Scepticism While Tracking the Truth

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José Zalabardo offers an intricate defence of what he calls a "reliabilist" theory of human knowledge.[1] It is "reliabilist" in that whether a true belief is a case of knowledge or not depends only on how that belief is connected with what is so in the world in which the belief is held. That connection is to be captured in the idea of a belief's "tracking the truth" which (ignoring essential qualifications) will be so if the probability of a person's believing that p if it is true that p is much higher than the probability of the person's believing that p if it is not true that p. When there is a high ratio between these two measures of probability the person's belief that p tracks the truth.

With a definition of tracking in hand, Zalabardo identifies having a belief that p that tracks the truth with knowing that p. This would not be easily applicable to our knowledge of necessary truths, which Zalabardo does not try to explain. But for the contingent truths that the view is meant to apply to, it has the "reliabilist" consequence that someone can know that p without knowing that he knows that p, or even without knowing that his belief that p tracks the truth. This is thought to be a desirable feature of "reliabilist" theories since many would-be "sceptical" attacks on the possibility of human knowledge appear to rest on the requirement that one knows that p only if one knows that one knows that p or knows that one has good reasons to believe that p. No such requirement is a threat to a "reliabilist" theory. Whatever the believer believes about how he got his beliefs, or about the adequacy of his reasons for holding them, is irrelevant to whether his beliefs track the truth, and so to whether he knows.

Zalabardo nonetheless presents what he sees as a certain "sceptical challenge" to the "reliabilist" truth-tracking theory of knowledge he explains and defends. In fact, the threat is generated and sustained by the truth-tracking conception of knowledge itself. Zalabardo directs our attention to certain kinds of things it looks as if we cannot know precisely because no beliefs of those kinds that we might arrive at track the truth, and knowing is tracking the truth. Although this book contains an elaborate explanation and defence of a truth-tracking theory of knowledge, Zalabardo says at the beginning that "the problem of scepticism is the subject matter of this book" [p. 2].

The kinds of things he says we cannot know concern some, perhaps all, of the beliefs we hold. But it is not easy to say exactly what Zalabardo thinks we cannot know about those beliefs, or why. It is not that we cannot know that we believe such-and-such. I know that I believe that it is sunny outside right now, for instance. Zalabardo has in mind what he calls "reflective beliefs" about our beliefs, or "cognitive appraisals" or "assessments" of our believing what we do. If that question of "assessment" is the question whether I succeed in knowing the things I believe to be so, or succeed in tracking the truth in believing what I do, it would seem that on the truth-tracking theory of knowledge I do or can know those things about my beliefs if my beliefs about them track the truth. If the truth-tracking theory is correct, what stands in the way of someone who accepts that theory knowing that the things he believes to be so are so, and so knowing that his "assessment" of those beliefs as true is correct?

The kind of "reflective belief" or "cognitive self-appraisal" Zalabardo says he is interested in is my ascribing truth to the things I believe. The question is whether I can know that my belief that p is true, or that I believe truly that p. He argues that that kind of "cognitive self-approval" is not something I can know to be so, on the truth-tracking conception, since my belief that my belief that p is true does not track the truth. If it did, the probability of my believing that my belief that p is true, if I believe that p, would have to be higher than the probability of my believing that my belief that p is true, if I *falsely* believe that p. But it is not higher; both probabilities are the same. So tracking fails. On the truth-tracking conception of knowledge no one can ever know that any "cognitive self-appraisal" of any of his beliefs is true. "Even if my belief that p tracks the truth, my reflective belief that this belief is true does not" [p.155].

