

EXPERT-ORIENTED ABILITIES VS. NOVICE-ORIENTED ABILITIES:  
AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

MICHEL CROCE

*University of Edinburgh*

[non-final version]

**Abstract.** According to a recent account of epistemic authority proposed by Linda Zagzebski (2012), it is rational for laypersons to believe on authority when they conscientiously judge that the authority is more likely to form true beliefs and avoid false ones than they are in some domain. Christoph Jäger (2015) has recently raised several objections to her view. By contrast, I argue that both theories fail to adequately capture what epistemic authority is, and I offer an alternative account grounded in the abilities that different kinds of authorities are required to possess.

INTRODUCTION

A recent book by Linda Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (2012), offers an innovative account of authority in the epistemic realm.<sup>1</sup> Her account focuses on the necessary conditions that legitimate believing on authority or, in other words, on the question: whom should we believe? (Coady 2012: 27). Christoph Jäger (2015), among others, raises several objections to Zagzebski's view and endorses an alternative theory of epistemic authority. In this paper, I suggest that both views are incomplete: my twofold aim is to solve the issues arising from Zagzebski and Jäger's works and to provide a comprehensive account of epistemic authority that includes not only the expert and the authority of (true) belief, but also the authority of understanding.

In section 1, I introduce Zagzebski's innovative definition of epistemic authority, which clearly distinguishes authorities from experts in the epistemic domain. In section 2, I present the *Preemption Thesis*, a crucial condition of Zagzebski's account of epistemic authority, and discuss Jäger's fundamental

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Kenneth Boyd, J. Adam Carter, Christoph Jäger, Klemens Kappel, Duncan Pritchard, Jan Wieben, Linda Zagzebski, Joost Ziff, and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

objections to Zagzebski's theory of authority. According to Jäger, Zagzebski's theory fails to account for the importance of epistemic authority in domains like philosophy and scientific research, where understanding is a more important epistemic aim than having true beliefs. In section 3, I offer three compelling considerations for going beyond Zagzebski and Jäger's accounts. Building on these remarks, in section 4 I develop an alternative, i.e. virtue-based, account of the epistemic authority that includes the three main kinds of authority in the epistemic domain – namely, experts, authorities of belief, and authorities of understanding.

## 1. EXPERTS AND EPISTEMIC AUTHORITIES

The issue of defining epistemic authority can be approached from two different perspectives: on the one hand, authority refers to “the normative power possessed by the bearer of authority” (Zagzebski 2012: 103), as most epistemologists have usually understood it. On the other hand – following Zagzebski's classification<sup>2</sup> – authority can indicate “the person or institution that has authority” (p. 103).<sup>3</sup> Here Zagzebski sheds light on a deeply-rooted confusion concerning the former definition, which has led most to consider epistemic authority merely as a property of those who are experts in some particular field, and hence to refer to the very same persons as “authorities” or “experts” indistinctly.<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, Zagzebski approaches this notion from the latter point of view, defining epistemic authority as follows:

**Epistemic Authority.** Someone who does what I would do if I were more conscientious or better than I am at satisfying the aim of conscientiousness – getting the truth. (p. 109)

Since this is not a commonly shared definition among epistemologists, it will be wise to clarify the role played by “[epistemic] conscientiousness”. Zagzebski defines it thus:

---

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I use “EA” and, later, “SA” when I talk about “epistemic authorities” and “Socratic authorities” as persons. Furthermore, I call “S” the layperson or the novice epistemic subject and, for the sake of simplicity, I consider novices as males, but experts, EAs, and SAs as females.

<sup>3</sup> Further considerations on the distinction between *being an* authority and *having* authority can be found in Raz (1979: 19–20; and 2006: 1034).

<sup>4</sup> A few occurrences of “authority” in the recent literature pre-Zagzebski (2012) help to track this trend: John Hardwig maintains that “[a]ppeals to the authority of experts often provide justification for claims to know” (1985: 336), while Steve Fuller, in his book on *Social Epistemology*, holds that “the layman is epistemically dependent on the authority of experts for all but the beliefs on which he himself is an expert” (1991: 278). Alvin Goldman considers a relevant feature of being experts to be seeking “to appraise the authority or credibility of other experts” (2001: 90), while Tom Christiano concisely states that “a theoretical authority in some area [...] is an expert in that area” (2012).

**Epistemic Conscientiousness.** Reflective disposition to use our faculties as best we can for obtaining the truth.

As a disposition, conscientiousness is matter of degrees and goes from the basic level of self-awareness we have most of the time (i.e. awareness that we are agents with abilities) to a more significant level in which we self-reflectively aim at getting the truth in various ways (see pp. 48–49). Thus, the epistemic authority is a subject who is more epistemically conscientious than I am, and hence is more likely than I am to obtain the truth in a particular field.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that the notion of an authority differs in three main respects from that of an expert, which I introduce below. The first difference pertains to the nature of the relationship between the epistemic superior and laypeople. Zagzebski's definitions make the notion of epistemic authority clearly *subject-dependent*, since she conceives it as a three-place relation between a given subject (or set of subjects) S, another subject (or set of subjects) S\*, and some doxastic domain D.<sup>6</sup> Suppose you are used to picking mushrooms in the countryside: it might easily be the case that someone is an EA for me with respect to recognizing different kinds of mushrooms, while she is not an EA for you in that particular domain. Analogously, someone might be an EA for me with respect to distinguishing mushrooms, whereas she is not an EA for me when it comes to philosophy of religion.

In contrast, the notion of an expert possesses a *subject-independent* dimension we need to explore. Consider Goldman's analysis of cognitive or intellectual experts:

**Experts:** people who have (or claim to have) a superior quantity or level of knowledge in some domain and an ability to generate new knowledge in answer to questions within the domain. [...] [E]xperts in a given domain [...] have more beliefs (or high degrees of belief) in true propositions and/or fewer beliefs in false propositions within that domain than most people do (or better: than the vast majority of people do). (2001: 91)

According to this definition, the expert is required to possess (a) superior reliability to most people within a given domain and (b) the intellectual ability to generate knowledge within that domain.

Some might worry that (a) makes Goldman's notion of an expert subject-dependent, as the attribution of expertise to someone partially depends on the reliability of the other members of her epistemic community. Goldman does not

---

<sup>5</sup> It is wise to mention that, following Zagzebski, I work under the assumption that S is conscientious as well, that is conscientious enough to realize that he has evidence that some individuals are more conscientious than he is in a given domain (see Zagzebski 2012: 57). This consideration sets a threshold that is meant to prevent cases in which a reckless person is an EA for an even more reckless interlocutor.

<sup>6</sup> Jäger argues that epistemic authority is also time-relative: “[s]ince our epistemic skills and virtues and the amount of available evidence and information about a given topic vary over time, S\* may be an authority for S at a given time  $t_0$  but no longer play that role at some later time  $t_1$ , or vice versa” (2015: 4).

deny that the notion of an expert has a comparative dimension that we refer to when we say that, for example, Debbie is *more* of an expert in contemporary history than Jessie, or that Mary is *more* of an expert in psychology than anyone else in the room. However, Goldman is clear that “[b]eing an expert is not simply a matter of veritistic superiority. Some non-comparative threshold of veritistic attainment must be reached” (2001: 91), even though this threshold might be difficult to determine.

Thus, when we say that someone is an expert, we are acknowledging (or supposing) that she reaches the reliability-threshold and that she has the ability mentioned in (b), which are requirements independent of other people’s epistemic status. This is exactly what happens when we say, for example, that José Mourinho is an expert in football tactics and Angus Deaton in economics: no matter where they are and whom they are talking to, according to Goldman’s analysis of the subject-independent notion of expertise they are experts because they satisfy both (a) and (b).

