Edinburgh Research Explorer

Epistemological Disjunctivism: Responses to My Critics

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISJUNCTIVISM:
RESPONSES TO MY CRITICS

Duncan Pritchard

University of Edinburgh

Response to Zalabardo

Zalabardo's focus is on my response to radical scepticism, and his misgivings about this response. He may be right to have misgivings,[1] but I must admit to being a little puzzled by how Zalabardo sets out his concerns. He has recast a lot of what I say in his own terms, which is of course his prerogative. The trouble is, in doing so he has attributed views to me that I simply do not hold (much less defend in the text) and then criticised those views.

First, a minor point. One difference between how I describe my position and how Zalabardo has characterised it is that he expresses my view in terms of evidence rather than reasons. I realise that many epistemologists use these notions interchangeably, but I'm not one of them. In any case, I will let this pass, since I think I can make the points I want to make using Zalabardo's preferred medium of evidence. As we will see, there are more substantive issues in play here.

Zalabardo sets out my argument against scepticism as follows:

"I've claimed in the previous section that Pritchard is right in endorsing the following principle:

A. If E provides deductive evidence for H1, and H1 entails H2, then E provides deductive evidence for H2.

And by virtue of this principle, ED [*epistemological disjunctivism*] entails:

B. Your seeing that you have hands provides deductive evidence for the proposition that you are not a brain in a vat.

If this is to amount to a solution to the evidential problem, we have to be able to conclude the following:

C. Your seeing that you have hands can constitute the evidential basis for your knowledge that you are not a brain in a vat.

This conclusion would be unproblematic in the presence of the following principle:

D. If S knows that p and S knows that p entails q, then p can constitute the evidential basis for S's knowledge that q." (Zalabardo, *this volume*, 6-7)

Zalabardo then goes on to argue that (D) is false, and cites cases such as Fred Dretske's (1971) 'zebra' example to illustrate this, a case which I also discuss in the book. Here we have an agent, who I call 'Zula', who it seems can in ordinary conditions know that there is a zebra before her (call this proposition '(Z)') just by looking. That this creature is a zebra entails that it is not a cleverly disguised mule, however, and yet it seems that Zula is not in an evidential position which would enable her to know that the creature before her is not a cleverly disguised mule. We thus seem to have a counterexample to (D), and hence, insofar as Zalabardo is right that the argument above depends on (D), we have exposed a lacuna in my argument against scepticism.

For the sake of argument, let's grant for the time being that Zalabardo has correctly characterised my view with regard to the transition from (A) through to (C). (As we will see in a moment, he hasn't correctly characterised my view on this score). What is curious about Zalabardo's criticism in this regard is that I am quite explicit in the book that I also reject (D). Indeed, in my discussion of the Zula case in part two of the book, I am very clear that I think that Zula can know that (Z) without thereby being in a position to know it is not a cleverly disguised mule. Hence, I would hardly be willing to sign up to (D).

Zalabardo notes at a couple of junctures that he will be setting aside the distinction I draw between favouring and discriminating epistemic support, and the associated two-tier relevant alternatives account of knowledge that I propose. I fear this may be the source of the problem here, in that what Zalabardo is setting to one side is in fact crucial to understanding why I reject a claim like (D), even though I don't reject the idea that knowledge is closed under competent deductions.

Here is what I say about the Zula case in the book. I argue that Zula can know that (Z) without being able to discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules. Indeed, in ordinary conditions Zula needn't have any evidence/rational support that bears on this local error-possibility, and hence can hardly be in an evidential/rational position sufficient to know that this possibility doesn't obtain. Ordinarily, all that counts in order for Zula to know that (Z) is

that she has the relevant discriminatory capacities (roughly, to be able to tell zebras from other things that could plausibly be in her local environment, such as baboons etc.). I also claim that Zula can ordinarily, via a competent deduction, come to know that the creature before her is not a cleverly disguised mule. The relevant closure principle in play here, as I formulate it (though I think this formulation is now pretty standard in the literature), is as follows:

> *The Closure Principle*
> 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]

