Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Fred Dretske

Fred Dretske was a philosopher of singular quality, inventive, lucid, and fundamental. His work in the theory of knowledge and the philosophy of mind, and his analysis of laws of nature, won him wide recognition and respect. He was a person of great charm, greatly loved by his friends. From Waukegan, Illinois, he went to Purdue to become an electrical engineer, but he was waylaid by philosophy, and during two years in the service, stationed in New Mexico, he managed learn enough philosophy to be admitted— provisionally—to the graduate program at Minnesota. He came to Wisconsin in 1960, soon to marry Brenda Peters (who died in 1984), and would stay in Madison for twenty-eight years. His philosophical power and the quiet force of his personality made him the solid center of that department. He was a superb teacher, a stickler for "standards" in academic matters. His writing is a model of hard-working philosophical prose, clear, plain, driven by vivid examples. His manner was modest and even retiring but not from lack of confidence. In philosophy he was very sure of himself.

Fred was entirely a philosopher, not a scholar of philosophy. He had no philosophical heroes. He spent little time criticizing the work of other philosophers. Instead, he devoted himself to working out his own views in his own way. Not that he was a solitary worker; on the contrary, he loved good philosophical discussion not least for the society of it. And wherever he went, he enhanced the quality of philosophical society, the pleasure of being a part of that society, its cohesion and fertility. In discussion with Fred, as in his work, a philosophical question was addressed face-to-face, not through the veil of someone’s view of the matter, or embalmed in various isms. It was a golden age of the Wisconsin department, and he was the heart of it. He moved on, in 1988, to settle with his new wife, Judith Fortson, in Palo Alto. John Perry recalls the ten years Dretske spent at Stanford as a golden age of that department as well. When Fred retired, and moved to Durham, he continued to work productively, now in the company of the Duke philosophers. But the main thing was life with Judith.

Dretske called his last book Naturalizing the Mind, and the title fits the bulk of his work. His naturalism was less a thesis than a standard he worked by. An account that might satisfy him would employ only the concepts of enlightened common sense and those certified by natural science. Anything else was of no interest to him. He was, certainly, part of the great modern tradition that seeks to understand the place of the human being in the world as it is revealed to us by science—but the understanding he sought was philosophical. He did not think that epistemology or the philosophy of mind might better just deliquesce into some cognate branch of science. Nor did he think the proper methods of philosophy are those of science. But he had a rare ability to put the proceeds of science to fertile philosophical use. The making of plausible models, biological or mechanical, was part of his method—models of the flow of information from the external world to concept and belief, to the movements of the acting body somehow caused by the representational content of thoughts. To really understand a thing, he said, you need to know how to build it.

Fred began in epistemology defending a commonplace: that we have "direct perceptual contact" with material objects. The philosophical refusal to allow this, he thought, stemmed from confusing our simply seeing or hearing a thing, taken neat and in itself, with various conceptual and judgmental accretions to that event. He insisted on the elementary distinction between seeing an armadillo, and seeing what the thing might be, seeing that it is an armadillo. This early distinction was back at work in his late attempts to pry apart the elements of consciousness, its objects and its
qualities. But in the beginning, in Seeing and Knowing, it gave him a tractable question: How do we ascend from simple "non-epistemic" seeing to beliefs based thereupon, and even to knowledge?

Dretske never doubted that if we know a proposition to be true then our belief cannot possibly be false. If the guarantee of its truth must be written in the mind’s inner sanctum, of its a priori endowments and logical powers, it will forever be doubted whether we know anything at all about the external world. But perhaps that guarantee is accomplished by the laws of nature, governing what happens even in the human mind, what actually can happen and under what conditions. For the present circumstance, the one that actually prevails, may be such that those laws entail that it could not possibly look to me as if this is a hand if it were not a hand, and if so, then that perceptual reason is a conclusive one for my belief that this is a hand. I can still conceive that I might be wrong, but that does not mean that I could be wrong in fact. I may not know that I am in such circumstances, or that there are such governing laws. But that means only that I do not know that I know, and why must I know the harder thing to know the easier one? Dretske buttressed this line of thought with studies of the distinctions on which it depends: between "epistemic operators" that do and those—like knows—that do not “penetrate” to all their implications; and between knowing that an animal is a zebra, and knowing that it is a zebra and not a small mule painted with zebra stripes. This material, put forth in his 1970 and 1971 papers "Epistemic Operators” and "Conclusive Reasons,” led on to the broadly conceived centerpiece of his corpus, Knowledge and the Flow of Information of 1981. Now the perceptual knowledge that s is F was conceived as a belief caused by the information that s is F, and for the information that s is F to be carried by a perceptual signal r—a reason—the conditional probability, given r, of s being F must be no less than 1. Such a belief, then, could not possibly be wrong. From this basis he developed an account of mental content or meaning. "In the beginning there was information. The word came later.”

Fred’s advances often began in his seeing a crucial distinction and why it matters. Philosophy may be born in wonder, but it is bred in confusion, in our blindness to differences. In Explaining Behavior: Reasons in a World of Causes, the question was how the airy content of a thought can set our physical parts in motion. The key was a seemingly uninteresting distinction between a motion that is caused by a thought and a thought’s causing a motion. If we identify behavior with a thought’s causing a motion, then the cause of behavior will be not what causes those motions, but what causes the thought to cause them: it will be the cause of the efficacious structure—like the structure of the gun that causes the pulling of the trigger to cause the bullet to move toward the target. This "structuring” cause may be found in the thought’s having the function of indicating some state of affairs, as the thought that this is food functions to indicate the presence of food, and its historically having veridically done so has selected that mental state for the role of causing the motions of eating, and sustained it in that role. But now, he said, having the function of indicating a state of affairs is being a representation of that state of affairs as obtaining. If that is what mental representation is, and what behavior is, then that is how representational content can cause behavior. The key was finding precisely the explanandum and precisely the explanans that fit together, the right nut for the right bolt.

This memorial has wound down from a tribute to a mere revisitation of his philosophy. Fred would think that’s just as well. But thinking through his ideas again is an evocation of him. And how it does make one want to sit down with Fred himself, and argue about these things again, in his amiable, irreplaceable company. Over Beefeater martinis.