Here is a simple way to recast the first difference between the subject-independent notion of an expert and the subject-dependent notion of epistemic authority. Granted that Mourinho is an expert in football tactics, he is an EA *for* all other amateur football players and coaches. In contrast, he might not be an EA *for* his mentor Louis Van Gaal or *for* Carlo Ancelotti – who won the Champions League more times than Mourinho – as they might easily be as epistemically conscientious as Mourinho.

The second difference between the two notions is explicitly suggested by Zagzebski when she claims that “the expert is an authority only in a very weak sense, since the expert and the layperson who defer to her may have no relationship with each other” (2012: 5). Surprisingly enough, Zagzebski does not provide an argument in support of this claim. What we can extract from this quote is that a further condition for one to be an epistemic authority – in the full or strong sense – is that one shares a relationship with the interlocutor. Why so?

I hold that having a personal relationship with someone epistemically superior to us in some domain is a necessary condition for her to be able to acknowledge our epistemic dependence and needs. As I will argue in the rest of the paper, the role of epistemic authorities can go far beyond the mere transmission of true beliefs to the novice. Indeed, I will defend the idea that someone is an authority for another insofar as she responds to (some of) his epistemic needs, which may vary, depending on the circumstances, from getting knowledge to understanding a subject matter, and from receiving what he needs through the authority’s testimony to achieving epistemic goals on his own thanks to the authority’s guidance.<sup>7</sup> But the authority cannot be sensitive to the novice’s needs if she does not have a relationship with him: thus, in absence of this condition, the authority might fail to provide what the novice is looking for.

---

<sup>7</sup> This notion of the epistemic authority is in line with the Razian model of the “service conception” of the authority, according to which a subject A is an authority for a subject B insofar as A is doing something, e.g. issuing binding directives, in the service of B (see Raz 2006).

In contrast, having a relationship with the novice seems unnecessary for one to be an expert, as neither condition (a) nor condition (b) require so. If a prominent expert in quantum mechanics, let us call her Professor Ivory Tower, does not share her progress and collected data with her colleagues and does not have students, then she still is an expert in her field, although she cannot be an epistemic authority in Zagzebski's strong sense, due to her lack of a relationship with laypeople. On the other hand, as I pointed out with the example of the authority in recognizing mushrooms, it might be the case that someone is an EA for me in some field, without necessarily being a socially recognized expert in that field.

The last difference between the expert and the epistemic authority concerns the intellectual virtues each is required to possess. Goldman's definition suggests that someone is an expert insofar as she is able to generate new knowledge in her domain of expertise by addressing new questions arising within that domain. Such an ability is fundamental to experts, yet not to EAs: in fact, someone might be an EA for me in North-European contemporary literature simply by having attended an undergraduate course on that topic, given that I do not know anything whatsoever about Baltic writers. Such a student could inform me about the most important writers and their work, yet be unable to generate new knowledge on Baltic contemporary literature, thereby lacking any expertise on that topic.

In section 4, I will distinguish between various kinds of authority depending on the abilities each needs to possess. At this stage of analysis, Goldman's definition of an expert and Zagzebski's considerations on the notion of epistemic authority allow us to conclude that we should not treat "epistemic authority" and "expert" as overlapping notions. The former is subject-dependent, whereas the latter is mainly subject-independent. Moreover, the former, unlike the latter, requires an ongoing relationship between the layperson and EA. Finally, the latter, unlike the former, demands that the expert be able to generate new knowledge in her field of expertise. Therefore, until section 4, where I give alternative definitions of the epistemic authority and the expert grounded in the abilities each of them needs to display, I will assume the following tentative definitions:

*Epistemic Authority (EA).* An epistemic subject A is an EA for another subject S in domain D iff:

- (i) A is *more epistemically conscientious* than S in D;
- (ii) There is an ongoing relationship between A and S.

*Expert.* An epistemic subject A is an expert in domain D iff:

- (a) A possesses more true beliefs than the majority of people do in D;
- (b) A has the ability to bring about new questions and to search for the best answers in D.

## 2. ZAGZEBSKI'S ACCOUNT OF EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY AND JÄGER'S OBJECTIONS

### 2.1 Zagzebski's account of the authority of belief

Zagzebski's account of epistemic authority is based on two fundamental theses she derives from Joseph Raz (1988): the Preemption Thesis and the Justification Thesis 1 for the Authority of Belief.<sup>8</sup> Both are meant to provide justification for a seemingly counter-intuitive action, such as believing on authority. The former is “a thesis about what it means to take someone as an epistemic authority” (Zagzebski 2014: 176) and can be defined as follows:

*Preemption Thesis for epistemic authority.*

The fact that the authority [EA] has a belief  $p$  is a reason for me to believe  $p$  that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing  $p$  and is not simply added to them. (Zagzebski 2012: 107)

Thus, according to the Preemption Thesis, believing on authority means that if I consider someone to be an epistemic authority for me, then I am not only in the position to defer to her; rather, I am epistemically compelled to adopt her reasons for belief as the decisive ones to settle the matter. I am not required to dismiss or completely disregard my own reasons for believing  $p$  as long as I let the authority's reasons be those for why now I believe  $p$ .<sup>9</sup> However, although the Preemption Thesis accounts for the epistemic attitude I am rationally supposed to adopt, it says nothing about what justifies my adopting EA's reasons for belief.

Zagzebski's latter thesis explains “the normal way to show that [E]A is an authority for S” (2014: 177) as follows:

*Justification Thesis 1 for the Authority of Belief (JAB1).*

The authority of another person's belief for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief if I believe what the authority believes than if I try to figure out what to believe myself. (Zagzebski 2012: 110)

According to JAB1, what allows me to consider someone an EA is my reflective judgment that she is more conscientious than I am, which in turn makes it rational for me to believe what she believes if I want to increase my chances of getting the truth.

Let us consider an ordinary example:

---

<sup>8</sup> For the Razian version of the Preemption Thesis see Raz (1988: 42, 57–59; and 2006: 1019, 1024); Zagzebski's Justification Thesis 1 for the Authority of Belief is grounded in Raz's Normal Justification Thesis (1988: 53). Arnon Keren offers an interesting discussion of the Preemption Thesis in his (2014a).

<sup>9</sup> See section 3.2 for further clarifications on the functioning of preemptive reasons. See also Jäger (2015) and Zagzebski (2015).

RED CARDINAL DISAGREEMENT CASE. Suppose I form the perceptual belief that there is a chaffinch on the tree in front of me, but I am not completely confident of it. Suppose, then, that I ask an ornithologist who is passing by and she says that the bird is a red cardinal (p).

According to Zagzebski, once I reflectively judge through JAB1 that I am more likely to form a true belief if I trust the ornithologist and believe that p than if I try to figure out what to believe myself, I have a compelling reason to consider her an EA and to adopt her belief, as demanded by the Preemption Thesis.

## 2.2 Jäger & Zagzebski's dispute on the Preemption Thesis

As mentioned above, there is debate over whether believing on authority requires preempting. Jäger, among others, raises several concerns against the Preemption Thesis: here I focus on what he calls “the problem of unhinging proper bases” (see 2015: 8-ss.). This problem does not directly pertain to cases of initial disagreement between S and EA, such as the one considered in the previous example.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it concerns cases of partial or full agreement between S and EA that, according to him, Zagzebski's account is not in a position to accommodate.<sup>11</sup>

In order to illustrate Jäger's first objection, consider the following example:

RED CARDINAL AGREEMENT CASE.<sup>12</sup> Suppose that I form the perceptual belief that there is a red cardinal on the tree and that I am not entirely confident of it. Suppose, then, that I ask the passer-by ornithologist whom I consider an EA and she confirms my belief that p.