Crucially, however, I *don't* claim that Zula can know the entailed proposition simply in virtue of exercising the kind of discriminative capacities that enabled her to know that the creature was a zebra prior to the cleverly disguised mule error-possibility entering the scene. Rather, she needs to be able to appeal to additional background epistemic support, albeit epistemic support which I claim is typically available for mature epistemic subjects—this is the weak 'favouring' epistemic support which I think most subjects in Zula's situation will easily possess (though one doesn't need to possess it in ordinary circumstances in order to know that (Z)). If, unusually, she lacks this favouring epistemic support, then she no longer retains her knowledge that (Z), and hence the relevant closure-based inference does not go through. In short, I argue that a distinction should be drawn between 'favouring' and 'discriminating' epistemic support, and argue that the former is all that is required to rule out the local error-possibility involving cleverly disguised mules.[3]

Note that the way I'm thinking about the Zula case is entirely antithetical to the principle (D) that Zalabardo sets out. In particular, I precisely do *not* claim that insofar as Zula comes to know that (Z) then her evidential/rational basis for this knowledge must be able to suffice for knowing that the creature before her is not a cleverly disguised mule. Note too that the foregoing doesn't appeal to anything specific to epistemological disjunctivism—indeed, I think this point about favouring and discriminating epistemic support is an entirely general one, and thus one that all epistemologists should endorse. If Zalabardo thinks that my argument against scepticism rests on (D), he has thus seriously misunderstood me.

The misunderstanding is rooted in how Zalabardo recasts my argument against scepticism in terms of the transition from (A) to (C). For at no point in my defence of epistemological disjunctivism do I claim that seeing that *p* can be a sufficient rational/evidential basis for knowing that one is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis. Rather, I claim that two further conditions need to obtain. The first is that the subject's belief that she is not the victim of a sceptical hypothesis has to be based on a competent deduction from one's rationally grounded

knowledge (the rationally grounded knowledge which is supported by the factive reason). The second is that the subject needs to recognise that the radical sceptical error-possibility in play has not been rationally motivated, but is merely being raised. That is, it is not part—nor could it be part, as I explain in the book—of radical scepticism to offer a rational basis for thinking that you are a victim of a radical sceptical hypothesis. That the error-possibility is not rationally motivated is what enables the subject to legitimately appeal to the factive rational support she has when undertaking the competent deduction, rational support which provides a decisive favouring ground against the sceptical hypothesis. In particular, in the light of a rationally motivated error-possibility, it would not be legitimate to cite one's factive reasons, which is why Zula couldn't respond to a rationally motivated presentation of the cleverly disguised mule hypothesis by saying that she sees that there is a zebra before her. (Indeed, on my view, when one is in a scenario where there are undefeated defeaters in play, as in the case just described, then one's perceptual beliefs are no longer supported by factive rational support anyway).

More generally, at no point in the book do I endorse the kind of evidential closure principle that Zalabardo attributes to me in (A). In particular, at no point in my case against scepticism do I argue that a rational/evidential basis, even a factive one, transfers across entailments in the way set out in (A). What I would subscribe to is the following reformulation of the closure principle, which focuses specifically on rationally grounded knowledge:

> *The Closure 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.[4]

Since competent deduction is a paradigm case of a rational process, if the closure principle holds then so should the closure principle*. How could the knowledge that results from a competent deduction from rationally grounded knowledge be itself lacking in a rational basis? But in endorsing this diachronic principle I am not thereby embracing the synchronic principle (A). In particular, it does not follow from my commitment to this principle that I think that a factive rational basis for knowing that p is thereby a factive rational basis for knowing any entailment (known or otherwise) of p.

I want to close by remarking on a principle that Zalabardo (*this volume*, 9) offers as a necessary condition for knowing a proposition on a certain rational/evidential basis, but where this is a principle he thinks my view doesn't respect:

> E S can know that q on the basis of the evidential support provided by p only if S is more likely to believe that p if q is true than if q is false.

