

Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst: Radical skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 264pp.¹

In this innovative, clearly written, and wide-ranging book, Duncan Pritchard offers a new response to skepticism. In the course of doing so, he argues that it is superior to a number of competing responses to skepticism currently on offer. As a result, this book will be of interest both to those curious about Pritchard's proposal, as well as to those who wish for a survey of contemporary responses to skepticism and a discussion of their strengths and weaknesses.

In brief, Pritchard argues in his book that there are two different skeptical problems (more on those in a minute) that demand two separate, but mutually reinforcing, responses. The response to the first involves the Wittgensteinian claim that denials of skeptical hypotheses are hinge propositions that cannot be believed, while the response to the second involves the McDowellian claim that in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge the knowledge in question enjoys a rational support that is both factive and reflectively accessible.

In the rest of this review I will briefly outline Pritchard's chapters and add some critical comments.

Chapter 1. In the first chapter, Pritchard introduces the first form of skepticism, closure-based skepticism, which he presents as a triad of inconsistent claims [23]:

(I*) One is unable to have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses.

(II*) The closure_{rk} principle: If S has rationally grounded knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her rationally grounded knowledge that p, then S has rationally grounded knowledge that q.

(III*) One has widespread rationally grounded everyday knowledge.

Pritchard criticizes several responses to this triad, including externalism, abductivism, and denying the closure principle.

In addition, he introduces a distinction that will be important later on. This distinction is between overriding anti-skeptical strategies, which offer "a revisionary diagnostic story, one on which we have an independent basis for disregarding the relevant intuition in play" and an undercutting anti-skeptical strategy which "aims to show that although the skeptical problem seems to be arising out of a tension in our epistemological concepts, pretheoretically understood, in fact it is the product of specific theoretical commitments that are revealed to be dubious" [16-7]. Pritchard thinks that undercutting strategies are superior and later on in his book he will argue that the two strategies he proposes are undercutting ones.

¹ Thanks to Duncan Pritchard for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.

A critical comment: Pritchard's presentation of the triad is somewhat idiosyncratic; on more standard statements of closure-based arguments, the term "rationally grounded knowledge" is not mentioned; people simply talk about knowledge simpliciter. For example, instead of offering the closure_{RK} principle as premise (II)*, they offer the following principle:

The traditional closure principle: If S has knowledge that p, and S competently deduces from p that q, thereby forming a belief that q on this basis while retaining her knowledge that p, then S has knowledge that q.

I am not sure exactly what Pritchard means by "rationally grounded knowledge" which caused problems for me in assessing (II*) and thus in assessing the strength of Pritchard's formulation of this skeptical triad as compared with more traditional formulations.

To develop this worry further, it looks as if Pritchard faces a dilemma. Either rationally grounded knowledge that p is such that one's grounds entail that p or not. If so, then it is not clear how widespread rationally grounded knowledge really is, and thus (III)* is dubious. For example, my grounds for believing that my car is parked several blocks away are that I remember parking it there and know that it's unlikely that it's been stolen or otherwise moved. But these grounds are consistent with it's having been stolen and thus my belief that it's parked several blocks away is not entailed by my grounds. And likewise for many other things that I believe.

On the other hand, if rationally grounded knowledge that p does not require grounds that entail that p, then it is dubious that it is closed under deduction and thus (II*) is dubious. For example, suppose that I believe that my car is parked several blocks away on the basis of my remembering that I parked it there plus my knowledge that it's unlikely to be stolen or otherwise moved. I then deduce that it has not been stolen. First note that certain grounds for my belief — the memory that I parked it in such and such a place — do not seem to carry over; my memory is not a ground for believing that the car has not been stolen. Next note that even if I have some grounds for thinking the car won't be stolen — the unlikelihood of its being stolen — it's not clear that this will be sufficient grounds to give me "rationally grounded knowledge." After all, it is deeply controversial that mere knowledge of likelihoods is enough, by itself, to ground knowledge. This sort of problem regarding closure of grounds doesn't (at least in any obvious way) affect the traditional closure principle. In short, Pritchard's way of formulating closure-based skepticism is idiosyncratic and is of questionable superiority when compared with more traditional ways of formulating closure-based skepticism.

Chapter 2. In the second chapter, Pritchard introduces his second form of skepticism, underdetermination-based skepticism, which he again presents as a triad of inconsistent claims:

(I***) One cannot have rational support that favors one's belief in an everyday proposition over an incompatible radical skeptical hypothesis.

