

IS THE FACT THAT OTHER PEOPLE BELIEVE IN GOD A REASON TO BELIEVE? REMARKS ON THE CONSENSUS GENTIUM ARGUMENT

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Abstract. According to *The Consensus Gentium Argument* from the premise: “Everyone believes that God exists” one can conclude that God does exist. In my paper I analyze two ways of defending the claim that somebody’s belief in God is a *prima facie* reason to believe. Kelly takes the fact of the commonness of the belief in God as a datum to explain and argues that the best explanation has to indicate the truthfulness of the theistic belief. Trinkaus Zagzebski grounds her defence on rationality of epistemic trust in others. In the paper I argue that the second line of reasoning is more promising and I propose its improved version.

INTRODUCTION

According to the *consensus gentium* argument (I shall use the term as tantamount to the term “common consent argument”), one can conclude from the premise: (P) “Everybody believes that p” that: (C) “p”. The argument was rejected in modern philosophy¹ and is now considered to be false, simply because the actual distribution of opinions about facts does not necessarily reflect them, as we have been convinced many times over in the history of science. Philosophers in particular dislike the common consent argument, which is easy to understand given the fact that most of them consider the attitude of contesting popular opinions and following only the reason’s lead and one’s own experience as the essential part of their morale.

Historically, the common consent argument was used in the context of the debate on theism². Nowadays, however, one refers to the popularity of an opinion as an indication of its truth value in various, different contexts; for example, in 2013 the Australian scholars John Cook, Dana Nuticelli and others analysed 11 994 papers on climate change and on the causes of global warming published in scientific reviews. It turned out that 97% of the analysed texts were in favour of the hypothesis that global warming is indeed taking place and very likely because of human activities³. This research has often been cited as proof for the claim that human activities are the primary driver of climate change⁴. At least it puts the adversary in the inconvenient position of someone who is immune to scientific evidence. In this case the

1 This rejection was closely connected with the fall of nativism. The proponents of the *consensus gentium* argument believed that the universality of theism is best explained by the fact that we are born equipped with the concept of God, and we are born with it because God Himself equipped us with this concept (Cf. Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, ed. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 268 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1933), I, 17).

2 Cf.: “Here, then, you see the foundation of this question clearly laid; for since it is the constant and universal opinion of mankind, independent of education, custom, or law, that there are Gods, it must necessarily follow that this knowledge is implanted in our minds, or, rather, innate in us. That opinion respecting which there is a general agreement in universal nature must infallibly be true; therefore it must be allowed that there are Gods; for in this we have the concurrence, not only of almost all philosophers, but likewise of the ignorant and illiterate” (ibid.).

3 John Cook et al., “Quantifying the Consensus on Anthropogenic Global Warming in the Scientific Literature”, *Environmental Research Letters* 8, no. 2 (2013).

4 The President of the United States, Barack Obama, referred to the research on his Twitter account on 16 May 2013 (<https://twitter.com/barackobama/status/335089477296988160>).

argument that could ridicule some people as ignorant and obscurantist takes the form of the common consent argument. One concludes from the premise (P1): “Every scholar working on climate change believes that human activities are the primary driver of global warming” that (C1): “Human activities are the primary driver of global warming”.

The above example shows that although philosophers almost univocally rejected the common consent argument as not valid, it is still functioning in the public debate. Psychologically, we understand why it gives a solid ground for many opinions, but does it also give the epistemic justification for views that are commonly held? Is the argument mere sophistry? Could the general agreement of many people with respect to a hypothesis make it at least rationally justified to hold the hypothesis in question?

The theistic proponents of the common consent argument are aware that universal agreement in the belief in God does not entail the truthfulness of theism. Nonetheless, they hope to show that it provides an inductively strong argument in its favour, even though it could be outweighed by other pieces of evidence or other experiences. In the paper I shall critically analyse two ways of defending the *consensus gentium* argument with respect to the belief in God’s existence. First, I shall take a closer look at the interpretation that takes the argument as the inference to the best explanation. According to Thomas Kelly, no explanation of the convergence of opinions “that fails to mention the truth of p [the conclusion of the argument] is as good as some potential explanation that does invoke the truth of p”⁵. In my opinion, however, most questionable in Kelly’s interpretation is the understanding of the premise of the argument, and I shall elaborate my criticism later in the text. In the second part of the paper I shall analyse the interpretation of the common consent argument that is based on the general principle of epistemic trust in others. I shall discuss the principle defended by Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski and in the last part of the paper I shall propose an improved version of Zagzebski’s argument based on the principle of reflective, epistemic trust in others which, as I claim, avoids problems that make Zagzebski’s reasoning susceptible to criticism.