The problem with (E), however, is that it is false, where its falsity has nothing specifically to do with epistemological disjunctivism. Indeed, the point I made earlier about how the distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support bears on the Zula case illustrates why. Recall that Zula cannot discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules, but that she does have the required discriminative capacities to be able to know that (Z), and she is also in possession of the required background favouring reasons to enable her, via closure, to come to know that the creature before her is not a cleverly disguised mule. There is thus a perfectively respectable sense in which Zula can know that the creature before her is a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule even though she cannot discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules. I think that failing to recognise this simple point has led us to entertain all manner of epistemological revisionisms on entirely dubious grounds.

Reflect, however, that with the Zula case so described, Zula's belief that she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule fails to satisfy (E), and hence cannot amount to knowledge according to Zalabardo. This is because Zula is no more likely to regard herself as having the relevant rational/evidential basis for this belief if she is not looking at a cleverly disguised mule than if she is. After all, we have granted that she cannot discriminate between zebras and cleverly disguised mules, and hence if she were presented with a cleverly disguised mule she would continue to believe that she has the same rational/evidential basis that she takes herself to have when presented with a genuine zebra.

In effect, in endorsing (E) Zalabardo is saying that what matters for knowledge is the possession of the relevant discriminative capacities and not the favouring evidence. After all, Zula *does* have evidence/rational support which suffices—by any normal epistemic criteria anyway—for knowing that the creature before is a zebra rather than a cleverly disguised mule. But by focussing in (E) on what Zula *would believe* about her rational support/evidence in the deceived case, Zalabardo neutralises this epistemic credential, and hence reduces epistemic standing to discriminative capacities. I think all epistemologists should resist this kind of reasoning, but epistemological disjunctivists especially so. As I argue in the book, the distinction between favouring and discriminative epistemic support is rooted in commonsense and affords us a straightforward way of avoiding epistemological revisionism of various stripes (e.g., contextualism, contrastivism, non-closure, and so on). But this distinction, when set within epistemological disjunctivism, also enables us to grant that while there is a perfectly good sense in which one cannot discriminate between good and sceptical bad cases, nonetheless agents can have a way of knowing, in the good case, that they are in the good case and not the bad case. Since Zalabardo offers no case against the distinction between favouring and discriminating

support that I offer in the book, much less the application of this distinction to epistemological disjunctivism, he cannot unproblematically help himself to (E) in this context, as if it were a truism about knowledge that all parties would find palatable.

Response to Littlejohn

My response to Littlejohn will be briefer, but this is because our differences are more straightforward. Littlejohn's complaint is with my appeal to reflectively accessible reasons. He argues that no proposal can capture this epistemically internalist idea, and hence that it must be abandoned. Littlejohn's objection is thus not specifically to epistemological disjunctivism as I set it out, but rather to a very general tenet of epistemological internalism which epistemological disjunctivism subscribes to.

The first point I want to make is methodological. As I make clear in my defence of epistemological disjunctivism, my goal in the book was only to show that there is a plausible epistemological story to be told about perceptual knowledge in paradigm conditions such that this knowledge can be supported by factive reflectively accessible reasons. In doing so, the idea was to offer an account of perceptual knowledge in paradigm cases which can accommodate some core claims made by both epistemic externalists and epistemic internalists. My explicit aim was to defend epistemological disjunctivism without committing to any wider claims that are controversial—epistemological disjunctivism, after all, is controversial enough. Since Littlejohn grants that most epistemic internalists subscribe to the thesis that he rejects, it would not have fallen within the remit of the book to defend this claim myself. Instead, I'm entitled to merely to help myself to it as part of the general epistemological architecture.

That said, it obviously wouldn't be very satisfying to respond to Littlejohn's remarks by conceding that the kind of epistemic internalism that I have wed epistemological disjunctivism to, even though widespread, is simply false. So I will try to say something in its defence. In order to do that, I first need to register a crucial point which Littlejohn overlooks.