The Preemption Thesis, Jäger notices, requires that I stop considering my visual experience as the reason for which I believe p and instead preempt; but in such a situation where I partially (or fully) agree with EA, (i) it might not be psychologically possible for me to disregard my evidence and (ii) I need not do so. Clearly, the fact that EA shares my belief is additional supporting evidence for my true belief, which is (partially) justified by my visual experience. Grounding my belief in both my own perceptual evidence and the authority's judgment seems epistemically better off than simply supporting such a belief with uncertain perceptual reasons. Nonetheless, there is no reason why I should set aside my own evidence, since it revealed itself as accurate.

---

<sup>10</sup> Notice that Jäger's problem of unhinging proper bases is part of a more detailed critique of Zagzebski's account of epistemic authority, where he individuates two further problems with preemption – namely, the problem of competing authorities and the switching problem (see 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Where a case of partial agreement is a situation in which both S and EA have the same belief, yet based on different epistemic reasons.

<sup>12</sup> The example is adapted from Jäger (2015).

Zagzebski's reply to Jäger's objection aims at deflating the relevance of the subject's own reasons compared with the authority's. She argues that there is nothing I can see about the bird that the ornithologist has not already noticed. Thus, it would be illusory to think that adding my own reasons to the ornithologist's would provide a better justification for believing that  $p$  (see Zagzebski 2015: 4). Furthermore, Jäger's remark that it might not be psychologically possible to preempt in cases of agreement like this should not affect Zagzebski's account, which is meant to provide a rational way to justify believing on authority, rather than determining whether or not it is possible to preempt in such and such a situation. What matters to her is that preemption assures the best track record in terms of getting the truth.

Without entering the debate too deeply and straying too far from my purposes, there is a compelling reason why Zagzebski's reply does not make her argument safe from Jäger's objection. Consider the following modified version of the RED CARDINAL AGREEMENT CASE, where the authority is not a socially recognized expert, e.g. an ornithologist, but just someone who is better epistemically placed than I am.

RED CARDINAL SISTER AGREEMENT CASE. Suppose I believe there is a red cardinal on the tree due to hearing a particular song that I ascribe to red cardinals. Then, suppose I ask my sister whether the bird on the tree is a red cardinal, since I have just lost my glasses and I am not entirely confident of my belief. She has no idea what the red cardinal's song sounds like, but she reports that the bird is a red cardinal ( $p$ ) on the basis of strong visual evidence that the brilliant red bird with a red mask on the tree is a red cardinal.

If we assume that there are circumstances, as in the RED CARDINAL SISTER AGREEMENT CASE, in which it is not necessary for one to be an EA to already be aware of possible reasons in support of  $p$ , then preempting might not be the most rational thing to do for  $S$ . Let us grant that deferring to my sister, i.e. the epistemic authority here, is rational, since she is better epistemically placed than I am. Nevertheless, despite my nearsightedness, when I asked for her help, I already had some reasons in support of my belief that were not part of her justification for  $p$  – namely, auditory evidence concerning the red cardinal's song. These perceptual reasons enforce both my justification for  $p$  and my confidence that  $p$  is the case. Therefore, preempting might still lead to the best track record in getting the truth, yet considering my sister's testimony as a further evidential reason for my belief that  $p$  would give me a stronger justification for  $p$  than she has. Hence, contra Zagzebski, it would be irrational for me to stop also basing my belief on my auditory evidence and just preempt.

### 2.3 Jäger's account of Socratic authority

Jäger's second objection to Zagzebski's account of epistemic authority emerges in cases of initial disagreement between S and EA within important domains like philosophy, scientific research, politics, and religion, or in those ordinary situations where gaining understanding is a more fundamental goal than merely having true beliefs. In such domains, the Preemption Thesis fails to capture what epistemic authority actually is, because the layperson S who disagrees with EA would not be willing to simply switch beliefs, adopt EA's, and improve his track record of true beliefs. What S wants is to enhance his understanding of some subject matter, that is, "grasping systematic connections among elements of a complex whole, or gaining insight into certain relations between items within a larger body of information" (Jäger 2015: 14).

Let us clarify the objection with an example: suppose I falsely believe that the recipe for tuna tartare requires that I cook the tuna in the oven for half an hour, but a chef, i.e. the epistemic authority for me here, tells me that I ought not to cook the tuna in the oven when preparing a tuna tartare. According to Zagzebski's account, once I conscientiously judge that the chef is more likely to get the truth than I am, I should just preempt my own reasons and adopt her belief. However, preempting would not give me any further understanding of the tuna tartare recipe, which is what I want to learn. I would expect an epistemic authority to improve my understanding by presenting further reasons in support of her belief. Merely knowing that I need not cook the tuna in the oven would not be of much help: acquiring more understanding would entail that I also learn, for instance, that tuna tartare is made with raw tuna, sliced into little strips or cubes, and served with different sauces or salads depending on the cook's preferences. This kind of expectation from an epistemic authority is something Zagzebski's theory does not explain, as she does not take a stand on whether her account of the authority of belief can also apply to understanding.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, Jäger argues that we should consider authorities in the epistemic realm those who are concerned with fostering S's understanding rather than merely providing him with true beliefs. This is what he calls a Socratic authority:

**Socratic authority (SA).** If someone is a Socratic authority for a subject in a given domain, he not only has a higher ratio of true to false beliefs in the domain than the subject does. He also displays superior methodological skills and insights which enable him properly to assess evidence, reasons, methods of thinking and investigation, and so on, and to communicate such insights to others. [...] A Socratic authority, in other words, serves not only as a source of

---

<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Zagzebski holds that understanding cannot be transmitted through testimony, as I will show in section 3.2. However, it might be argued that Zagzebski's theory of epistemic authority is in a position to account for the expectation that the chef explains the whole recipe to me, since EAs are, by definition, sensitive to S's needs. If so, then epistemic authorities à la Zagzebski have the potential to enhance S's understanding. In the next section, I will offer an argument for broadening Zagzebski's view in such a way that we can consider the notion of epistemic authority as including both authorities of belief and authorities of understanding. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me.

maximizing true beliefs at the object level, but also as a source of *understanding*. (Jäger 2015: 13)<sup>14</sup>

A comprehensive account of epistemic authority has to make room for Socratic authorities. The example of Socrates shows that the notion of epistemic authority not only serves as an efficient “litmus paper” for true beliefs, on Zagzebski’s view; it also ought to account for the epistemic guidance that authorities offer.<sup>15</sup> I will be accounting for the authority of understanding in the next section. Here, it is worth adding a final remark: it is wise to separate the negative part of Jäger’s project, that is undermining the Preemption Thesis, and its positive proposal that we define authority in the epistemic realm in terms of Socratic authority. For admitting SA as a fundamental level of epistemic authority, as in fact I do, does not commit us to accepting Jäger’s argument against the Preemption Thesis. Therefore, in what follows, I suggest that there are good reasons for both saving the Preemption Thesis and offering a theory of epistemic authority that is able to account for the authority of belief as well as for the authority of understanding.

### 3. GOING BEYOND ZAGZEBSKI AND JÄGER

This section outlines the critical side of my project, which sets the ground for the alternative account I will offer in section 4. First of all, I will argue that Zagzebski’s theory of epistemic authority could potentially explain how an authority can promote understanding, which is as much of a fundamental epistemic goal as having true beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Then, I will show that both Zagzebski and Jäger are wrong about preempting: on the one hand, Jäger demonstrates that there are several cases where Zagzebski’s Preemption Thesis does not explain what epistemic authority is. On the other hand, pace Jäger, there are particular circumstances in which preempting can still be the most rational option for a layperson. Finally, I will defend the claim that Socratic authority constitutes a special model of epistemic authority, rather than an alternative account of epistemic authority.

#### 3.1 The (unexpressed) potential of Zagzebski’s account

As anticipated, this section is devoted to defend the following claim:

---

<sup>14</sup> Some might think that Jäger’s definition of Socratic authority still has a too veritistic flavor. Following Kvanvig’s (2003) distinction between central and peripheral beliefs, we could argue that a Socratic authority need not have a higher ratio of true to false beliefs in the domain than the subject, provided the authority at least has a higher ratio or number of true *central* beliefs about the subject matter than the other individual. This remark sounds plausible to me. However, for the sake of simplicity I leave it aside here.