THOMAS KELLY’S WAY TO DEFEND THE COMMON CONSENT ARGUMENT

According to Thomas Kelly, the common consent argument with respect to the existence of God reads as follows: (P2) “Everyone believes that God exists”, therefore (C2) “God exists”⁶. It is clear that an argument in this form is logically invalid. One can imagine a possible world crowded with believers and yet a world where there is no God. Atheists claim that this is indeed the case in the actual world. Could one nevertheless say that the implication $P2 \rightarrow C2$ is an example of good inductive reasoning, in which P2 renders C2 most likely true? This is certainly what Kelly thinks. In order to defend the claim, he has to argue in favour of:

- (a) The truthfulness of P2
- (b) The claim that there is no better explanation of P2 than C2. In other words, in his view only the existence of God can explain the popularity of the belief in God. One cannot offer a more satisfying explanation to the fact that at different times, places and cultures, people were united in the conviction that there is a God.

If these two conditions were fulfilled, then indeed the common consent argument would be good inductive reasoning giving us strong evidence in favour of theism. Kelly points out that once we reject nativism with respect to concepts, we cannot resort to some kind of naturalistic and evolutionary explanation for religious beliefs. It would be difficult to explain why people coming from different times, continents and cultures, people of different education, age, gender, etc., acquired and acquire during their lives the same

5 Thomas Kelly, “Consensus Gentium: Reflections on the ‘Common Consent’ Argument for the Existence of God”, in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, ed. Kelly J. Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon (OUP, 2011), 143.

6 Kelly, “Consensus Gentium”, 135.

theistic belief without referring to the fact that the belief is true⁷. This would demand a theory that would have to explain why we are constantly prone to the same fallacy, and Kelly suspects that every such theory, although it “drains the support” for a theistic explanation, nonetheless appears less probable than the one that assumes the truthfulness of C2⁸. Imagine students passing an exam independently and separately, in which everyone gives the same answer to the same question. What would be a better explanation of this fact than acknowledging that the answer is simply true? If the analogy holds, then Kelly is right in his defence of the common consent argument. However, I shall argue that condition (a) is fulfilled only in a specific way that is irrelevant to the argument, and that because of it condition (b) is not met.

WHAT ONE SHOULD MAKE OF THE FACT OF THE POPULARITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS?

Kelly stresses the fact that under the inductive interpretation of the common consent argument it is sufficient that the belief in God is a dominant opinion in a group of people⁹. If it is, it still demands an explanation, and it still may be the case that the most coherent answer is that the opinion is simply true. One could also successfully argue that theism is still a dominant opinion among people, but it seems to me that Kelly does not face the fact that P2 demands something more than a verbal agreement among people that C2 is true. In order for P2 to give strong support for the belief in God's existence, C2 additionally needs to be understood and experienced in a similar way. Otherwise, it gives no evidence for theists. In other words, the diversity of beliefs about the reference of the name “God” matters for the common consent argument. Kelly claims that one has to give an explanation to the datum, which is the convergence of opinions among believers. But how exactly do these opinions converge? For example, Cicero, one of the most prominent philosophical proponents of the *consensus gentium* argument, was convinced that everyone believes that there are Gods. Thomas Kelly, on the other hand, thinks that everyone believes that there is one God. Cicero thought that these Gods have a human form — something like a body¹⁰ — Kelly thinks that God is immaterial. People believed and believe in God by believing in Yahweh, Vishnu, Allah, Shiva, Jesus, etc. What do these beliefs have in common? Do they all confirm the existence of a necessary being who created the world and who is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and so forth, i.e. a God of classical theism? It seems that one needs an additional clarification that would exceed the scope of the argument by far; a clarification that does not take the convergence of opinions for granted.