Littlejohn seems to suppose that I am in the book offering a general epistemic internalist account of knowledge. His ultimate objection to the conception of knowledge as grounded in reflectively accessible reasons is that not all knowledge is so grounded. But I never claim that all knowledge is grounded in reflectively accessible reasons, much less that all knowledge is grounded in factive reflectively accessible reasons. Indeed, I offer no general theory of knowledge in the book, but rather confine my attentions to perceptual knowledge in epistemically paradigm

conditions. It is thus open to me to grant Littlejohn's thesis while nonetheless preserving my endorsement of epistemological disjunctivism.

I have offered a general theory of knowledge elsewhere, what I call an *anti-luck virtue epistemology*.[5] Crucially, this general theory of knowledge is meant to be compatible with epistemic externalism, which I take to be the view that one can have knowledge without possessing any reflectively accessible rational basis for the target belief. Note that there is no inconsistency in endorsing epistemic externalism in this sense while also advocating, in line with epistemological disjunctivism, that when it comes to perceptual knowledge in paradigm conditions, one's knowledge enjoys factive reflectively accessible rational support.

At one point Littlejohn considers the idea that I might not in general hold that knowledge is rooted in reflectively accessible rational support, and grants that this would be a way out of the problem that he has posed for my view. But he dismisses this response on the ground that if I took this route then I would lose the rationale for epistemological disjunctivism. Littlejohn's idea is that I motivate epistemological disjunctivism by saying that it can, by being an epistemic internalist proposal, capture an important conception of epistemic responsibility that epistemic externalism fails to accommodate. So the thought is that if I end up only endorsing epistemic internalism about a certain kind of knowledge, then there's no point in advocating epistemological disjunctivism.

I don't buy this line of reasoning. My general view about knowledge is that a necessary condition on possessing knowledge is that one's cognitive success should be significantly creditable to one's cognitive agency. Very roughly, this is the 'virtue' element of my anti-luck virtue epistemology. If one satisfies this condition, then one has manifested a certain kind of epistemic responsibility. Crucially, however, I argue that one can satisfy this condition in a minimal fashion which doesn't involve the possession of reflectively accessible rational support. Accordingly, I hold that epistemic externalists can capture a minimal kind of epistemic responsibility.

Often, however, I think the mature knower exercises an epistemic responsibility of a very different kind, one which does involve reflectively accessible rational support. Moreover, in line with epistemological disjunctivism, I think that sometimes this reflectively accessible rational support is factive. It is this more robust kind of epistemic responsibility, which is essentially internalist, that I want to capture in my formulation of epistemological disjunctivism. I don't see any tension in the idea that we want an epistemology that allows for both kinds of epistemic responsibility. Indeed, I think that such a view gives us precisely what we want—all knowledge

demands epistemic responsibility, but sometimes this requirement is quite minimal and easy to meet, and hence the acquisition of knowledge is not unduly difficult.

In any case, the crucial point is that I don't intend epistemological disjunctivism to be a general theory of knowledge, much less do I endorse the idea that all knowledge must be grounded in reflectively accessible reasons (factive or otherwise). So even by Littlejohn's own lights, the problem he poses fails to gain a purchase on my view.

Response to Genia Schönbaumsfeld

Genia Schönbaumsfeld raises a dilemma for the anti-sceptical proposal that I offer, a proposal that is rooted in epistemological disjunctivism. As she points out, on my view although one can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses, there is something conversationally awkward about flatly asserting them. Schönbaumsfeld's dilemma is that if such knowledge is *bona fide*, then there ought to be conversational contexts in which they can legitimately be asserted; conversely, if they can never be legitimately asserted, then we cannot make sense of such knowledge as *bona fide*.

The first thing that I want to say about this dilemma is that the anti-sceptical thesis that I set out in *Epistemological Disjunctivism* clearly opts for the first horn. For although I grant that there is something conversationally awkward about flatly claiming to know the denials of sceptical hypotheses, I'm also very clear that there is a way of cancelling the relevant conversational implicature that is in play here, at least if one is an epistemological disjunctivist.[6] Accordingly, there *are* conversational contexts in which one can legitimately claim to know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. (Relatedly, Schönbaumsfeld also claims that the conversational awkwardness here cannot be due to there being a false conversational implicature in play because one can always cancel false implicatures, and yet I'm quite clear in the text that this is precisely what I think is going on in this case. In particular, I'm quite clear that the relevant false implicature can be cancelled).