<sup>15</sup> See Lackey (2015) for a different perspective on authorities as advisors.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Carter and Gordon (2014), Kvanvig (2003: 202–203) and Pritchard (2009: 39–40).

*Claim 1.* There is no valid reason to limit an account of epistemic authority to the authority of belief; indeed, it can be expanded so as to include the authority of understanding.

Now, the notion of “understanding” is open to different interpretations. Here, following a recent but well-established tradition, I consider “understanding” in its “objectual” dimension, that is, as related to subject matters, theories, and bodies of information requiring explanation, rather than mere propositions (“propositional understanding”, Kvanvig 2009: 96).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, I take understanding to be an epistemic success that varies along three main dimensions: breadth, depth, and significance (see Elgin 2007). According to this perspective, a subject A has *broader* understanding of a subject matter  $x$  than S if A is able to imbed some true belief pertaining to  $x$  into a more comprehensive set of beliefs concerning  $x$ . Instead, A has a *deeper* understanding of  $x$  if her network of beliefs related to  $x$  is more tightly intertwined than S’s, that is “it contains more propositions, and/or more non-trivial inferential connections between propositions” (p. 36). Finally, A’s understanding of  $x$  is *more significant* than S’s if A grasps the relevance of the beliefs included in  $x$  better than S does; in other words, if A is in a better position to appreciate the significance of the truth, not merely to recognize that it is a truth (see p. 36).<sup>18, 19</sup>

Consider the following example:

HISTORY PROFESSOR CASE. Suppose a student S believes that George W. Bush sent US troops to Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, and that during a history class, the teacher says that Bush started fighting against Iraq also because Iraq possessed many oil wells.

Such an example of broader understanding, a very common one within education, clearly shows that the teacher’s considerations, which were in fact absent from S’s initial understanding of the issue, would improve his understanding of the reasons why the US attacked Iraq. Indeed, they allow him to figure out why starting that war was potentially profitable from an economic and financial point of view. Thus, the HISTORY PROFESSOR CASE clarifies why S can consider the professor an epistemic authority even though they share a true

---

<sup>17</sup> Such that understanding a proposition  $p$ , e.g. understanding that the notebook is broken, does not seem to differentiate too much from knowing that  $p$ . Rather, understanding a subject matter  $x$ , e.g. understanding meteorology, cannot be reduced to merely knowing some propositions (see Kvanvig 2009). On the propositional model of understanding, see also Grimm (2014: 330-ss). For a recent account of objectual understanding, see Carter and Gordon (2014).

<sup>18</sup> These features of understanding are not mutually exclusive: there may be cases where EA has both a broader and deeper, broader and more significant, or deeper and more significant understanding than S. Moreover, such features of understanding are not meant to present a complete account of understanding: further kinds of understanding might be found.

<sup>19</sup> I take this analysis of the notion of understanding to prevent the objection that “understanding a subject matter  $x$ ” is nothing other than “having more true beliefs pertaining to  $x$ ”. That is, I believe that Elgin and Kvanvig provide good reasons not to overlap these concepts. However, if someone considered such reasons to be merely instrumental, my account of epistemic authority would seem redundant – yet it would not be undermined.

belief – namely, that “George W. Bush sent US troops to Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein” – and they (partially) agree on the causes of the Iraq War.

For what makes the professor an authority for the student is not her having more true beliefs than him, but her possessing a broader understanding and sharing it with him. This is why she counts as an authority of understanding, rather than an authority of belief. Based on this example, we can introduce a thesis for the authority of understanding that parallels Zagzebski’s JAB1:

*Justification Thesis 1 for the Authority of Understanding (JAU1):*  
the authority of another person’s understanding of a subject matter  $x$  for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to gain a better understanding<sup>20</sup> of  $x$  if I believe what the authority believes than if I try to figure out what to believe myself.

This thesis expands Zagzebski’s account, since it suggests another way to establish that EA is an authority for S, i.e. showing that S’s chances of acquiring a better understanding of something increase if S trusts EA, instead of sticking to his own view.

### 3.2 Weakening but extending the Preemption Thesis

Claim 1 only concerns the way in which we can justify broadening the notion of epistemic authority so as to include the authority of understanding. Whether or not the Preemption Thesis works for the authority of understanding is a different matter, which I explore with the following consideration:

*Claim 2.* A more comprehensive account of epistemic authority, one that contemplates both the authority of belief and the authority of understanding, need not set aside the Preemption Thesis.

Claim 2 can be split into two different questions: (i) whether it is possible to maintain that the Preemption Thesis explains what epistemic authority is, and (ii) whether this thesis can apply to both the authority of belief and the authority of understanding. Jäger concedes that in several ordinary circumstances preempting is still the most rational thing to do.<sup>21</sup> Suppose I go to the doctor and ask for some cure for my cough, but she tells me that, instead, I need to cure my acid reflux, which is the real cause of the cough. In such a case, once I conscientiously judge that my doctor is an authority for me in this domain, it is rational to give up my belief and the epistemic reasons supporting it and preemptively adopt the doctor’s belief.

However, as discussed in sections 2.2 and 2.3, Jäger holds that preempting is irrational both when S has epistemic reasons regarding whether  $p$  is the case

---

<sup>20</sup> Where I intend “better understanding” to include at least one of the three dimensions of understanding just introduced.

<sup>21</sup> See Jäger (2015: 2).

and in those domains where understanding is a more important epistemic goal than acquiring true beliefs. I disagree with him on both claims. Concerning the former, I will argue that it is rational for S to let EA's reasons preempt his own both when S disagrees with EA and when they agree but EA's reasons include and exceed all the reasons S has for believing  $p$ . As for the latter, I will demonstrate that a refined version of the Preemption Thesis is compatible with the notion of the authority of understanding. Thus, I endorse positive answers (partially, at least) to both (i) and (ii).

Consider (i). I suggest that the best way out of the Zagzebski–Jäger debate is to conditionalize the Preemption Thesis on particular, yet not-too-narrow, circumstances:

*Preemption Thesis Weak for the Authority of Belief (PTW-B).*

There are circumstances in which the fact that an EA has a belief  $p$  is a reason for me to believe  $p$  that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing  $p$  and is not simply added to them.

Weakening Zagzebski's Preemption Thesis in this particular way restricts its applicability to specific situations, thereby achieving two important objectives: first, the thesis accounts for those ordinary cases in which preempting is the most rational option for S; and second, it allows for situations in which preempting may not be rational. We can distinguish (at least) two types of situations in which S must rationally let EA's reasons for belief preempt his own:

- (a) Cases of disagreement between S and EA.<sup>22</sup>
- (b) Cases of agreement between S and EA, where S is entitled to suppose that his reasons for believing  $p$  are included among EA's reasons.

This analysis of PTW-B accommodates instances of (a), such as the doctor case and the RED CARDINAL DISAGREEMENT CASE, and instances of (b) such as the RED CARDINAL AGREEMENT CASE. However, condition (b) does not settle the RED CARDINAL SISTER AGREEMENT CASE, where I am entitled to suppose that my sister is not sensitive to birds' sounds, and hence that aggregating her reasons with mine is more rational than just preempting.

