A Defence of Defeating the Closure-Based Radical Skeptical Argument with the Sensitivity Principle

Bianca Verjee, Simon Fraser University

According to the closure-based radical skeptical argument, it is impossible for us to have knowledge of the majority of everyday propositions because we can't have knowledge of the denials of the skeptical hypotheses they entail (Pritchard 96). In Chapter 6 of his book Epistemology, Duncan Pritchard describes a response to this argument which uses the sensitivity principle to deny the closure principle, thereby defeating the radical skeptic's argument. Despite Pritchard's concerns with this solution, denying the closure principle using the sensitivity principle is a plausible method of defeating the skeptic. I will begin by more clearly describing the issue at hand, before delving into my responses to Pritchard's concerns. First, I will argue that the reason the closure principle seems so intuitively plausible (despite being false) is that we tend to consider obvious entailments, rather than skeptical hypotheses, when considering the closure principle. Unlike the skeptical hypotheses, we can know the denial of the obvious entailments because those beliefs are sensitive. Second, I will explain why not allowing for inductive knowledge is no reason to reject the sensitivity principle, as true belief gained by induction can be considered rational belief, rather than knowledge. Finally, I will

argue that the sensitivity principle can, indeed, provide the necessary counterexamples to the closure principle— something Pritchard denies because he thinks the sensitivity principle demands an evaluation process that cannot be applied when considering skeptical scenarios. This paper will show that Pritchard's concerns are not sufficient reason to reject the sensitivity principle as a solution to closure-based radical skepticism.

So, what is the closure-based radical skeptical argument and how can rejecting the closure principle defeat it? The argument relies on something called the closure principle, which states that if I know some proposition, and I know that that proposition entails a second proposition, then I know that second proposition (Pritchard 95).The closure-based radical skeptical argument takes the following form. First (Premise 1), we must agree that it is not possible to know the denials of skeptical hypotheses, such as the brain in a vat hypothesis (Pritchard 96). Second (Premise 2), by the closure principle, if we have knowledge of everyday propositions, then we must be able to know the denials of at least some skeptical hypotheses (Pritchard 96). For instance, if I know that I have legs (an everyday proposition), and I know that if I have legs, I am not a brain in a vat, then I must know that I am not a brain in a vat. Since we don't know the denials of skeptical hypotheses (e.g. we don't know that we are not brains in vats), it follows that we don't

have knowledge of everyday propositions (Pritchard 96). Now, this argument seems to be deductively valid, so in order to defeat it we must deny the truth of one of the premises. Premise 1 seems quite difficult to refute. The whole point of skeptical hypotheses is that we are unable to know they are false— their denials are, by definition, unknowable (Pritchard 96). Therefore, if we are to defeat this argument, we must deny Premise 2 . One way to do this is to deny the closure principle, because if the closure principle is false, then we are able to have knowledge of everyday propositions without knowing the denial of some skeptical hypotheses (Pritchard 96). This is the solution that I defend in this paper.

One way to deny the closure principle is to appeal to the sensitivity principle (Pritchard 96). The sensitivity principle states that, in order for a subject to be considered as having knowledge that p (where p is some proposition), the subject's true belief must be such that, if p had been false (i.e., in the nearest possible world where p is false), the subject would not have believed that p (Pritchard 19, 22). In other words, the subject's beliefs must be sensitive to the facts in order to be considered knowledge (Pritchard 19). This principle, when taken as a sufficient condition for knowledge, allows us to provide counterexamples to the closure principle—cases where we know a proposition and what it entails (such as: If a is true, then b must be true), but we don't know that the proposition entailed (b) is true (Pritchard 97). For instance,

according to the sensitivity principle, I can know that I have hair on my head while also not knowing that I'm not a brain in a vat. This is because the belief that I have hair on my head is a sensitive one (if I didn't have hair on my head—i.e., I am bald—I wouldn't believe that I did). In contrast, the belief that I am not a brain in a vat—and, likewise, all other denials of skeptical hypotheses— are, by definition, insensitive (Pritchard 97), for these hypotheses always involve the subject being unaware of their true circumstances. For instance, if I were a brain in a vat, I would still believe that I wasn't because "my experiences [would] be indistinguishable from" (Pritchard 97) that of my real-word counterpart. Therefore, if we accept the sensitivity principle, we can deny the closure principle.

The first concern raised by Pritchard is an issue with rejecting the closure principle in general, whatever the reason. He challenges us to explain why the closure principle seems so "highly plausible" (Pritchard 98) if it is actually false. If I know some proposition, x, and I know that x entails some other proposition, y, then it seems obvious that I should also know y. However, I propose that the closure principle seems so intuitive because, when considering what is entailed by everyday propositions, most of the propositions we think of are knowable because they are sensitive beliefs. When we think of the logical entailments of a proposition such as "I am sitting down," we typically consider the most

obvious entailments, such as "if I am sitting down, then I am not standing up or lying down." These types of entailed beliefs are sensitive (if I were standing up or lying down, I wouldn't think that I wasn't). We are very unlikely to think of entailments involving skeptical hypotheses, such as "if I am sitting down, then I am not a brain in a vat"— a belief that is insensitive. This tendency to stick to obvious entailments is what makes the closure principle seem plausible. Most of the propositions we think of as being entailed by everyday propositions are knowable, so it seems that if we know the everyday proposition, then we know the proposition it entails. However, just because the closure principle holds when considering obvious entailments, doesn't mean it always holds. The sensitivity principle gives us good reason to doubt that it holds in situations beyond the obvious, particularly when it comes to skeptical hypotheses.

