

Closure and Transmission Redux

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Handout

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I: Closure: Dynamic or Static?

Transmission (rough)

An argument is transmissive if a rational subject, on coming to know its premises, may use the argument to acquire knowledge of its conclusion.

Knowability Closure

If P is knowable and may be known to entail Q, then Q also is knowable.

Intuitive Closure (Matthew Jope)

If S knows that P, and S competently deduces Q from P, thereby coming to believe that Q on the basis of the competent deduction while retaining their knowledge that P, then S knows that Q.¹

Compare

Competent Deduction Closure (Duncan Pritchard)

If S knows 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 knows that Q.²

Jope:

“What makes *Intuitive Closure* so intuitive is the thought that deduction is a paradigm way of growing one’s knowledge base. Williamson argues from the intuition that “deduction is a way of extending one’s knowledge” to the intuitive closure principle (2000, 117). Echoing Williamson, John Hawthorne argues that “The core idea behind closure is that we can add to what we know by performing deductions on what we already know” (2005, 29). Likewise, in trying to formulate a satisfying closure principle, Steven Luper takes us to be trying to capture the intuition that “we can extend our knowledge by recognizing, and accepting thereby, things that follow from something that we know” (Luper, 2016). And in a similar spirit, Duncan Pritchard articulates the force of the intuitiveness of intuitive closure by asking “How could one draw a competent deduction from one’s knowledge ... without thereby coming to know the deduced conclusion?”

¹ In Jope, forthcoming

² Pritchard forthcoming. I’ll focus on Jope’s formulation in what follows.

However, the quoted thoughts merely converge on the idea that deduction is (normally) *a* way of extending knowledge— not that each and every deduction is potentially at the service of knowledge extension.

Joep continues:

One thing that is interesting to note here is that, if we take these remarks at face value and understand closure as a dynamic, knowledge-extension principle, the line between closure and transmission starts to blur.

I'll argue this blurring is not an upshot that we should welcome.

II: What is it for an argument to be Transmissive?

The characterisation I propose requires four notions:

(i) ***Undermining defeat*** (“undercutting”—Pollock)

(ii) ***Open-mindedness***. Your open-mindedness about P, in the sense that concerns us here, requires

(a) your having no opinion whether or not P;

(b) your not being *agnostic* about P in the sense of “agnostic” frequently associated with a stance which holds e.g. that the existence of God is a matter on which no rational subject can consider that they have a knowledgeable or even a justified view. Open-mindedness about P involves readiness to accept or reject P, should appropriate evidence turn up but also, as we shall here understand it,

(c) your being of the opinion that *so far* you have no basis for a view, but not ruling out the possibility of new information that might mandate taking one.

Corollary. Suppose you are presented with purported evidence E, for P, and suppose you are open-minded about whether something you recognise as a specific potential underminer, U, for E obtains. Then you ought rationally to be open-minded about whether or not E should be regarded as supportive of P.

Two more notions:

(iii) Where U is any underminer of evidence E for P, let us call the negation of U an ***authenticity condition*** for E with respect to P. (Likewise where U is an underminer of the capacity of faculty F to reliably determine whether P, let the negation of U be an ***authenticity condition*** for F with respect to P.)

Finally (iv) let us say that an argument $\{P \Rightarrow Q\}$ is potentially ***cogent*** for a rational thinker who is presented with evidence E for P, (or who achieves prospective non-inferential verification of P by employing faculty F,) just if acknowledgement of the evidential force of E for P, or the competence of F in the circumstances to determine whether P,³ is rationally consistent with open-mindedness about Q.

Intuitively, a cogent argument is one where acceptance of the grounds offered for its premises is consistent with (temporary) open-mindedness about its conclusion. Within the class of deductively valid arguments, it is only the cogent arguments, thus characterised, that are at the service of extending our knowledge.

A template for one kind of Transmission failure:

³ For ease of exposition, I will sometimes omit explicit reference to the “faculty” case in the formulations to follow.

= any valid argument, $\{P \Rightarrow Q\}$ where Q is an authenticity condition for the particular evidence, E, offered for P, or for the competence of F to determine whether P. In order for the argument to be potentially cogent, it has to be rationally possible to be open-minded about Q consistently with appreciation of the probative force of E for P. If Q is an authenticity condition for E with respect to P, that is exactly what is not rationally possible.

Some quotidian examples:

Chiff-chaffs and Willow-warblers

E: That bird's size, colour, movement and general *gestalt*

P: That bird is a willow warbler

Q: That bird is not a chiff-chaff

—is non-transmissive for me, though not for an expert birder who can distinguish the two species by sight.

Twins.

Jessica and Jocelyn are identical twins, both are well known to me but not so well that, seeing either by herself, I can be confident which of them it is:

E: That girl looks exactly like Jessica

P: That girl is Jessica

Q: That girl is not Jocelyn

A case of a slightly different structure (Cohen):

Town clock.

E: The clock says 10.51

P: So the time is 10.51

Q: So (from E and P together) The clock is accurate on this occasion.

