one *in a position to know that P*. This is short of actually knowing that P. To go from seeing to knowing, one must also believe the target proposition and not have any undefeated defeaters.

As for myself, I agree with the conclusion that (S2) does not entail (S3), but I would rest the case on belief, not defeaters. (Pritchard also agrees with this, but makes less of it.) This is controversial, but it seems right to me that *knowing that P* entails *believing that P* while *seeing that P* does not entail *believing that P*. In other words, I can see that something is the case without automatically believing that it is the case. This could happen when, say, I have been presented with misleading information, as what happens when the attendant tells me that there are no goats present. While I have this misleading information in mind, I see that there are goats (because they are there before me), but when I think about what I see, I use the misleading information to override belief formation. In that event, I was in a position to know that there are goats, but I failed to know this because I failed to form the belief based on what I saw.

¹ *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, pg. 26–7

In my view, it is more sensible to block the entailment from (S2) to (S3) by appealing to belief than by appealing to defeaters. My reasons for this are threefold. First, it seems to me that the ideology of defeaters is suspect, and it fits oddly with the disjunctivist view of perceptual knowledge that Pritchard develops. Secondly, the case that motivates it is essentially the ‘art gallery’ case from Lasonen-Aarnio’s “Unreasonable Knowledge”, whereby one is presented with a red exhibit piece and is misleadingly told that it is not actually red, it’s merely bathed in red light. Like Lasonen-Aarnio, I would want to resist the verdict that misleading apparent counter-evidence blocks knowledge in all such cases. That is, I would want to uphold the claim that, in some cases, one does know that *p* when one sees that *p* (and is thereby linked to the facts in the right way) and stubbornly believes that *p*, despite the presence of misleading apparent counterevidence. I fear that if you take the internalist line on this one, then it would follow that we rarely ever attain knowledge in the political sphere, where misleading apparent counter-evidence against our beliefs is a dime a dozen, and nobody has the time to defeat all of those defeaters. Anyway, these two cursory, baffling remarks would take me too far afield if I were to substantiate them further.

Finally — and this to me is the most compelling reason — I want to say that there are plenty of cases where perceptual contact with a scene places one in a state whereby *one is in a position to know that p, but fails to know that p, only for lack of belief*. For example, say that there’s a goat before my eyes and although things are otherwise normal, for whatever reason, I refuse to believe it. (Perhaps I am contemplating radical skeptical scenarios and mistakenly take them to prove that I shouldn’t believe anything at all). In that case, I want to say that I am in a state that makes the following counterfactual true: *if I were to believe that there’s a goat before me, I would then know that there’s a goat before me*. In short, I’m in some state that puts me in a position to know that there’s a goat before me.

But what state would that be? It can’t merely be that I see a goat since, as I will explain in the next section, seeing a goat is insufficient for placing me in a position to know that there’s a goat. The best candidate for placing me in a position to know (without believing) is seeing *that* there is a goat. But this explanation requires *seeing that p* to be compatible with a lack of belief in *p*. The only reason that I didn’t know that *p* was that I didn’t believe it; I was otherwise in a position to know.

So, in summary, the main reason (I think) that *seeing that p* doesn’t entail *knowing that p* is that one can *see that p* without believing it, but one cannot *know that p* without believing it. And the main reason to think that *seeing that p* doesn’t entail *believing that p* is that it is required to explain a core epistemic category: being *in a position to know that p without believing p*.

The biggest problem for my claim that *seeing that p* doesn’t entail *believing that p* is the fact that it is incredibly awkward to say. It is very hard to find cases where it sounds right to say “I see that *p*, but I don’t believe it.”

There is, however, a natural pragmatic explanation for why that’s the case when speaking in the present tense. Basically, *seeing that p* is factive, so it entails that *p* is true. Thus, to utter the conjunction “I see that *p* and I do not believe that *p*” entails the conjunction “*p* but I do not believe that *p*.” This is standardly known as Moore’s paradox. It’s paradoxical because the statement can easily be true, and yet it is impossible to assert without violating some norm of assertion. Asserting ‘*p*’ (and ‘*I see that p*’ for that matter) in the context of a conversation would be appropriate only if I believe that *p* since it signals to my interlocutor that I have some standing to vouch for *p*’s truth. So to disavow belief in *p* in the very next statement is tantamount to admitting that I didn’t have the standing to assert *p* (or *I see that p*) in the first place.

