Précis of *Scepticism and Reliable Belief*

José Zalabardo

The problem of scepticism and the analysis of knowledge are two central topics of the traditional epistemological curriculum. They are intimately related. Sceptical arguments purport to establish the conclusion that most knowledge is impossible by showing that there are necessary conditions for knowledge that we cannot satisfy. Whether these conditions have the status that sceptical arguments ascribe to them will depend on how knowledge should be analysed. If the right analysis makes room for instances of knowledge that don't satisfy the conditions that the sceptical arguments treat as necessary, the arguments will have to be dismissed as unsound.

This aspect of the problem of scepticism is brought to prominence by externalist analyses of knowledge. All extant sceptical arguments appear to rest on principles concerning the nature of knowledge that are rejected by externalist analyses. If this is right, then scepticism poses a problem only for those who endorse internalist analyses of knowledge.

The central thesis of *Scepticism and Reliable Belief* (SRB) is that scepticism and internalism are not connected in this way. I maintain that knowledge should be analysed along externalist lines, and develop in some detail an externalist analysis of knowledge. This analysis shares with other externalist epistemologies the power to undermine traditional sceptical arguments, as they all invoke epistemic principles that are false if knowledge is what I say it is. However, I go on to argue that there is a form of sceptical reasoning that doesn't invoke any premises that would be falsified by my analysis of knowledge. It follows that if my analysis of knowledge is along the right lines, then externalism is true, but scepticism is still a problem.

The anti-sceptical power of externalist analyses of knowledge resides in the fact that they license counterexamples to the necessary conditions for knowledge postulated by sceptical arguments. There are several principles with sceptical potential that externalists reject. In my treatment of traditional sceptical arguments in chapter 1 of SRB, I focus on the *evidential constraint* — the principle that knowing a proposition requires having adequate evidence in its support. I contend that the evidential constraint is at the heart of the main

standard lines of sceptical reasoning. However, the analysis of knowledge that I defend allows counterexamples to the evidential constraint: there are circumstances under which someone who doesn't have adequate evidence for a proposition nevertheless counts as knowing it.

If my analysis of knowledge is correct, then the evidential constraint is not universally valid. The same goes for any other standard externalist analysis. This might be seen as an asset of externalist epistemologies, in light of the sceptical potential of the constraint. However, it might turn out to be a liability, if the evidential constraint is independently motivated. Then the fact that an analysis of knowledge allows counterexamples to the principle, as mine does, will be a reason to reject it. This is the line on externalist analyses of knowledge taken by Laurence BonJour. Chapter 2 of SRB is devoted to addressing BonJour's arguments. I contend that BonJour's attack on externalist epistemologies doesn't work, because he fails to provide legitimate support for the universal validity of the evidential constraint.

In spite of the connection that I have highlighted between the problem of scepticism and the analysis of knowledge, the task of analysing knowledge should be pursued independently of our anti-sceptical agenda. We are not after some analysis of knowledge that makes knowledge possible, but after the true analysis. This doesn't require thinking of knowledge as possessing a hidden essence. It will suffice to think of the true analysis as the one that provides the best match for our intuitions concerning who knows what. Once we have identified the account that satisfies this condition, we can use it to assess sceptical arguments.

The analysis of knowledge that I defend in SRB takes as its starting point Robert Nozick's conception of knowledge as truth tracking. Chapter 3 is devoted to presenting the aspects of Nozick's position that I want to endorse as well as those that I see as needing revision. I agree with Nozick that tracking the truth is a sufficient condition for a true belief to have the status of knowledge, and that sensitivity is a central ingredient of truth tracking. However, I don't want to follow Nozick in treating adherence on a par with sensitivity, in relativizing sensitivity to methods, in treating truth tracking as a necessary condition for knowledge or in construing truth tracking in terms of subjunctives. On this last point I adopt Sherrilyn Roush's idea of construing sensitivity and other epistemic properties in terms of conditional probabilities.

In Chapter 3 I take the first step towards the goal of analysing knowledge by providing an analysis of adequate evidence. I construe adequate evidence as an objective probabilistic relation between two states of affairs, as a result of which the obtaining of one of them provides adequate support for the obtaining of the other. More specifically, E supports H when the values of $P(H|E)$ and of $P(E|H)/P(E|\neg H)$ are sufficiently high. I.e. *H* has to be likely to obtain if *E* obtains, and *E* has to be significantly more likely to obtain if *H* obtains than if *H* doesn't obtain.