These examples ought to be persuasive that rational belief management sometimes requires recognising that the order of the *epistemic* dependences among one's beliefs and suppositions inverts the order of their *logical* dependencies.

III Do cases of transmission failure count against the unrestricted validity of Intuitive Closure and kin?

Intuitive Closure again:

If S knows that P, and S competently deduces Q from P, thereby coming to believe that Q *on the basis* of the competent deduction while retaining their knowledge that P, then S knows that Q

First, we must remember that *basing*, as a real psychological phenomenon, can be rationally inappropriate: one can base a belief on considerations that are poorly selected to justify it. Second, we may want to impose a rationality condition on knowledge in general. A belief should not count as knowledgeable, even if de facto reliably or safely formed, if the thinker is irrational to hold it.

Town Clock as a counterexample to *Intuitive Closure*

In general, *Intuitive Closure* will be in trouble whenever Q is an authenticity condition for the relevant method for acquiring knowledge of P but of such a kind that ordinary standards for what it takes to get knowledge of P require no independent scrutiny of Q which is rather permissibly "taken for granted".

A close relative that *might* be true:

*Intuitive Closure**

If S knows that P *by some method for which Q is not an authenticity condition*, and S competently deduces Q from P, thereby coming to believe that Q on the basis of the competent deduction while retaining their knowledge that P, then S knows that Q

IV Transmission Failure— four controversial cases

First up is

Moore

E: My experience is in all respects as if there is a hand in front of my face

P: Here is a hand. So, (since hands are material objects existing in space) —

Q: There is an external material world.

Moore Lite

E/P: Here is a hand. So

Q: There is an external material world

Ante-Moore

E: The phenomenal character of my subjective experience is consistent both with its amounting to perceptual awareness of a hand in front of my face and with its being the product of a sustained hallucination.

P: I am perceptually aware of a hand in front of my face

Q: Here is a hand

McKinsey:

P(1): I believe that water is wet

P(2): An agent has the concept of water only if they, or others of their speech community have, historically, interacted with water. Hence

Q: Members of my speech community have, historically, interacted with water.

Ante-McKinsey

P(1^{minus}): I believe that *water* is wet

P(1): I believe that water is wet

P(2): An agent has the concept of water only if they, or others of their speech community have, historically, interacted with water. Hence—

Q: Members of my speech community have, historically, interacted with water.

Q *: Members of my speech community have, historically, interacted with a substance that validates *water*.

Putnam

P(1) In the language I speak, ‘brain-in-a-vat’ means *brain-in-a-vat* (My language is disquotational)

P(2) In the language of the brains-in-a vat in the sceptical scenario, “brain-in-a-vat” could not mean *brain-in-a vat* (by the absence of the causal connections which according to some appropriate content-externalism would be required by such a content). So

Q: I am not such a brain-in-a-vat

Finally, Dretske’s

Zebras

— which he originally conceived, of course, as a failure of Closure:

E: The look of the animals, in a zoo cage marked “Plains Zebra”

P: Those animals are Zebras

Q: Those animals are not mules, their coats cleverly dyed and manes coiffured to look exactly like zebras.

The following reasoning is surely transmissive, notwithstanding the inconclusiveness of E:

E: The look of the animals, in a zoo cage marked “Plains Zebra”

P: Those animals are Zebras

Q: These animals are not mules.

So how can it make a difference if we tack an arbitrary disjunct onto Q?

V. Closure and Metaphysical “Heavyweights”

<i>Domain of Enquiry</i>	<i>External World</i>	<i>Other Minds</i>	<i>The Past</i>	<i>Induction</i>
I E(vidence)	Visual and proprioceptive evidence as of a hand in front of my face	Your gashed shin and twisted ankle after falling off your bicycle	Recent excavation of a huge fossilised reptilian skeleton	All Fs in a large random cross-sample of Fs prove to be G
II P	Here is a hand	You are shocked and hurting	A dinosaur died here many millennia ago	All F’s are G
III Q (Authenticity Condition)	There is an external world	There are other minds	The negation of Russell’s Five Minute Hypothesis ⁴	The World is inductively amenable

VI Conclusions

1. It is not a good reason to maintain Dynamic Closure principles that we otherwise put in jeopardy our ability to advance our knowledge and justified beliefs by deduction. There is no such jeopardy provided we can corral and theorise the exceptions.

2. The exceptions are one and all cases where the conclusion of a valid piece of reasoning encodes an authenticity condition for the warrant we take ourselves to have for one or more of the premises. When that is so, the reasoning ought rationally to be regarded as powerless to induce justified confidence in its stated conclusion since absent such confidence *in advance*, one rationally ought to lack confidence in the putative warrant for the premises.

That, in a nutshell, is how and why transmission failure occurs,

3. Dynamic Closure, in full generality, is false provided knowledge of the conclusion of a valid inference from known premises is required to be *rationally* based thereon.

⁴ Namely, that the world did *not* spring into existence five minutes ago, albeit replete with apparent traces of a much more ancient history. (Russell 1921, p. 159)

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