Things get a bit rougher when we consider the situation in the past tense. Suppose that after my visit to the farm, I come home and learn of the fact that the attendant was deceiving me: there were in fact

goats present that were not cleverly disguised facsimiles. Upon being apprised of this fact, would I then describe my past self as having seen *that there were goats*? Could I then say, “I saw that it was true, but I didn’t believe it at the time”? Or must I hedge my assertion by saying “I *thought* I saw that there were goats”?

Notice that I now have the standing to outright assert that there were goats present, so I cannot appeal to the same pragmatic factors to explain away any apparent illicitness in asserting “I saw that there were goats presents.” If the past tense assertion “I saw that there were goats, but I didn’t believe it at the time” clashes with intuition, then the most likely explanation is that the first conjunct is false. So what do we say about this assertion?

Amazingly, Pritchard has the presumptuousness to *argue* for his view by claiming as a premise that the unhedged past-tense assertion is intuitive (26–7). Now, I myself do not have that level of confidence. But it’s also not obvious to me that the past-tense claim is illicit. On the one hand, it does seem appropriate to hedge my assertion with “I *thought* I saw that there were goats.” But on the other hand, it also doesn’t seem egregious to make the unhedged assertion: e.g. “I *did* see that there were goats, but I was tricked into disbelief!” After all, we have already seen some theoretical reason for thinking that the unhedged assertion is *true*. Namely, there’s reason to think that I was (at the time) *in a position to know that there was a goat*, notwithstanding the misleading apparent counter-evidence. And if I was in such a position, then presumably it’s because I saw that there were goats. Granted, this is an argument from epistemology, not intuition. But if this epistemological theory is fruitful and worthy of defense, then I don’t think we should dismiss it on the basis of indecisive intuitions.

So, in conclusion, I accept Pritchard’s claim that *perceptually knowing that P* entails *seeing that P* (S3 entails S2) but not the converse. The main reason why I think that the converse doesn’t hold is that *seeing that p* does not entail *believing that p*. I acknowledge that the intuitive evidence regarding this view is tricky, but I don’t think it comes close to decisively favouring the opposite view.

Seeing and seeing that

Let us turn now to what I consider to be the trickier division, that between *seeing a K (S1)* and *seeing that there is a K (S2)*. We have already stated what’s obvious about it: (S2) entails (S1) but (S1) does not entail (S2). It is not difficult to discern what the entailment relations are. What is difficult, however, is to *explain* the gap between them.

To make the first steps forward, let’s start off with the reasons why they can come apart. I have only briefly mentioned one, but, in fact, there are several.

The one I have already mentioned is that it is possible to see a *K* without recognizing it as a *K*. In that case, one does not see *that there is a K*. Perhaps I see a goat in the distance, but because it is far and my eyesight is poor, I do not recognize it to be a goat. (Perhaps I do not form any belief about its species, or perhaps I misidentify it as a sheep.) In that case, it would be true to say of me that I see a goat without seeing *that* it is a goat.²

This suggests that the ‘seeing a *K*’ relation is *de re*. One thing this means is that in sentences like ‘Graham sees a goat’, the object of sight position is open for quantification. We can infer “there is a goat such that Graham sees it.” We can even expand on its properties, regardless of whether they’re known to Graham: “there is a goat over there, her name is Betsy, she’s been at this farm for five years, and Graham

² If you need another example, consider the familiar case where you see a person and fail to recognize them as your friend. Let’s call him Bob. In that case, you *see Bob*, but you do not see *that he is Bob*.

sees her.” We can also substitute our description of the object without sacrificing truth value: e.g. “Graham sees the one and only goat that’s been on this farm for five years.” This description of the goat need not be *known* to Graham.

In short, the *S sees x* relation does not make any particular cognitive demands on the seeing subject. The subject does not need to *conceptualize* the object of sight in any particular way in order to count as seeing the object. For a subject to see an object, they just need to stand in the right sort of causal relationship to it — one that runs through their visual system in the right way. Now, there is, in fact, quite an interesting philosophical problem as to what counts as “the right sort of causal relationship” to ground relations of *de re* seeing (see David Lewis “Veridical hallucination and prosthetic vision”), but I will not go into it here.