Someone might object to (a), arguing that not every case of disagreement requires S to preempt his own reasons: indeed, there might well be situations in which EA gets something wrong and S should have held on to his original belief. It is important to notice though that such circumstances would call EA's status of epistemic authority into question, rather than S's rational commitment to

---

<sup>22</sup> Notice that here I only consider classical cases of non-peer disagreement, such as Goldman's novice/expert problem (2001). For the sake of simplicity, I do not take into account more complex cases of disagreement between experts, such as Goldman's novice/2-expert problem, where S has to face the judgment of two authorities who disagree with each other. See Jäger (2015) and Zagzebski (2015) for further considerations on this particular case.

preempting. Indeed, when you disagree with an EA on something, if you have conscientiously judged that she is an authority – that she is more likely to get the truth than you are – it is still rational for you to believe that you are more likely to be wrong than she is, and hence to adopt her belief.<sup>23</sup> However, if you find out that she is wrong (and you are correct), then you should start wondering whether it is still rational to consider her an epistemic authority, that is, whether adopting her belief maximizes your chances of getting the truth.<sup>24</sup>

Arnon Keren (2014b) offers an argument against the functioning of Zagzebski’s Preemption Thesis, which challenges condition (a). He recalls that Zagzebski’s justification of the rationality of preempting in cases of disagreement is grounded in Raz’s argument for practical authority. As Raz clearly shows, once S acknowledges that he is more likely to be wrong than the authority in some domain, endorsing the authority’s judgment makes S’s rate of mistakes decline and equal that of the authority. In contrast, when S disagrees with the authority and sticks to his own judgment, his rate of mistakes remains greater than that of the authority. From these considerations, Raz concludes that “only by allowing the authority’s judgment to preempt mine altogether will I succeed in improving my performance and bringing it to the level of the authority” (1988: 68).

Keren points out that the Razian argument is meant to explain preemption in cases of practical authority, where S has just two options – namely, doing an action *a* and not doing *a*. In contrast, in the epistemic case – relevant to Zagzebski – S has at least three options, namely “believing *p*”, “believing not-*p*”, and “suspending judgment”, and two epistemic goals, namely “forming a true belief” and “avoiding a false belief”. Given these elements, Keren argues that S’s suspending judgment “in at least some proportion of the cases” of disagreement between S and EA – instead of preempting – lowers S’s probability of error not only below that of S’s independent judgment, but also below that of EA (see 2014b: 74). If S has better scores than EA in avoiding falsehood by withholding judgment, then it is not the case that S will be more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false one if S lets EA’s judgment preempt his own. Thus, we should conclude with Keren that Zagzebski’s account of the rationality of preempting in cases of disagreement fails and hence that PTW-B should not apply to condition (a).

However, Keren’s argument is susceptible to criticism. Zagzebski (2014) acknowledges the importance of considering “withholding judgment” an available strategy for S, yet she replies that Keren’s objection loses its strength once we

---

<sup>23</sup> In fact, situations of peer disagreement differ from cases of non-peer disagreement in an important respect: the former might give S a *prima facie* reason to believe that the interlocutor is not an epistemic peer, whereas in the latter S still has a *prima facie* reason to defer to EA, i.e. the mere fact that she is an epistemic superior.

<sup>24</sup> As both Jäger and Zagzebski illustrate, there are cases in which authorities get things wrong, change their minds about something, or reveal themselves to be less authoritative than laypeople expect. Therefore, there is no reason why we should deny some sort of fallibilism on S’s part and grant the possibility of S’s re-considering EA’s status of epistemic authority.

show that if S has three options, EA should have three options too. In other words, if we concede that EA can suggest that S suspend judgment then preempting still assures the best track record in satisfying both epistemic goals, for it is rational for S to withhold judgment whenever EA says to do so.

Taking a different line of argument, I want to show that, despite its initial plausibility, Keren's strategy leads to unwelcome and counterintuitive results. Let us assume that in cases of disagreement between S and EA, EA is more likely to be right than wrong.<sup>25</sup> If so, then we can easily demonstrate that by withholding judgment S is more likely to fail to acquire true beliefs than to avoid false ones. Thus, it is more likely that suspending judgment will lead S to *not* reach the former goal than to reach the latter.

Although Keren is merely concerned with proving that suspension of belief lowers S's probability of error, he should not underestimate the (potential) loss of true beliefs that withholding judgment involves. For, assuming that forming true beliefs and avoiding false ones are equally relevant epistemic goals, as appears to be the case in Zagzebski's view, S's overall score with respect to the two goals considered together is lower when he suspends judgment than it is when he preemptively adopts EA's belief. In other words, withholding judgment leads S to obtain worse overall scores than he does by preempting. These results strike me as good reasons to avoid suspension of belief, especially because both Keren and Zagzebski postulate that the epistemic goals are equally relevant. Therefore, despite the technical soundness of his response to Zagzebski, Keren's strategy still looks implausible due to his underestimation of the costs of withholding judgment.

Now, let us examine (ii). Despite the examples supporting Jäger's argument against the Preemption Thesis, i.e. RED CARDINAL AGREEMENT CASE and RED CARDINAL SISTER AGREEMENT CASE, I think Jäger is wrong to claim that preempting is in itself incompatible with the authority of understanding. Consider the following example:

GRANDMOTHER FISH CASE. Suppose that a child truly believes that fish breathe, but that his belief is grounded in some fantasy theory that they just need to surface and breathe once per day, and that they do it at night, when nobody can notice and catch them. Suppose also that his grandmother, despite lacking any particular competence in zoology, gives him a more reasonable explanation for how fish breathe and that she persuades him.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> This assumption is in line with the very idea that EA is an epistemic authority for S. Conceding that EA "is much more likely to be mistaken" when she disagrees with S about p compared to cases on which they agree, as Keren does (2014b: 74), does not entail that EA should be more likely to be wrong than right as to whether p is the case. If that were the case, then it would seem unreasonable to consider EA as an authority in that domain.

<sup>26</sup> We do not even demand that she knows much about fish respiratory systems; it is merely required that her explanation better fits other true beliefs related to mammals, gills, personal experiences, or narratives about fish life, etc.

In such a case, the child is in a position to disregard his initial understanding of the fish respiratory system and to adopt his grandmother's, for he realizes that he is more likely to gain a better understanding of this subject if he trusts his grandmother than if he sticks to his own judgment, as suggested by JAU1.

However, to demonstrate that it is rational for S to let EA's understanding preempt his own, I first need to resist the objection that "understanding can't simply be given to another in the way knowledge can" (Gordon *forthcoming*: 6), that is, via testimony. Philosophers like Emma C. Gordon, Allison Hills, and Linda Zagzebski have already defended what Kenneth Boyd recently called the *Indirectness Thesis*, according to which "[t]estimony cannot be a direct source of understanding: at best, it can be an indirect source of understanding by laying the groundwork for potential understanding" (*forthcoming*: 3).<sup>27</sup>

Following Boyd, we can conceive the notion of understanding as consisting of two main components: the *informational* component and the *grasping* component. The former amounts to possessing the apt information we need for understanding a subject matter  $x$ ; hence it can easily be transmitted via testimony, as the teacher does when explaining the causes of the Iraq War to the student and as the grandmother does when she tells the child about how fish breathe. The latter component involves both the apt exercise of some intellectual ability on S's part and "the relationships between the thing understood and either the reasons that make that thing true or propositions that are related to it" (p. 20). Given that testimony does not convey epistemic virtues from the speaker to the hearer, it seems that one cannot acquire this grasping component through testimony, as stated by the Indirectness Thesis.

Nonetheless, Boyd claims that this thesis only applies to a specific kind of understanding, i.e. *difficult understanding* – that is, to cases requiring long-term effort and the exercise of many abilities, such as understanding the tiki-taka strategy in football or Navies-Stokes equations in fluid mechanics. Other kinds of understanding, i.e. *easy understanding* and *easy<sub>s</sub> understanding*, have more relaxed demands. Anyone possessing a general background familiarity with the subject matter at stake can achieve easy understanding simply "by making sense of" the interlocutor's utterances, as the student and the child can do in the aforementioned examples (see p. 29). On the other hand, *easy<sub>s</sub> understanding* works as easy understanding for a particular range of subjects who have specific background familiarity with a more complex issue and who have developed the necessary abilities to grasp the information they receive. For example, understanding the Gettier problem is a difficult challenge for a young philosophy student, yet it is definitely easier for a philosophy professor.