(II***) The underdetermination_{RK} principle: If S knows that p and q describe incompatible scenarios, and yet S lacks a rational basis that favors p over q, then S lacks rationally grounded knowledge that p.

(III***) One has widespread rationally grounded everyday knowledge. [34].

He also criticizes several responses to the triad, including externalism and attributor contextualism.

In addition, Pritchard compares underdetermination-based skepticism and closure-based skepticism in the hopes of determining how they are related. According to Pritchard, closure-based skepticism — and in particular, the closure principle that appears in it — is underwritten by *the universality of rational evaluation thesis* which says that there are no in principle constraints on the extent of one's rational evaluations [55]. Meanwhile, underdetermination-based skepticism — and in particular, the underdetermination principle that appears in it — is underwritten by *the insularity of reasons thesis* which says that the rational support we have for our perceptual beliefs about the external world, even in the best case, is troublingly weak, in that it is compatible with widespread falsity in those beliefs [55].

Pritchard argues that one can reject one of these two theses — and thus the skeptical argument that invokes it — without rejecting the other and concludes that a satisfactory response to one form of skepticism need not provide a satisfactory response to the other [56-8].

A critical comment: even if Pritchard is right and one can reject one thesis without rejecting the other, it does not immediately follow that a satisfactory response to one of the skeptical arguments need not be a satisfactory response to the other. For example, take the closure puzzle. Even if Pritchard is right that (II*), the $\text{closure}_{\text{RK}}$ principle, does not depend on the insularity of reasons thesis, perhaps one of the other two members of the triad that makes up closure-based skepticism does. Take (I*) — the claim that one is unable to have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses. Perhaps the motivation for this premise depends on the underdetermination principle and thus in turn on the insularity of reasons thesis (I am assuming for the sake of argument that Pritchard is right that the underdetermination principle depends on the insularity of reasons thesis). If so, then in rejecting the insularity of reasons thesis, we would be able to resolve underdetermination-based skepticism as well.

Furthermore, there is good reason to think that (I*), the claim that one is unable to have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses, does depend on an underdetermination principle, even by Pritchard's own lights. After all, Pritchard motivates (I*) as follows:

Such a claim seems entirely compelling. After all, since the BIV scenario is ex hypothesi subjectively indistinguishable from normal perceptual conditions, it is hard to see how one might come to know such a thing. What kind of rational ground might one have for such a belief, given that there is no subjective basis on which one can discern that one is not in a radical skeptical scenario? [12].

This certainly sounds like an argument which invokes an underdetermination principle; it seems to rest on the idea that if one's rational grounds underdetermine whether a proposition is false, then one lacks knowledge that it is false.

Chapters 3 and 4. In the next two chapters, Pritchard introduces and defends a Wittgensteinian proposal in response to closure-based skepticism. In brief, on this proposal, we cannot have beliefs in the denials of skeptical propositions, but can only have something called “hinge commitments” towards them. Pritchard's view of hinge commitments works as follows: all peo-

ple have the über hinge commitment, viz. that they are not radically and fundamentally mistaken in their beliefs, and then depending upon what other beliefs they have — and thus what it would take to be radically and fundamentally mistaken — they also have other hinge commitments, although different people might have different hinge commitments [95]. So, for example, I might have a hinge commitment to my not being a brain in a vat, seeing as my being a brain in a vat would be a way for my beliefs to be radically and fundamentally mistaken.

The reason one cannot have beliefs regarding hinge commitments is because beliefs are propositional attitudes that are, by their nature, responsive to rational considerations, whereas hinge commitments are not [90].

In addition to defending this Wittgensteinian response to closure-based skepticism, Pritchard also contrasts it with several other responses, including inferential contextualism, Strawsonian naturalism and Davidsonian content externalism and argues that it is superior.

A critical comment: it seems to me that there are counterexamples to Pritchard's claim that one's propositional attitude towards the claim that one is radically and fundamentally mistaken is not responsive to rational considerations. For instance, consider Neo, in the movie the Matrix who comes to realize he's been living in a virtual world run by computers. While this is a surprising claim, the evidence offered to him — in particular, an explanation of how the virtual world came to exist along with the experience of being unplugged and then "waking up" in another world convinces him that he had been living in the Matrix. Why is this not a process of rationally coming to accept that his beliefs were radically and fundamentally mistaken?