The second issue Pritchard raises is a concern about whether we should accept the sensitivity principle in general. Pritchard suggests that we shouldn't, as the sensitivity principle doesn't allow for true beliefs gained by induction to be considered knowledge (27). However, the fact that the sensitivity principle doesn't allow for knowledge by induction shouldn't be a reason to reject the sensitivity principle. It is not so intuitive that true beliefs acquired by induction are, in fact, knowledge, for true beliefs gained by induction are much less certain than those obtained by

deduction, for instance. To illustrate just how large the gap in certainty is between knowledge gained by induction and knowledge gained by deduction, I introduce the following pair of examples. Consider the following deductive argument. (1) All fish live in water. (2) Salmon are fish. (3) Therefore, salmon live in water. It is not very likely, in fact it's impossible, that we could be wrong about (3), provided that (1) and (2) are correct. In contrast, suppose that I have always arrived on time to my 8:00am class, when I've left home at 7:00am. If I infer that I will therefore, always be on time to my 8:00am class if I leave at 7:00am, I will be making a claim based on inductive reasoning. We can see that this type of claim is more likely to be wrong. Though it may be reasonable to believe I will be on time if I leave at 7:00am, it is perfectly possible that I could leave at 7:00am one day and not be on time. Because I have not experienced all cases under the umbrella of my generalization, I would not know if my belief was wrong in one or more of those cases, and therefore, my belief is insensitive to the facts and cannot be considered knowledge according to the sensitivity principle. Beliefs gained by induction are less secure than other types of beliefs, so they shouldn't be given the same status as more secure types of beliefs (such as deduction and perception). Instead of thinking of beliefs gained by induction as knowledge, we can consider them to be mere rational belief. Though this is certainly a controversial claim, it does not create any practical issues because, though the status of our belief

may have changed, we are not required to abandon it. It is still rational to believe the proposition in question and we still ought to believe it. We are merely acknowledging that our belief is less secure, and not quite deserving of the name 'knowledge'.

Finally, Pritchard claims that the sensitivity principle, understood correctly, doesn't actually provide the counterexamples to the closure principle that it's meant to (99). As noted earlier in the book, the possible world we must consider when determining if a belief is sensitive is the nearest possible world where the proposition being considered is false, and the subject uses "the same belief-forming method as in the actual world" (Pritchard 26). In chapter 6, Pritchard reminds us that "what constitutes one's belief-forming method needs to be understood externalistically" (99)—outside the mind of the agent. This means that "what counts is what in fact gave rise to your belief and not (which could be different) what you believe gave rise to your belief" (99). This is certainly true. We wouldn't want to misattribute knowledge to a subject who doesn't actually know the proposition in question, due to our incorrect evaluation of their belief as sensitive when it isn't. We must identify how they are forming their beliefs, in order to determine what beliefs they would form in certain possible worlds.

However, Pritchard goes on to say that, in the case of skeptical hypotheses, we cannot use the sensitivity principle to show that a subject is unable to know that they are in a given skeptical scenario, because the same belief-forming method used by the subject in the real world is not available to them in the skeptical scenario. Pritchard claims that skeptical hypotheses "involve the agent forming beliefs in very different ways from how they would form those beliefs were the skeptical hypothesis not to obtain" (99). Take the example of the brain in a vat skeptical hypothesis. The belief that one is not a brain in a vat is formed using "a mixture of perception and inference" (Pritchard 99). Pritchard argues that we cannot use the sensitivity principle to show that a subject is unable to know that they are a brain in a vat, because the same belief forming method—perception—is unavailable to the envatted subject. He states that the envatted subject "does not perceive anything" (Pritchard 99). I disagree. The envatted subject is perceiving what appears to be an everyday world, just like their real-world counterpart. They are both having perceptions of waking up, going to work, etcetera. The only difference is the source of those perceptual experiences. For the real-world subject, the source is the actual world, while for their envatted counterpart, the source is the stimulation from the evil scientist. Both subjects are having perceptions of life-like experiences and inferring that these experiences represent something true about their state of affairs. Perception is only

unavailable to the envatted subject if we consider perception to be something like an imprinting of external objects on the subject's mind. This would be an externalist conception of perception— what determines the belief forming method is the source of the perceptions, rather than the internal process in the subject's mind.

However, we could instead view perception as the subject's mind receiving and interpreting stimuli (this would be an internalist conception of perception— what determines the belief forming method is the internal process occurring in the subject's mind). The sensitivity principle merely states that we must identify what gave rise to the belief "externalistically" (Pritchard 99)— meaning that the fact of what belief-forming method was used, need not be "accessible to the agent" (Pritchard 11). Contrary to what Pritchard seems to think, the sensitivity principle makes no claim about how we ought to understand, or define, the belief-forming method itself. Therefore, we are able to use, within reason, any definition of perception we choose, including the internalist definition described above. Using an internalist definition of perception means that the belief-forming method is available to both the real world subject and their envatted counterpart. This allows us to use the sensitivity principle to evaluate the belief of the envatted subject, showing that they can't know whether they are a brain in a vat. We are thereby able to produce relevant

counterexamples to the closure principle, just as the sensitivity principle was meant to.

In conclusion, Pritchard's concerns about using the sensitivity principle to defeat the closure-based radical skeptical argument are not as troubling as he suggests. We can explain the closure principle's intuitive plausibility without making it necessarily true, we do not have to abandon the sensitivity principle just because it doesn't allow for inductive knowledge, and with a proper understanding of what the sensitivity principle requires, we can use it to deny the closure principle. Therefore, this solution to the skeptic's concern still seems quite plausible. If Pritchard wishes to deny the plausibility of using the sensitivity principle to reject the closure principle, he will need to provide another rationale.

Works Cited

Pritchard, Duncan. Epistemology. 2nd ed., Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.