Knowledge doesn't require evidence, but evidence can produce knowledge. Chapter 4 uses the account of evidence developed in the preceding chapter to provide an account of when *S* can know *H* as a result of having evidence *E* for *H*. For this to be the case, *S* needs to know *E*, *E* needs to support *H* and *S* needs to know that it does. In addition, the support that *E* provides for *H* shouldn't be misplaced — i.e. the way of making *H* true for which *E* provides support has to coincide with the way of making *H* true by which it actually comes to be true. Finally *S* has to be more likely to believe *E* if *H* is true than if *H* is false.

Chapter 6 presents two ways in which a belief can have the status of knowledge without satisfying the evidential constraint. The first is truth tracking. I put forward an account of truth tracking that closely mirrors my account of evidence. My belief in *A* tracks the truth just in case the state of affairs of my believing *A* provides adequate support for *A* — i.e. the values of $P(A|\text{Bel}(A))$ and of $P(\text{Bel}(A)|A)/P(\text{Bel}(A)|\neg A)$ are sufficiently high. In other words, *A* has to be likely to be true if I believe *A*, and I have to be significantly more likely to believe *A* if *A* is true than if *A* is false. Sufficiently high values for $P(A|\text{Bel}(A))$, $P(\text{Bel}(A)|A)$ and $P(\neg\text{Bel}(A)|\neg A)$ can be seen as probabilistic translations of the properties of safety, adherence and sensitivity, usually construed in terms of subjunctive conditionals. In light of this analogy, on my account, truth tracking requires high levels of safety and sensitivity, with adherence acting as a calibration parameter for sensitivity. The second way in which a belief can have the status of knowledge without satisfying the evidential constraint applies to *standing beliefs* — those that we form as a result of an innate predisposition, largely independent of input. For standing beliefs, I contend, truth is a sufficient condition for knowledge: if you have a standing belief in *p*, and *p* is true, then you know *p*.

Thus on the account of knowledge put forward in SRB, a true belief can acquire the status of knowledge in three ways: first, through adequate evidence, second, by tracking the truth, and third, by being a standing belief. If this is along the right lines, then a successful sceptical argument will have to identify beliefs that don't satisfy any of the three sufficient conditions for knowledge postulated by the account — i.e. non-standing beliefs that don't track the truth and for which I can obtain no adequate evidential support. The sceptical argument that I develop in chapter 7 is based on the thought that, if *B* is a non-standing belief, then this description is satisfied by my higher-order belief that *B* is true. I refer to beliefs of this form as *cognitive self-approvals* (CSAs). If *B* is a non-standing belief, the same goes for the belief that *B* is true. Furthermore, the belief that *B* is true doesn't track the truth, since I am as likely to have it if *B* is false as if *B* is true. And finally, I contend, I can't obtain adequate evidence for my belief that *B* is true.

Suppose for a moment that all this is broadly correct — knowledge is what I say it is and there is an argument that shows that CSAs can't be knowledge without invoking any false assumptions concerning the nature of

knowledge. Where does this leave us? If the sceptical argument invokes only assumptions concerning the nature of knowledge, and if none of these is false, then we will be forced to accept the conclusion of the argument: CSAs can't be knowledge — I cannot know to what extent I am successful in the enterprise of forming true beliefs. Suppose, however, that the argument makes other assumptions, not epistemological, but metaphysical — concerning the nature of cognition and the relationship between reality and our doxastic representations of it. Then the sceptical outcome could still be avoided if we could identify a mistake in the metaphysical conception that the argument presupposes. Chapter 8 is devoted to exploring this possibility. Those who have pursued this line have often targeted the realist conception of cognition as an enterprise aimed at truth, with truth construed as independent of our cognitive practices. I argue that replacing this conception with one according to which the goal of cognition is constitutively dependent on our cognitive practices doesn't produce a satisfactory outcome. The resulting account renders cognition unrecognisable, and it doesn't even avoid the sceptical problem, since the argument concerning CSAs can be easily adapted to challenge our claim to know that we have the kind of beliefs that we aim to have in cognition, independently of how we construe our cognitive goal. The challenge for this approach is to articulate an account of cognition that abandons the aspects of the realist conception that the sceptical argument invokes without substituting an inadequate anti-realist alternative. SRB ends with a few general suggestions as to how this line could be pursued. The view that I have in mind would accept the principle that cognition aims at truth, but instead of treating this principle as invoking an independent conception of truth in order to characterise cognition, as an activity that aims at truth, it would be understood as invoking an independent conception of cognition in order to characterise truth—as that which cognition aims at. If this could be done without reverting to the anti-realist dependence of truth on our cognitive practices, we might have a position that overcomes the difficulties of realist and anti-realist conceptions. Whether a position along these lines is viable or attractive are questions that SRB doesn't attempt to answer.

Philosophy Department
University College London
Gower Street, London *WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom*
E-mail: j.zalabardo@ucl.ac.uk