There are two things I think I do not understand about this argument. First, why are the probabilities Zalabardo considers the relevant probabilities? He explains that the comparison must be put in that surprising way because a singular term referring to my belief that p is needed to express my "cognitive self-approval" of that belief. And since the singular term 'my belief that p' would fail of reference if I did not believe that p, there would be nothing to compare in that case. So the relevant comparison must be with my falsely believing that p. But I do not see why a singular term referring to a belief of mine must be used in expressing my "cognitive self-appraisal" of my believing what I do. What is in question for Zalabardo in that "appraisal" is my ascription of truth to the belief I have that p. And the question whether I can know such a thing can be put by asking whether I can know that in believing that p I believe truly that p. If I do know that I believe that p that seems to leave me only with the question whether it is true that p.

The second and more puzzling thing I do not understand is therefore why any comparison of probabilities comes into this question at all. Zalabardo treats one's "cognitive self-approval" of one's belief that p as true as a conclusion

arrived at by reflection on one's believing that *p*. But anyone who believes that *p* already regards it as true that *p*. To believe something is to take it to be true or to endorse it or put it forward as true. That does not require using or even having a word 'true'. It requires only a conception of something or other's being so. Someone who believes something takes something or other to be so. For anyone who understands what he is saying or thinking in ascribing a belief to himself, there is therefore nothing in need of further explanation in his endorsing or regarding what he believes as something that is so. He regards the belief he ascribes to himself as true. This is shown even in Zalabardo's comparison of the probabilities. The reason someone who believes that *p* is no more likely to regard that belief as true than someone who falsely believes that *p* is that all believers regard the beliefs they know they hold as true.

If regarding as true a belief one holds, or ascribing truth to the belief, amounts to a "cognitive assessment" or "self-approval" of that belief, it looks as if we could know such "appraisals" of our beliefs to be correct, even on the truth-tracking theory. Someone who studies the meteorological data on Monday and comes to believe that there will be rain on Tuesday can find out on Tuesday that what he has believed since Monday is in fact so. He knows what he has believed since Monday, and if his belief that it is raining on Tuesday tracks the truth, he knows that the belief which since Monday he has regarded as true is true. So he knows that his "assessment" of that belief is correct; he believed truly that there will be rain on Tuesday. It looks as if any believer who knows something of what is so in the world and knows what he believes could know in this way that positive "cognitive appraisals" of many of his beliefs are true. It also looks as if a believer could arrive in the same way at knowledge of the correctness of his "cognitive appraisals" of the beliefs of other believers, as long as he knows what those others believe.

Considering only the "assessments" individual persons make of this or that particular belief of theirs in everyday life does not really serve to bring out Zalabardo's reasons for denying that we can ever know "cognitive appraisals" of our beliefs to be correct. What lies behind his idea that this kind of "reflective knowledge" about our beliefs is not available to us appears to be something more general. Even if we do in fact know many things about the world, Zalabardo says, "what matters here is not so much our actual epistemic situation, but our assessment of it" [p. 153]. This 'it' that is the object of assessment appears to be not just this or that belief or even all beliefs, but something singular: our "epistemic situation" as a whole. When Zalabardo says "The sceptic's goal is to mount a cogent argument to undermine my knowledge claims" [Ibid.], he does not mean only Zalabardo's knowledge claims, or your or my knowledge claims, but all the knowledge claims any of us ever makes from the "epistemic situation" we all occupy together. The "sceptic's goal" is to show that no one can ever achieve knowledge of an "assessment" of one's belief within that "situation". If that is so, then of course

none of the particular assessments we take ourselves to be making in every-day life would be known to be true after all.

The source of the difficulty, as Zalabardo sees it, is that the task of assessing our epistemic situation is "a new, additional activity", beyond "the first-order activity" of cognition. Even if the truth-tracking theory of knowledge explains how that "first-order activity" of cognition yields knowledge of what the world is like, there remains a possible "sceptical threat" to our "assessment" of our "epistemic situation". If the threat succeeds, it would show that we "have no knowledge of how good we are at determining what the world is like" [p. 168]. "We may be very good at cognition, and we may believe that we are very good, but if [we don't know whether our "assessments" are correct] we don't in fact have any knowledge of how good we are" [Ibid.].