To demonstrate that one can achieve these kinds of understanding via testimony, Boyd argues that satisfying their grasping component does not demand too much effort from the subject, since making sense of the testimony itself suffices to allow one to grasp the relationships between bodies of information. Thus, even though the grasping component, technically speaking,

---

<sup>27</sup> See also Hills (2009) and Zagzebski (2008: 145).

does not transmit from one person to another it is still true that the mere fact that one conveys her understanding via testimony suffices to let the hearer acquire that understanding. For making sense of the speaker's utterances entails fulfilling both the informational and the grasping component at once. Therefore, we can conclude that, pace Gordon, easy understanding and  $\text{easy}_s$  understanding can be given to another as knowledge can, that is, via testimony.

Furthermore, easy understanding and  $\text{easy}_s$  understanding allow for preemption. Preemptive transmission of understanding between EA and S requires S to disregard whatever understanding of a subject matter  $x$  he possesses and adopt EA's understanding of  $x$  without considering her testimony as evidence to weigh against his own. Boyd's analysis explains why preempting understanding is possible, as acquiring easy understanding and  $\text{easy}_s$  understanding by making sense of another's words does not require the cognitive effort and the exercise of intellectual abilities that weighing evidence demands.

Some might want to resist the idea that it is possible to preempt understanding by arguing that understanding does not satisfy Jäger's account of preemption in terms of *proper basing*.<sup>28</sup> According to Jäger, preemption demands that "the authority's belief should typically constitute a reason *for which* one adopts" her belief (2015: 9). In the case of understanding, holding that the authority's understanding of  $x$  constitutes a reason for which one adopts her understanding of  $x$  seems (at best) unclear. For adopting another's understanding always requires that I grasp the inner relationships between the various parts of her testimony as well as the relationship between the testimony itself and my background knowledge concerning  $x$ .

However, Boyd's distinction between the two components of understanding suggests a way to accommodate this worry and to argue that Jäger's proper basing account explains preemption in the case of understanding as well. We should not be surprised that proper basing does not apply to the grasping component, as we have already shown that this component cannot be transmitted from one person to another. In contrast, this account does apply to the informational component: the epistemic reason *for which* S accepts the information conveyed by the authority via testimony – and therefore satisfy the informational component – is exactly the fact that it is EA's testimony of her understanding. Thus, we can account for preempting understanding in terms of proper basing, as the communicable component of understanding satisfies Jäger's requirements.

Before moving to the analysis of the circumstances in which preempting EA's understanding is rational for S, I think it is worth mentioning one more point about the role of the authority of understanding. Letting another's understanding preempt my own is possible only if the interlocutor is able to convey her understanding (or some portion of her understanding) in such a way that I can grasp the relevant relationships between bodies of information simply

---

<sup>28</sup> Jäger defines proper basing as follows: "S's (graded) belief B is properly based on a given ground (or set of grounds) G iff (i) G is the ground for which S holds B and (ii) S has a true and rational belief to the effect that G sufficiently supports B" (2015: 9).

by making sense of her utterances – as both easy understanding and easy<sub>s</sub> understanding demand. Such a condition casts light on a specific ability that authorities of understanding need to display: namely, sensitivity to S’s epistemic resources. I will say more about the authority’s virtues in section 4.

Now it is possible to introduce a version of PTW and clarify how preempting works in cases of the authority of understanding as follows:

*Preemption Thesis Weak for the Authority of Understanding (PTW-U).*

There are circumstances in which the fact that an EA has some understanding of a subject matter  $x$  is a reason for me to accept her understanding of  $x$  that replaces my previous understanding of  $x$  and is not simply added to it.

The two main circumstances in which PTW-B justifies S’s preemptively adopting EA’s beliefs apply to PTW-U as well. When S disagrees with EA about  $x$ , that is, condition (a), preempting may well be the most rational option for him, as in the GRANDMOTHER FISH CASE, where the grandmother clearly has a broader, deeper, and more significant understanding than the child. Moreover, we can imagine that the grandmother has developed the necessary sensitivity to her grandson’s epistemic resources such that she is able to convey to him an easy understanding of how fish breathe.

Someone might object that there are cases of disagreement in which preempting is not rational, since EA is wrong and S is right. As in PTB-W, similar cases threaten EA’s status of authority, not the rationality of preempting. Preempting understanding is rational insofar as EA’s understanding of  $x$  fares better than S’s understanding of  $x$  on at least one of the three dimensions of understanding – i.e. breadth, depth, and significance – without faring worse on any of them.

This rule applies to condition (b) as well: when EA’s understanding of some subject matter  $x$  is just broader, deeper, or more significant than S’s, and hence the informational component of EA’s understanding of  $x$  already includes all the information about  $x$  that S possesses, it is rational for S to preempt. This is what happens in the HISTORY PROFESSOR CASE, where the teacher’s broader understanding of the Iraq War includes the student’s explanation for the US military intervention in Iraq but places it within a more comprehensive story of the causes of conflict. Therefore, both JAU1 and PTW-U apply to the HISTORY PROFESSOR CASE, for it is rational for the student to disregard his previous understanding and preemptively adopt the teacher’s.

However, as condition (b) of PTW-B is not in a position to account for the RED CARDINAL SISTER AGREEMENT CASE, there are also cases where S’s understanding is not completely included within EA’s. Consider the following example:

PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR CASE. Suppose that I acquire, through intensive study, some understanding  $U$  of the traditional dichotomy between reductionism and non-reductionism in the epistemology of testimony ( $x$ ). Suppose also that my professor has a broader understanding of  $x$  ( $U^I$ ), as she has an explanation for how recent hybrid theories intend to overcome both traditional views, yet not a deeper and more significant one, since my research on reductionism and non-reductionism has been extremely thorough.

In situations like the PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR CASE, even if it were possible to preempt, it would still not be rational. Indeed, since acquiring  $U^I$  via preemption entails that my own understanding of  $x$  ( $U$ ) “stops operating” (Jäger 2015: 9), by doing so I would be acquiring an understanding of the relationships between the traditional views and hybrid theories from the professor without grounding this new information on the more detailed story of  $x$  that I already possess. Suppose JAU1 still applies to the PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR CASE insofar as I acknowledge that the professor has a broader understanding  $U^I$  than I have and I judge that it is more likely that I gain a better understanding of  $x$  if I believe what the professor believes. In this case, it would still be wise not to preempt, because basing the new information about hybrid theories of testimony provided by the professor on my deeper and more significant understanding of  $x$  would allow me to establish more robust explanatory relationships between traditional views and hybrid theories than the ones I would acquire if I let the professor’s understanding preempt mine. Therefore, PTW-U does not apply to the PHILOSOPHY PROFESSOR CASE.

To summarize, Claim 2 allowed me to defend a weak form of the Preemption Thesis, that is, to conditionalize the application of this thesis upon specific circumstances in which preempting is still the most rational thing to do for S, both in cases of the authority of belief and in cases of the authority of understanding.

### 3.3 The limits of Jäger’s account

A final point against Jäger’s account of epistemic authority can be found in Claim 3:

*Claim 3:* Socratic authority (SA) should represent a special case of authority, rather than an alternative account of authority.