That said, I am nonetheless quite sympathetic to the general form of the dilemma that Schönbaumsfeld raises, and its putative import to epistemological disjunctivism *qua* anti-sceptical position. The reason for this is that my considered view on the problem of radical scepticism—of its broadly Cartesian variety anyway, as understood in the contemporary literature—is that epistemological disjunctivism can offer only a partial response to the problem. This is because I hold that this sceptical problem is in fact two logically distinct problems in disguise, where one

formulation of the difficulty trades on the closure principle, and another formulation trades on a completely different epistemic principle known as underdetermination. Properly understood, I think epistemological disjunctivism is only the antidote to underdetermination-based radical scepticism, and offers us an awkward, at best, purchase on the closure-based formulation of the problem. For this latter formulation I think we need to introduce a broadly Wittgensteinian angle on radical scepticism, one that makes essential appeal to the "hinge" commitments that Wittgenstein discusses at length in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969).

Given that this is my considered take on the sceptical problem, one might be puzzled as to why this nuance doesn't make an appearance in *Epistemological Disjunctivism*. The reason for this, as I explained in the précis of the book above, is that epistemological disjunctivism is a controversial view in its own right, such that allying it to another proposal which is also controversial—as the Wittgensteinian account of hinge commitments surely is—would be highly distracting. My goal in the book, recall, was to convince epistemologists to take a view seriously that is usually quickly dismissed as untenable, so as much as possible it was important that I outlined it in ways that avoided appeal to independently contentious philosophical territory.

Note that this is *not* to say that I think the anti-sceptical proposal that I set out in *Epistemological Disjunctivism* is untenable. On the contrary, I think it is entirely defensible, and in fact superior to most other anti-sceptical proposals in the contemporary literature. I just think that when applied to the closure-based formulation of the problem it generates a consequence that I find awkward—*viz.*, that one can have a factive reflectively accessible basis for knowing the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. To my ear, such a claim seems unduly heroic, to the extent that if one could consistently find a way of avoiding such a commitment, then that would be desirable. Moreover, since I think that allying the Wittgensteinian account of hinge commitments to epistemological disjunctivism does provide one with a neat and principled way of avoiding such a commitment—without, it should be stressed, leading to the denial of the closure principle—there is hence nothing to be gained by adopting needless heroism in the face of radical scepticism.

Now one might think that Schönbaumsfeld's own response to the dilemma that she poses for my view would be that we should straightforwardly allow that we can know, and therefore legitimately claim to know, the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. Oddly, however, that turns out not to be her view at all. Rather she thinks that merely by being able to block the radical sceptical argument by appeal to epistemological disjunctivism we can get ourselves into a situation where there would be no impetus to make such claims to know at all. I must confess to

be mystified by this proposal. After all, whether we are inclined to make such claims is neither here nor there. If such knowledge is possessed—and Schönbaumsfeld seems to think that it is—then what is to stop someone claiming to have this knowledge? And if they do claim such knowledge, then isn't such a claim entirely legitimate by Schönbaumsfeld's lights (for if it isn't, then how are to understand her criticisms of my proposal)? But if that's right, then why would one demur from making such an anti-sceptical claim?

I think the oddness of Schönbaumsfeld's response to radical scepticism at just this juncture exposes the import of the Wittgensteinian strategy. For this offers us a way of explaining why some of the propositions that we are committed to—such as the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses—are simply not in the market for rationally grounded knowledge at all. The point is not merely that once we accept epistemological disjunctivism then are somehow content not to entertain the epistemic standing of these propositions, although we have knowledge of them nonetheless and can legitimately claim to know them if we are so inclined (though we won't be, apparently). Rather, we come to recognise that what epistemological disjunctivism gives us is a way of making sense of how we can have a robust epistemic grip on the facts in paradigm cases of perceptual knowledge, of a kind that underdetermination-based scepticism seems to show is unavailable. It is then a further question whether that epistemic grip on the facts can be converted, via closure-based inferences, to factive rationally grounded knowledge of the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. This is where the Wittgensteinian approach is brought to bear, since it shows us that since such propositions are not even in the market for rationally grounded knowledge, so we can demur from claiming such knowledge without thereby admitting of any limitation on our epistemic position (and without denying closure).[7]