Many devoted proponents of the "reliabilist" truth-tracking theory of knowledge would presumably ask why we *have* to know how good we are at getting knowledge of the world in order to be good at getting it. Why isn't knowledge of the world enough, especially if that knowledge includes knowledge to the effect that we and others believe such-and-such? Zalabardo does not try to answer that question directly. He evidently thinks, quite rightly, that we can and do know something about how good we are in getting knowledge of the world, and he wants to account for that knowledge. One response would be to abandon the truth-tracking theory of knowledge if, as he argues, it implies that we can know no such thing.

Zalabardo does not give up on that theory so quickly. He is concerned rather to draw attention to what it is about the task of assessing our "first-order" activity of cognition that he thinks is responsible for the potential threat. Assessment of our success in cognition must assess that activity with respect to a certain criterion. On the truth-tracking theory, that criterion is the extent to which the activity "attains the goal of truth" [Ibid.]. Zalabardo thinks this poses a potential threat because "when we choose truth as our cognitive criterion, bias is inevitable" in our putative assessments [p. 170]. It might seem that we could find adequate evidence against bias by being very careful, especially in cases that matter the most. But Zalabardo argues that for assessments of our cognitive efforts within the "epistemic situation" we all occupy, "removing the bias is not an option" [p. 171]. That is because he thinks the only ways we have of finding out that a belief that *p* is true are in general the same as the ways we have of finding out that *p*.

> My belief as to whether my belief that p satisfies this criterion (whether the belief is true or false) is necessarily governed by the same doxastic mechanisms that govern my belief as to whether *p*. This means that, given that they have produced the belief that *p*, if they produce a belief on the truth value of this belief, they will produce the belief that my belief that *p* is true. The fact that this

> kind of bias is inevitable in cognitive self-assessments with respect to the goal of truth is the reason why they are always favourable [p. 170].

That the same "doxastic mechanisms" are inevitably at work in answering both kinds of question explains "the fact that particular cognitive assessments are invariably favourable" [p. 169]. And if those assessments are *invariably* favourable, they do not track the truth about those beliefs, so they are not something we know.

It is difficult at first to know what to say about this argument. We all know that assessments of the truth of our beliefs are not *invariably* favourable. All too often we come to know that something we believe is not so; we find that our belief is false. Of course, if we really accept that verdict, we do not continue to believe what we believed before. We do not regard as false beliefs we actually hold. That is the sense in which we invariably regard "favourably" (i.e., as true) every belief we hold (with varying degrees of confidence). But if we are assessing our success in cognition by the criterion of the truth or falsity of what we believe, we know that in many cases the assessment can go either way. Because the meteorologist knew it was raining on Tuesday, he knew that the belief he got on Monday is true. But if, even with his Monday calculations, things had gone differently on Tuesday (as they so often seem to in meteorology), he and we would have known that the belief he got on Monday is false, and would have assessed it "unfavourably". If he were to see that it is not raining on Tuesday, the "mechanisms" that produce his belief about the truth value of the belief he got on Monday would not produce in him the "favourable" judgement that that belief is true. But when we are outdoors, are the "doxastic mechanisms" that produce on one occasion a belief that it is raining significantly different from the "mechanisms" that produce on another occasion a belief that it is not raining?

Zalabardo suggests that what creates the apparently "sceptical" challenge is the very idea of truth as the object or goal of cognition: truth as "independent of the procedures at our disposal for detecting its presence or absence" [p. 167]. I am not sure whether he sees this understanding of truth as also in some way responsible for what he regards as the inevitability of only "favourable" judgements of the truth of our beliefs. If so, I don't see why. Near the end of the book he begins to explore the possibility of understanding the goal of cognition, or the difference between success and failure in cognition, as something other than truth or falsity. Perhaps that will provide "resources for defusing the sceptical argument" [p. 185] while preserving the truth-tracking theory of knowledge. This "might be the only solution", he thinks; "the sceptical problem might have a metaphysical solution" [p. 186].