The argument in support of Claim 3 is quite straightforward. What Jäger has in mind when he offers his alternative account of epistemic authority is Socrates’ maieutic ability. This ability is such that Socrates does not tell anyone that such and such is the case: he merely asks questions that guide interlocutors to understand things for themselves. Hence, Socrates’ questions provide people with reasons to expand their understanding in a very *indirect* way. On the one

hand, Socrates' method rightly places him and those who adopt the maieutic method among the authorities of understanding. But on the other hand, his higher ratio of true to false beliefs than the interlocutor *plus* his ability to recognize false beliefs within the corpus of the interlocutor's beliefs should make him an authority of belief as well.<sup>29</sup> The fact that SA has this twofold authoritative role for the layperson justifies considering it a special case of authority. Indeed, Jäger's view illustrates a specific, *viz.* indirect, way in which someone can fulfil what I take to be the general scope of epistemic authority, that is, responding to S's various epistemic needs.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to define epistemic authority merely in terms of Socratic authority, for two main reasons: first, Jäger's account rules out authorities of understanding that lack maieutic ability and therefore guide laypeople in a more direct way, e.g. the grandmother who straightforwardly presents the child with a better explanatory story of how fish breathe, rather than leading him to work out that his understanding is wrong through critical questions. Second, it is insensitive to any distinction between authorities of belief and mere experts, neither of which is considered an epistemic authority on his view. Thus, Jäger's account severely restricts the opportunities for a layperson to defer to an epistemic authority.

Some might believe that this consequence of Jäger's view is unproblematic for the agenda of social epistemology. For even if experts and authorities who lack maieutic ability do not fulfil his account of authority, we can still acquire testimonial knowledge from them. Notice, though, that this reply is flawed. Many epistemologists concede that someone's testimony provides the hearer with weighing reasons. Furthermore, Jäger holds that this view may well apply to the interaction between the authority and the layperson. However, the weighing-model of epistemic authority differs from testimonial exchanges among epistemic peers in an important respect. According to this model, it is precisely the fact that I acknowledge my interlocutor's epistemic authority that explains why EA's testimony that p provides me with a stronger reason to believe that p than the one I would acquire from an epistemic peer's testimony that p.

Thus, if we follow Jäger and deny experts and authorities who lack maieutic ability the status of epistemic authorities, it is doubtful whether an expert's testimony that p provides us with the strong reason to believe p that we expect to possess whenever we deal with such epistemically superior subjects. This is bad news for social epistemologists aiming at explaining the value of our dependence on epistemic authorities, because Jäger's view fails to appreciate an important epistemic advantage to deferring to authorities, rather than to epistemic peers. Thus, unless Jäger offers us better reasons for endorsing this restrictive view, we can conclude that Socratic authority cannot represent a plausible account of epistemic authority; rather, it constitutes a special kind of authority.

---

<sup>29</sup> See section 4 for further clarifications on Socratic authority.

We can draw further evidence for this conclusion from considerations about the Preemption Thesis. Jäger does not account for any authority whose exercise entails issuing preemptive reasons to the interlocutor. But if the reasons I offered in support of PTW-B and PTW-U are compelling, then Jäger owes us an argument for rejecting the idea that in specific circumstances epistemic authorities can provide the interlocutor with preemptive reasons. Furthermore, no version of the Preemption Thesis can work for Socratic authorities. To understand why, consider the following case, involving the grandmother and her grandson again:

GRANDMOTHER BOAT CASE. Suppose the inquiring child notices a huge yacht moored in the harbor and forms the incorrect belief that boats float because fish hold them up once they see their shadow. This time, the grandmother wants to let the child correct his opinion by himself. Hence, she asks him how many fish are holding up the yacht and he replies that there must be hundreds of medium-size fish below it. Then the grandmother asks: “But why are there no fishermen trying to catch them all?” Now, her grandson is confused and unsure of what to believe. So to help him, she asks whether fish also hold him up when he lies down in the water. He rightly replies: “No, I don’t see fish around me when I am swimming. It’s just the water that makes me float!” Thus, the child now believes that his original explanation was wrong and that a better explanation does not involve fish holding up objects to make them float in water.

This example shows how the interaction between a SA and a layperson might work. Indeed, the grandmother does not use her authority to present the child with a better understanding; rather she challenges him with critical questions so as to lead him to reassess his own judgment. It seems evident that Socratic authority leaves no room for preempting: if SA cares about a layperson’s intellectual development and limits herself to putting S in a better position to improve his understanding by himself, then she does not give any true and clear-cut testimony of her understanding that S might preemptively adopt. Therefore, we can conclude that SA should be merely conceived as a special subset of epistemic authority including both the authority of belief and the authority of understanding.

As a final remark, notice that there may be cases of Socratic authority that violate Zagzebski’s assumption that an epistemically conscientious S needs to acknowledge the interlocutor’s authority over him. In other words, it is not necessary in the case of Socratic authority that S possesses a reason to believe that SA is more likely to have a true belief or a better understanding than S is. This violation is legitimate because the maieutic method does not require that S defer to SA, neither by preempting nor by weighing the reasons provided via testimony. Rather, S enhances his understanding simply by reflecting on the interlocutor’s questions.

The discussion of the three claims introduced in this section has set the ground for the broader theory of epistemic authority I will develop in section 4. Claim 1 provided reasons for broadening Zagzebski's account so as to elicit S's appeal to an authority to expand his understanding of some subject matter. Claim 2 explained why it is wise to maintain a weak version of the Preemption Thesis (i.e. PTW-B) and to admit that it also applies to the authority of understanding (i.e. PTW-U). Finally, Claim 3 made clear that a comprehensive account of epistemic authority ought to define Jäger's Socratic authority merely as a special case of authority of both belief and understanding.

#### 4. OUTLINING AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY.

The alternative account I endorse is based on three fundamental dimensions of authority in the epistemic realm: the expert, the authority of belief, and the authority of understanding. In order to cash out the differences among these notions and develop a fine-grained framework for classifying epistemic authorities, I suggest distinguishing between:

*Expert-oriented abilities:* virtues that allow an expert or authority to exploit their fund of knowledge to find and face new problems in their field of expertise (e.g. intellectual curiosity, intellectual creativity, open-mindedness, intellectual courage, firmness, autonomy, etc.); and

*Novice-oriented abilities:* virtues that allow an expert or authority to properly address a layperson's epistemic dependency on them (e.g. sensitivity to S's needs, intellectual generosity, intellectual empathy, sensitivity to S's epistemic resources ... maieutic ability).

Assuming this classification, I propose the following criterion for discriminating among different kinds of authority:

*Classification Criterion for Epistemic Authority (CCEA).* In order for one to be an expert, one is required to display expert-oriented abilities; whereas, in order for one to be an epistemic authority (whether an authority of belief or an authority of understanding), one is required to display novice-oriented abilities.

Both the ability requirements and the criterion I am endorsing here need some clarification. Notice, first of all, that my definition of expert-oriented abilities easily fits Goldman's account of the expert (see section 1), for it merely points to essential virtues that were not explicitly mentioned in his definition. Thus, introducing a condition pertaining to the expert's abilities provides a supporting explanation for condition (b) for being an *Expert*, as defined in section 1.

Second, the list of novice-oriented abilities goes from the easiest virtue to display, i.e. sensitivity to S's needs, to the hardest virtue to display, i.e. maieutic ability. This order of the novice-oriented abilities casts more light on the limits of Jäger's view, as he is committed to denying that those who lack maieutic ability can be epistemic authorities, despite their displaying (or not displaying) other novice-oriented abilities.

Third, sensitivity to S's needs plays a fundamental role within this framework because it allows EA to acknowledge S's dependency on her and to properly address his specific demand in a given situation. Someone like Ivory Tower, who lacks this novice-oriented ability that operates only within a relationship between two (or more) subjects, cannot be EA for the interlocutor. However, CCEA allows us to consider her an expert insofar as she possesses a sufficient degree of expert-oriented abilities, which are not necessary features of epistemic authorities.<sup>30</sup>

Fourth, in order to determine whether EA counts as an authority of understanding for S rather than as a mere authority of belief, we should ask whether or not the sensitivity to S's needs activates further novice-oriented abilities possessed by EA. Indeed, it is plausible to suppose that an authority of understanding, who aims at providing better service to S than merely providing him with true beliefs, needs to display a broad range of intellectual virtues. In other words, the more someone is willing to help S to settle the matter by himself, the more she moves toward the authority of understanding set on the spectrum of epistemic authority.