Contrast this now with seeing *that* there is a *K*. This relation is *de dicto*, by which I only mean that the object of the relation is a proposition. (Which is *not* to say that one sees (*de re*) a proposition. It’s just to say that one sees *that* something is the case.)

Since one can see a goat without seeing that it is a goat in the scenario that one does not conceptualize the thing they see *as a goat*, we can infer that the *seeing-that* relation requires, at minimum, some exercise of conceptual capacities. In order for me to see that there is a goat, I must at least *entertain* the proposition that there is a goat. I need not *believe* the proposition (if what I said in the last section is right). But I must entertain it. And in order for me to entertain the proposition, I must at least exercise the *concept* of a goat. My cognitive system must produce the information <there is a goat> by employing my goat-concept. Generally speaking, for a subject *S* to see *that there is a K*, they must, at the time, employ their concept of *Ks*.

This entailment actually strikes me as pretty commonsensical. To make it appear more intuitive, consider the case of seeing a *K* when one *lacks the concept of a K entirely*. Plainly, someone who lacks the concept of (e.g.) a lunar eclipse cannot see *that there is a lunar eclipse*, even when one is plainly there before them. The reason is that they do not know how to conceptualize what they see. Well, if that’s right, then I think the same thing can be said about one who merely possesses the concept of a lunar eclipse, but makes no use of it while they see one. As far as what actively occurs within their mind at the time of seeing the eclipse, they are no different than the person who lacks the concept entirely. So by parity, they ought not to be credited with seeing *that* there is a lunar eclipse.

It follows, then, that *de dicto* seeing has stronger cognitive requirements than *de re* seeing. But I would like to argue that that is not all. Besides this, *de dicto* seeing also has stronger *epistemic* requirements.

The quickest way to see this is to consider an example that fits the mould of Goldman’s ‘fake barn county’ variety. Suppose that I am at the farm, and before me is a real goat, plainly in view. Let’s even stipulate that I *see* the goat *in the de re sense*. However, this time, let’s further stipulate that there is a number of goat facades in the vicinity. Perhaps the majority of goat-looking creatures on the farm are actually fake goats; I just so happen to be looking at one of the real ones. The fake goats are such that, were I to see one, I would mistake it for a real goat; I would mistakenly form the belief that *there is a goat* before me. (Taking a page out of *Cards Against Humanity*, perhaps each fake goat is really a man with the body of a goat and the head of a goat.)

I said that I *see* the goat (the one real goat among a sea of facades). But do I also see *that* it is a goat?

From what I gather, intuitions on this question are either strongly against or inconclusive. Some people feel strongly that one does not see *that* it is a goat. Others find that the thought experiment is

sufficiently tricky for them to lose confidence in their intuitions. Hardly anyone would say that I see *that* there is a goat in these circumstances. For myself, I don't find the thought experiment to be farfetched or tricky. (There have been real instances of zoos planting facade animals, like the donkey painted to appear like a zebra in the Cairo zoo.) And I have come around to the claim that one does not see that there is a goat (in the *de dicto* sense).

Besides intuition, this can also be supported by epistemological theory. As mentioned in the previous section, I am sympathetic to the idea that seeing that *p* (*de dicto*) places one *in a position to know that p* (even when it doesn't amount to outright knowledge). Now, patently, merely glimpsing a goat without the ability to distinguish it from the facades does not place me in a position to know that there is a goat before me in the scenario where facades are present (or abundant). Since seeing that there is a goat would put me in a position to know, but I am not in a position to know, it follows that I do not see that there is a goat.

These two cursory remarks suggest a fairly startling conclusion: that *seeing a K* and *seeing that there is a K* can come apart upon epistemic grounds. This suggests that seeing-that (*de dicto*) is an epistemically and normatively-loaded state in a way that seeing (*de re*) is not. No doubt, I have not done enough to argue conclusively for this claim here. But I want to take it on board and see what we can do with it.³

If this claim is right, then there are certain epistemic features that are lacking in the fake-goat scenario that prevent me from seeing that there is a goat before me. What might these epistemic features be?