Chapters 5 and 6. In the next two chapters, Pritchard introduces and defends a McDowellian proposal, according to which in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge the knowledge in question enjoys a rational support that is both factive and reflectively accessible [124].

Pritchard also contrasts this response to underdetermination-based skepticism with several others, including rational support contextualism, contrastivism, and dogmatism and argues that his response is superior qua response to underdetermination-based skepticism. And, as noted earlier, he contends that his response is undermining, that is, that it shows that although the underdetermination-based skeptical problem seemed to be arising out of a tension in our epistemological concepts, pretheoretically understood, in fact it is the product of specific theoretical commitments that are revealed to be dubious.

A critical comment: Pritchard's defense of the claim that his proposal counts as an undermining one strikes me as underdeveloped. In particular, consider the new evil demon intuition, according to which our beliefs would have just as much rational support if we were brains in vats as if we're living in the actual world. Pritchard must deny this intuition and furthermore show that it is the product of specific theoretical commitments that are revealed to be dubious. To do this, he starts by arguing that his McDowellian proposal is intuitive, but we mistakenly think that this proposal faces problems that it does not face. He then suggests that the mistaken belief that the McDowellian proposal is flawed in these ways is what has led us to endorse the new evil demon intuition [142]. In short, Pritchard thinks that the new evil demon intuition isn't really an intuition at all, but rather a theory-driven commitment.

It strikes me as rather dubious to claim that the new evil demon intuition is in fact not an intuition, but rather a theory-driven response, and, in particular, a theory-driven response to apparent problems with the McDowellian proposal. I would have liked to see a fuller defense of

this claim. I don't know exactly how one might demonstrate that the new evil demon intuition was theory-driven in this way, but perhaps Pritchard could have done so by tracing the history of the new evil demon intuition or by demonstrating that the folk don't possess it.

Chapter 7. In the final chapter, Pritchard argues that while neither of his two proposals can overcome both skeptical problems on its own, they can each address one of the two skeptical problems, and that furthermore they are mutually supporting.

A critical comment: As noted earlier, it is not clear to me that Pritchard has formulated the strongest versions of the skepticism problems. Thus, even if he is right that his two solutions solve the two problems he presents, it is not clear that this pair will be able to handle all versions of skepticism, and thus that they are to be preferred as compared to other responses on offer.

To develop the worry further, consider a modification of closure-based skepticism involving the term “position to know”:

(I****) One is not in a position to know the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses.

(II****) If one has knowledge that p and p entails q then one is in a position to know q .

(III****) One has widespread everyday knowledge.

Understand the term “position to know” in such a sense that one is in a position to know some proposition so long as one possesses rational grounds sufficient for knowledge. For an example to illustrate how I am using the term, suppose that I know Reed is in the library because I saw him there. Then, even if I don't currently believe that Reed is either at the library or the gym, and even if, thanks to some idiosyncrasy, I cannot form the belief that Reed is either at the library or the gym, I will be in a position to know that Reed is either at the library or the gym — as I am using “position to know” — because I will have rational grounds sufficient for knowledge.

I am not sure how Pritchard would approach this skeptical trilemma. His Wittgensteinian hinge propositions story seems unable to handle it, seeing as, unlike in his formulation of closure-based skepticism, nothing in this trilemma requires someone to believe — or even be able to believe — the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses; it simply talks about the possession of rational grounds.

Perhaps his McDowellian story about epistemological disjunctivism will be of use; maybe Pritchard will say that my reason for believing that I have hands — my seeing that I have them — puts me in a position to know the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses. But if so, then it looks like his story about epistemological disjunctivism would be able to solve his formulation of closure-based skepticism as well; he could simply reject the claim that one is unable to have rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical skeptical hypotheses. Meanwhile, if Pritchard's McDowellian story is not of use in addressing the skeptical trilemma I just presented, then it looks like he will be unable to use his two proposals to address all skeptical problems.

In short, even if Pritchard's solutions to his two preferred skeptical problems require both of his proposals, I am worried that once he is forced to confront the full range of skeptical problems, pairing his two preferred responses will look less impressive.

As we have seen, Pritchard's proposals are quite controversial. Nonetheless his book is clearly written, innovative, and well worth your time if you're interested in skepticism or in epistemology more generally.