Finally, since both definitions concern virtues, that is, dispositions that a subject acquires and develops by degrees, it should not be surprising that CCEA can only offer thick conditions that work as cues for distinguishing among different kinds of epistemic authority rather than a direct discriminating formula.

CCEA and the clarificatory remarks just offered allows us to refine the three central notions of the alternative account of epistemic authority as follows:

*Expert.* A subject A is an expert in domain D (for a subject S) iff:

- (1) A has more accurate information than the majority of people do in D;
- (2) A possesses *expert-oriented abilities*.

*Authority of belief (AofB).* A subject A is an AofB in domain D for a subject S iff:

- (1) A is more conscientious than S – who considers her to be an EA – in D;
- (2) A possesses and makes use of *sensitivity to S's needs*.

---

<sup>30</sup> Notice here that I am still pointing to the subject-independent dimension of expertise (see section 1). In order for someone to have more expertise than I do in some domain (i.e. subject-dependent notion of expert), it is not necessary that they display high-level of expert-oriented abilities. All that matters is that they have more accurate information than I have in that domain, as held by Coady (2012).

*Authority of understanding (AofU).* A subject A is an AofU in domain D for a subject S iff:

- (1) A is more conscientious than S – who considers her to be an EA – in D;
- (2) A possesses and makes extensive use of *novice-oriented abilities*.

An interesting advantage of this framework is that it is compatible with the idea that there may be mixed cases of authority, such as the ornithologist who satisfies the requirements for being both an expert and an AofB and the professor who can be legitimately considered an expert and an AofU.

Some might wonder why I have not yet placed Jäger’s notion of Socratic authority in my framework. This is because to find the most apt position for it, we need to know whether he considers SAs to be not only AofU, but also experts according to the subject-independent dimension of expertise.<sup>31</sup> If the latter, then we might want to claim that SAs represent the ideal sub-set of epistemic authority, one that fulfils all the requirements of the three notions above. If the former, we could simply consider SAs as both AofB and AofU, as they have both a “higher ratio of true to false beliefs in the domain than the subject does”<sup>32</sup> and novice-oriented abilities, maieutic ability included.

It is worth adding a final remark here: I take it that the ideal exemplar of epistemic authority has to display a further virtue, namely that of *wisdom*. Wisdom is the supreme ability possessed by those who recognize when it is better to directly settle the matter for S or to guide him in a more sophisticated manner by using maieutic techniques and further virtues.<sup>33</sup> It seems that an epistemic authority who is able to adopt both stances towards the layperson is epistemically superior even to Socratic authorities that always prevent themselves from settling the matter for S, since there might be cases in which doing so is more epistemically beneficial to S than just fostering his understanding. The GRANDMOTHER BOAT CASE and the GRANDMOTHER FISH CASE, taken together, feature an exemplar of epistemic authority (i.e. the grandmother) that is able to switch her attitude toward the layperson (i.e. her grandson) in such a way that she exemplifies the virtue of wisdom. Therefore, the ideal model of epistemic authority might be defined as follows:

*Supreme Epistemic Authority (SEA).* A subject A is a SEA (for a subject S) iff

- (1) A has more accurate information than the majority of people do in D;
- (2) A possesses and makes extensive use of *expert-oriented abilities*;

---

<sup>31</sup> Notice that SA’s having a higher ratio of true to false beliefs in a given domain than S merely allows us to consider her an authority of belief. In order for SA to be an expert as well, Jäger should define SA as having a higher ratio of true to false beliefs in a given domain than *most people do*.

<sup>32</sup> See section 2.3 for Jäger’s definition of SA.

<sup>33</sup> For further clarifications on wisdom and its various forms see, for instance, Ryan (2011), Whitcomb (2010), Zagzebski (1996).

- (3) A possesses and makes extensive use of *novice-oriented abilities*;
- (4) A possesses and makes use of *wisdom*.

## CONCLUSION

This paper pursued a twofold aim. In the critical side of the paper, I offered a strategy to broaden Zagzebski's theory of epistemic authority in such a way that it can account for the authority of understanding, but I also argued that both Zagzebski and Jäger's accounts are affected by serious problems concerning the application of the Preemption Thesis. Furthermore, I put forth compelling reasons to reject Jäger's view, in that it reduces epistemic authority to mere Socratic exemplars, hence overlapping and underestimating the notions of an expert and of an authority of belief. In the constructive side of the paper, I endorsed an alternative account of epistemic authority by pointing out the intellectual virtues that each kind of authority is required to display. This virtue-based theory of authority is beneficial in three main ways: first, it overcomes several weaknesses in Jäger and Zagzebski's views; second, it yields a comprehensive and fine-grained framework that is in a position to account for many subtle differences among exemplars of epistemic authority; and finally, it vindicates the importance of distinguishing between the notion of an expert and that of authority in the epistemic realm.

## References

- Boyd, K. Forthcoming. "Testifying Understanding." *Episteme*. Available at CJO 2015. doi:10.1017/epi.2015.53.
- Carter, J. A. and Gordon, E. 2014. "Objectual Understanding and the Value Problem." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 51: 1–13.
- Christiano, T. 2012. "Authority." In E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authority/>>.
- Coady, D. 2012. *What To Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Elgin, C. 2007. "Understanding and the facts." *Philosophical Studies*, 132: 33–42.
- Feldman, R. 2006. "Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement." In S. Hetherington (ed.), *Epistemology Futures*, pp. 216–236. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fuller, S. 1986. *Social Epistemology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Goldman, A. 2001. "Experts: Which One Should You Trust?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63: 85–110.
- Gordon, E. Forthcoming. "Social Epistemology and the Acquisition of Understanding." In S. Grimm, C. Baumberger, S. Ammon (eds.), *Explaining*

- Understanding: New Perspectives from Epistemology and the Philosophy of Science*. New York: Routledge.
- Grimm, S. 2014. "Understanding as Knowledge of Causes." In A. Fairweather (ed.), *Virtue Epistemology Naturalized: Bridges Between Virtue Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, pp. 329–345. New York: Springer.
- Hardwig, J. 1985. "Epistemic Dependence." *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82: 335–349.
- Hills, A. 2009. "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology." *Ethics*, 120: 94–127.
- Jäger, C. 2015. "Epistemic Authority, Preemptive Reasons, and Understanding." *Episteme*. Available at CJO 2015 doi:10.1017/epi.2015.38.
- Keren, A. 2014a. "Trust and Belief: A Preemptive Reasons Account." *Synthese*, 191: 2593–2615.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2014b. "Zagzebski on Authority and Pre-emption in the Domain of Belief." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6: 61–76.
- Kvanvig, J. 2003. *The Value of Knowledge and the Pursuit of Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2009. "The Value of Understanding." In A. Haddock, A. Millar, and D. Pritchard (eds.), *Epistemic Value*, pp. 95–111. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lackey, J. 2015. "Experts and Disagreement." Unpublished manuscript.
- Pritchard, D. 2009. "Knowledge, Understanding and Epistemic Value." *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*, 64: 19–43.
- Raz, J. 1979. *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 1988. *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2006. "The Problem of Authority: Revisiting the Service Conception." *Minnesota Law Review*, 90: 1003–1044.
- Ryan, S. 2011. "Wisdom, Knowledge, and Rationality." *Acta Analytica*, 27: 99–112.
- Whitcomb, D. 2010. "Wisdom." In S. Bernecker and D. Pritchard (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, pp. 95–105. London: Routledge.
- Zagzebski, L. 1996. *Virtues of the Mind*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2008. *On Epistemology*. Belmont: Wadsworth.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2012. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2014. "Epistemic Authority and Its Critics." *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6: 169–187.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2015. "Replies to Christoph Jäger and Elizabeth Fricker." *Episteme*. Available at CJO 2015 doi:10.1017/epi.2015.39.