A few candidates come to mind. For one, my perceptual system is not *reliable* at delivering true goat-related information in this environment. For another, I could have easily been tricked; had a fake goat been before me, I would have mistaken it for a real goat on the basis of sight. (In philosopher's terminology, my perceptual system fails the safety requirement.) Finally, it seems like I lack a certain perceptual ability: I cannot *distinguish* by sight a real goat from a fake goat.

I suppose the question now is: which of these epistemic characteristics are necessary conditions on *de dicto* seeing?

Unfortunately, I'm going to have to give a somewhat evasive answer to this question. Really, the answer has to be based on this: *whatever is required for de dicto seeing to fulfil its epistemic role of placing a subject in a position to know*. Seen that way, the question really hangs on the conditions for knowledge. If so, then *N is a necessary condition for <S sees that P>* if *N is a necessary condition for S to be in a position to know that P based on sight*.⁴

³ Here's a possible objection to my claim. *Seeing that p* — in the epistemically loaded sense — is actually just a terminological variant of *S knows that P*; it doesn't have anything specifically to do with sense perception. To confirm this, consider the fact that we use 'sees' to refer to knowledge that is patently not based on sense perception. Case in point: after grasping the mathematical proof, one 'sees' that pythagorus's theorem is true. I must say, for this post, that I'm just not using 'sees' in this way. In order for my thesis to make sense, I must carve out a sense of '*S sees that there's a K*' that is (i) tied to the sensory modality of sight, (ii) shy of entailing *S knows that P* (but does entail that *S is in a position to know that P*), and (iii) conditional on various epistemic requirements. I hope that there is such a state of seeing, and that all of this makes sense.

⁴ Even this may be disputable. Pritchard argues that *knowing that P based on sight* can obtain, in part, by the subject ruling out *not-P* possibilities based on their background statistical knowledge. For instance, in most zoos, I can know by sight that there is a zebra in front of me in part because I know that it's unlikely for the zoo to plant facades. Now, as far as I can tell, Pritchard does not mean to say that background statistical knowledge has a part to play in determining whether *S sees that P*; rather, it influences whether *S can know that P based on seeing that P*. If that interpretation of Pritchard is correct, then (maybe) for Pritchard, *<S sees that P>* does not entail *<S is in a position to know by sight that P>* in the case where the subject lacks the required statistical background knowledge.

Out of all of the potential epistemic conditions for states like (S2), the one that interests me the most is the *ability to discriminate goats from non-goats, or Ks from non-Ks*. We might express this as a principle:

(D) If *S* sees that there is a *K*, then *S* has the ability to perceptually discriminate *K*'s from (relevant) *K*-facades (in the local environment).

Or something like that. Something like this principle seems to me to be true. The explanation as to why I do not see that there is a goat when goat-facades are present (in the local environment) is likely that I cannot discriminate between them based on sight. But the principle also needs to be hedged with “relevant” and “in the local environment.” Presumably, we do not want to count me as failing to see that there is a goat before me, just in case there is an alien goat facade species far off on a remote planet, millions of lightyears from earth. These hedges are important, and much of the philosophically interesting ramifications of the view will hinge on the bounds of ‘relevant’ and ‘local’. But I will not discuss these here.

I want to know what this perceptual discrimination ability consists in. It seems to me that perceptual discrimination abilities is one of the clear differences between states like (S1) and (S2). And yet, I find the concept ‘discrimination ability’ to be rather elusive.⁵ All I can do is offer a couple of *attempts* at understanding perceptual discrimination abilities, but I’m not hopeful that they will be illuminating.

One potential way of cashing out perceptual discrimination abilities will appeal to the phenomenal character of the perceptual episode. Here is a first pass of what I have in mind:

(D1) *S* can perceptually discriminate between *Ks* and *K*s* (a kind of *K* facade) just in case the experience of seeing a *K* has a different phenomenal character for *S* than the experience of seeing a *K**.

In other words, on this view, I can perceptually discriminate between goats and goat-facades because *they look noticeably different to me*.