Metaphysics comes into the picture because Zalabardo identifies endorsement of this conception of truth as "independent of the procedures we employ in its pursuit" [p. 184] with acceptance of what he calls "metaphysi-

cal realism". So avoiding the sceptical outcome and accounting for our knowledge of the "assessments" of our beliefs appears to require abandoning "realism". "Anti-realism", directly opposed to metaphysical "realism", can take several different specific forms, but in all its form it sees truth, or the goal of cognition, as "defined . . . in terms of some aspect of our engagement in the activity of cognition" [p. 181]. But how can any form of "anti-realism" define the goal of cognition in a way that accounts for the difference we recognize between success and failure in that activity? Zalabardo does not go into that question in any detail in the few pages at the end of this book. He rightly sees no version of "anti-realism" as any help to him in his apparent dilemma. He simply observes, surely correctly, that in accepting metaphysical "anti-realism" "we lose our grip on the idea that our beliefs represent the world in a certain way" [p. 181]. But if metaphysical "realism" is the only other alternative, Zalabardo's "sceptical argument" threatens to show that we can never know to what extent, if any, we are successful in achieving the goal of cognition.

Zalabardo sees the only hope to lie in some position that avoids both horns of the apparent dilemma. That certainly seems the right tack to take, given his conception of the dilemma he thinks "realism" and "anti-realism" otherwise present him with. He seeks what he calls a "middle position". But the kind of position he thinks he needs cannot strictly be a *metaphysical* "middle position" lying somehow between metaphysical "realism" and metaphysical "anti-realism". There is no room between those two metaphysical positions: as accounts of truth or the goal of cognition, each involves the denial of the other. What Zalabardo sees he needs, and needs to explain, is some position or stance which is neither "realism" nor "anti-realism".

I do not think Zalabardo's brief sketch of a possible "middle position" in the final pages of his book takes us very far towards a promising way out of his dilemma. I have the sense that Zalabardo feels the same way. The strategy he suggests for steering a middle course between "realism" and "anti-realism" seems to be to remain as non-committal as possible about what the difference is between cognitive success and failure. If, as on one suggestion, the only facts relevant to making the distinction are "subjects' inclinations" to apply one word or sound ('success' or 'true') to some efforts at cognition and another word or sound ('failure' or 'false') to others, that would amount to a radical form of "anti-realism" while giving no indication of what, if anything, the makers of those sounds are saying about those efforts at cognition. It will not do to say that 'success' or 'true' are simply what those subjects *call* those efforts at cognition that they assess as cognitively successful: in the situation as described there is no such thing as anyone's assessing something as cognitively successful.

Zalabardo's example of participants in a practice of detecting the presence of a certain thing who judge the "success" of another person's "detection", and even a "detection" of their own in the past, by whether it agrees

with the assessor's own present "detection", would also be a form of metaphysical "anti-realism". But in that case a judgement of "success" rather than of "failure" would indicate a real difference between the two "detections" so judged. The criterion actually at work, whether explicitly mentioned or not, would be sameness or difference between the "detection" under assessment and the assessor's own present "detection".

Zalabardo sees that both "realism" and all forms of "anti-realism" could be avoided if there were a position in which "the conception of cognition endorsed by its participants constitutes the real truth about the activity" [p. 184]. I think there is such a position. We can understand our "epistemic situation" in a way Zalabardo is looking for, without either "realism" or "anti-realism", if we hold no *metaphysical* view one way or the other about truth and the goal of cognition. I think Zalabardo got close to having at least a *name* for such a position, if not a positive account of it, in the title of his 2000 paper "Realism De-transcendentalized".[2] "Realism" de-transcendentalized, or de-metaphysicalized, I take it, would be nothing more (and nothing less) than the idea of truth as, in general, "independent of the procedures at our disposal for detecting its presence or absence" [p. 167].

