

Book Reviews



Duncan Pritchard

Epistemic Angst: Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing,
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016, 264 pp.

In this innovative, clearly written, and wide-ranging book, Duncan Pritchard¹ 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.

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

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.

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.