It sounds plausible. But it also sounds to me that cases like those discussed in Daniel Dennett’s “Quining Qualia” will break this account down on the edges. Consider, for example, a case where someone gains perceptual discrimination abilities that they didn’t previously have. Say that I start off as relatively unable to distinguish musical notes, but over time I refine my sensory abilities to recognize the different notes of the scale. Or suppose that I start off with an inability to distinguish the taste of stouts from porters, but over time I gain this ability. Finally (for a visual example), suppose that I start out life

If so, then the conditions for <S is in a position to know by sight that P> need not be conditions for <S sees that P>. (Is that right? Note to self: I will have to take another look at Pritchard to figure this out.)

⁵ One interesting fact that I think I know about discriminatory abilities is that they need not symmetric. Usually, when one can discriminate As from Bs, it also happens that one can discriminate Bs from As. But not always. It is possible that *S* can discriminate As from Bs without also being able to discriminate Bs from As. This happens, for instance, when I can discriminate being slightly tipsy from being drunk, but I cannot discriminate being drunk from being slightly tipsy.

The fact that discriminatory abilities are not symmetric is, in my view, a fairly profound philosophical lesson that has direct relevance to the problem of radical skepticism. In short, one cannot infer from <S cannot discriminate being in a radical skeptical scenario (e.g. being a brain in a vat) from real life> to the conclusion that <S cannot discriminate being in real life from being in a radical skeptical scenario>. Skeptical arguments that make this inference are committing a logical misstep.

unable to tell the difference between gold and fool's gold (or elms and beach trees, or dolphins and porpoises), but later I gain this ability.

In each case, we may ask: do I gain the discriminatory ability in virtue of the phenomenology changing? Do the notes *sound* different to me? Has the taste of a porter changed? Does the gold look different from how it used to? Or rather, do the sounds and tastes and appearances stay constant, but I am better able to categorize things on the basis of them? Is it that my discrimination abilities are better able to make fine distinctions within a constant phenomenology?

I cannot recount all of Dennett's highly intricate paper here. But suffice to say that prolonged engagement with these questions can cause one to feel like you've lost your grip on these questions. And yet, these are exactly the questions that one needs to settle in order to get the phenomenological account (D1) of perceptual discrimination off the ground. Dennett's paper thus poses a major obstacle for the phenomenological account of perceptual discrimination.

Another potential way of cashing out perceptual discriminatory abilities will appeal to the cognitive capacities exercised in the perceptual episode. Roughly, my ability to discriminate goats from goat-facades consists in the fact that my perception-based information-processing system yields propositions with goat-content in the former case and not the latter case. In other words,

(D2) *S can perceptually discriminate Ks and K*s* just in case [were S to see a K, they entertain a proposition about *Ks* as a result of their perceptual episode] and [were S to see a *K** — and not a *K* — they do not entertain a proposition about *Ks* as a result of their perceptual episode].

In short, I have the perceptual ability if I bring to bear different concepts where it is appropriate to do so.

I suspect that this is more promising than the last account, but it is beset with some initial difficulties. Whether these difficulties can be overcome will have to be a topic for another paper.

Basically, I worry that a cognitive account of perceptual discrimination might render the ability too cheap if content is externally individuated. If content is externally individuated (*which of course it is*), then the proposition I entertain as a result of a perceptual episode will, in some cases, depend, in part, on *which* thing I see. And if so, then there may be cases where I can appropriately entertain distinct propositions as a result of different perceptual episodes, even though I shouldn't be credited with the ability to distinguish between their objects.

Let's say there are twins, Gabriel and Ethan, whom I cannot intuitively be said to be able to distinguish on the basis of sight. When I see Gabriel, I entertain the demonstrative thought <there is *him*>, which has the content <there is Gabriel>, since the content of the demonstrative is determined by who I see. Likewise, when I see Ethan, I entertain the demonstrative thought <there is *him**>, which has the content <there is Ethan>. It follows, then, that I *can* differentiate between Gabriel and Ethan as far as the cognitive account (D2) is concerned. But since I intuitively can't, the cognitive account is in trouble.

This is the initial problem that I see with the cognitive account. Maybe it can be remedied if we rule out cognitive discrimination through the use of demonstratives. Or maybe we have to rephrase D2 so that it appeals to fine-grained concepts rather than coarse-grained content. Doing so will land us squarely in the midst of Frege-puzzles and worries about narrow content. All of this will make the puzzles of *de dicto* seeing exponentially more complicated, and so I think it is now time to stop talking about it.

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