In calling this a "non-metaphysical" conception I mean only that understanding what it says about truth draws on nothing more than what we all already know about the world we live in. We know, for instance, that it can be raining at a particular place, or not, independently of whether anyone perceives or believes or knows that it is, or that it is not. In general, whether it is true that so-and-so is in that sense independent of whether any of the procedures or capacities we have for knowing whether it is true that so-and-so are in operation. That is so even if the application of those procedures and capacities has been, and has been found to be, highly successful in the past in yielding knowledge of the world. I think there is nothing distinctively metaphysical in this observation about the world we all live in, unless saying anything at all about the world around us counts as metaphysical.[3]

I don't see this conception of independent truth as in itself a threat to a truth-tracking theory of knowledge. Whether there are good reasons in favour of such a theory is another question. It seems to me that the goal of cognition is not simply true belief, but knowledge, which of course requires truth, but also something more. I think truth-tracking theories of knowledge tend to take belief for granted without going seriously into the question of what is involved in a person's believing something. Being capable of the kinds of propositional attitudes involved in knowledge and belief requires understanding the contents of those attitudes, being sensitive to the force of reasons for and against acceptance, and being ready to adjust one's acceptances to what one takes to be the strength of reasons one recognizes as counting for or against them. Any theory that would account even for true beliefs would have to acknowledge the indispensability of such intentional evaluative attitudes

and explain how they contribute to believers' coming to believe what they do. That question could not be answered without taking into account certain things that are so in the world in which those believers operate. But I take it that no explanation of our knowledge could succeed without taking into account certain things that are so, and known to be so, in the world in which we occupy our distinctive "epistemic situation".

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NOTES

[1] José L. Zalabardo, *Scepticism and Reliable Belief*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012 (numbers in square brackets in the text refer to the pages of this book).

[2] *European Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1) 2000, pp. 63-88.

[3] Zalabardo mentions Donald Davidson and John McDowell, among others, as suggesting something like the kind of "middle position" he is looking for [182n]. But I don't think either of them sees any prospect of describing "cognitive success" in terms only of procedures we employ for ascribing it, without the notion of truth as independent of the application of such procedures.

RESUMEN
Zalabardo considera que la teoría 'fiabilista' del conocimiento que sigue la pista de la verdad que él defiende daría cuenta del hecho de que conocemos muchas cosas sobre el mundo, pero no nos deja ninguna manera de conocer si hemos tenido éxito en nuestros esfuerzos epistémicos: las creencias sobre la verdad de las creencias que ya mantenemos no siguen el rastro de la verdad. De acuerdo con ello, él considera entender el objetivo de la cognición como algo más que independencia de la verdad. Expreso algunas dudas sobre sus razones para extraer esta conclusión 'escéptica' y sugiero que incluso con la independencia de la verdad como objetivo de la cognición podemos saber que hemos tenido éxito en una gran cantidad de nuestras creencias. Esto exige probablemente una concepción de creencia más rica que la que da por sentada una teoría del conocimiento puramente 'fiabilista' que rastrea la verdad

PALABRAS CLAVE: *conocimiento; creencia; verdad; rastreo de la verdad; fiabilismo; escepticismo; éxito cognitivo.*

ABSTRACT
Zalabardo finds that the 'reliabilist', truth-tracking theory of knowledge he defends would account for our knowing a great many things about the world but would

leave us with no way of knowing whether we have been successful in our epistemic efforts: beliefs about the truth of beliefs we already hold do not track the truth. He accordingly considers understanding the goal of cognition as something other than independent truth. I express some doubts about his reasons for drawing that 'sceptical' conclusion, and suggest that even with independent truth as the goal of cognition we can know we have been successful so far in a great many of our beliefs. That probably requires a richer conception of belief than a purely 'reliabilist', truth-tracking theory of knowledge takes for granted.