A final point that I want to note in this regard is that although Schönbaumsfeld and myself disagree on this particular point, there is in fact a great deal of common ground in our treatments of the problem of radical scepticism, at least once the overall features of our views are taken into account. It is thus important not to overestimate the extent of disagreement in play here. As I hope Schönbaumsfeld would agree, we are more fellow travellers as far as our anti-scepticism goes than adversaries.[8,9]

REFERENCES

Dretske, F. (1970). 'Epistemic Operators', *Journal of Philosophy* 67, 1007-23.

Hawthorne, J. (2014). 'The Case for Closure', *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology (2nd Edn.)*, (eds.) M. Steup, J. Turri *&* E. Sosa, 40-56, Oxford: Blackwell.

Littlejohn, C. (*This Volume*). 'Knowledge and Awareness', *Analysis*.

Nozick, R. (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pritchard, D. H. (2010). 'Relevant Alternatives, Perceptual Knowledge and Discrimination', *Noûs* 44, 245-68.

——— (2012*a*). 'Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology', *Journal of Philosophy* 109, 247-79.

——— (2012*b*). *Epistemological Disjunctivism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——— (2012*c*). 'Wittgenstein and the Groundlessness of Our Believing', *Synthese* 189, 255-72.

——— (2015). *Epistemic Angst: Radical Scepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pritchard, D. H., Millar, A., *&* Haddock, A. (2010). *The Nature and Value of Knowledge: Three Investigations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schönbaumsfeld, G. (*This Volume*). 'TBC', *Analysis*.

——— (2015). *The Illusion of Doubt, unpublished manuscript*.

Williamson, T. (2000). *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty*, (eds.) G. E. M. Anscombe *&* G. H. von Wright, (tr.) D. Paul *&* G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell.

Zalabardo, J. (*This Volume*). 'Epistemic Disjunctivism and the Evidential Problem', *Analysis*.

NOTES

[1] As I explain in the précis that accompanies this symposium, and again below in my response to Schönbaumsfeld, I don't think the response to radical scepticism that I offer in Pritchard (2012*b*) is the full story. As I hope will become apparent, however, Zalabardo's reservations about the response to radical scepticism that I set out in this work are not my reservations.

[2] See Hawthorne (2014, 43) for a defence of this formulation of the closure principle, which he attributes, in a slightly different form, to Williamson (2000, 117).

[3] See Pritchard (2010) for more on the distinction between favouring and discriminating epistemic support, and its relevance to the Zula case.

[4] I discuss this particular formulation of the closure principle, and its implications for the problem of radical scepticism, at length in Pritchard (2015, part one).

[5] I have offered a general theory of knowledge elsewhere. See, in particular, Pritchard, Millar *&* Haddock (2010, ch. 3) and Pritchard (2012*a*). Note that I leave it open whether this is a *reductive* theory of knowledge.

[6] See especially Pritchard (2012*a*, 149-50).

[7] I appreciate that the reader might well be puzzled why this approach to radical scepticism doesn't lead to the denial of the closure principle, though I'm afraid don't have the space here to elaborate on this further. For a more detailed defence of this claim, see Pritchard (2012*c*; 2015, part two).

[8] For a fuller sense of where Schönbaumsfeld and myself converge, and diverge, when it comes to the contemporary problem of radical scepticism, the reader may find it useful to read Pritchard (2015) and Schönbaumsfeld (2015) side-by-side.

[9] I am very grateful to my fellow symposiasts for their careful attention to my book. Thanks also to the reviews editor of *Analysis*, Tony Ellis, for commissioning this symposium in the first place.