Some authors try to give that extra support for the datum and they tend to downplay the importance of the conflicting truth-claims of different faiths. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski writes:

The people of the world give different descriptions of the object glimpsed, but they agree that there is a genuine glimpse of something important. Perhaps the vagueness of the idea of God makes the consensus gentium argument uninteresting to some people, but I agree with Aristotle that even a half a glimpse of the profound is more valuable than a complete view of lesser things.¹¹

John Hick in a similar way claims:

Every conception of the divine which has come out of a great revelatory religious experience and has been tested through a long tradition of worship, and has sustained human faith over centuries of time and in millions of lives, is likely to represent a genuine encounter with the divine reality.¹²

In other words, both authors claim that, although believers differ in their descriptions of faiths, they certainly refer to the same thing, or they have formed their beliefs based on the experience of the same thing. It would seem that a defender of the common consent argument as the inference to the best explanation would have to additionally argue in favour of some kind of religious pluralism or of a theory

7 Kelly, “Consensus Gentium”, 147.

8 Ibid., 148.

9 Ibid., 146.

10 Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, I, 18.

11 Linda T. Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority* (OUP, 2012), 188.

12 John H. Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (Oneworld, 1993 [1973]), 141.

similar to Karl Rahner's theory of anonymous Christianity¹³. These theories seem to be dubious, i.e. they neglect the possibility that people worship false gods or commit idolatry in their religious practices, and if this possibility is in fact the case, then one cannot say that everybody believes in God. In order to show this, let us invoke Wittgenstein's famous "beetle in a box" example¹⁴ and adapt it to the discussion about the common consent argument. Wittgenstein imagined a situation where everyone had a box with something that everybody believed was a beetle (additionally, one could look only into one's box, and everyone knew that he or she had a beetle only by looking into his or her own box). Although one could say that the proposition: "Everyone believes that there is a beetle in a box" is true, it could, however, turn out that some people had something else than a beetle in their boxes or even that in some cases the boxes were empty. Arguing in this case that the universality of beliefs about beetles in boxes could be explained only in relation to the existence of beetles in boxes would sound peculiar. Similarly, one can say that the proposition: "Everybody [or precisely speaking: A strong supermajority of the world's population] believes that God exists" is true, nonetheless, understanding of the notion of God could reveal such great discrepancies (up to the point of ascribing contradictory features to the notion) that it deprives the *consensus gentium* argument of its psychological strength, not to mention epistemic reliability. There could be no connection between the fact of the existence of God and the many beliefs people have about God.

WHAT IS THE BEST EXPLANATION FOR THE UNIVERSALITY OF RELIGION?

I argued in the last section that although one could defend the truthfulness of P2, it is irrelevant with respect to the common consent argument. Let us consider another argument in favour of my claim. First, one could notice that P2 is in fact defensible only when interpreted as tantamount to the observation that everyone is religious. If thinkers that entertain the idea of being religious without actually believing in God are right¹⁵, or if thinkers that entertain the idea that the true faith is directly opposed to religion (in other words that religion traps people in idolatry; that religion is unbelief, "the attempted replacement of divine work by a human manufacture"¹⁶) are right, then we see the lack of a connection content-wise between the premise and the conclusion of the *consensus gentium* argument. Let us remember that Kelly argues that since nobody comes to the world with a theistic belief, then one has to give a plausible explanation as to why it is that large numbers of people acquire and sustain such a belief during their lives. In his opinion, the rejection of nativism rules out all the evolutionary explanations. When we ask why large numbers of people arrived at the same belief, e.g. that the Earth travels around the sun, the hypothesis that pertains to the truth of the belief suggests itself, and the hypothesis referring to the theory of evolution or to our biologic predisposition seems less probable¹⁷.

13 Karl Rahner famously made the distinction between what is believed by a person explicitly and what is believed unconsciously or anonymously (Cf. Karl Rahner, "Anonymer und expliziter Glaube." In *Theologie aus Erfahrung des Geistes* (Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benzinger Verlag, 1975)). On the basis of this distinction one could argue that although people express their religious beliefs differently, they are unaware of the fact that they unconsciously believe in the same God. (Rahner himself obviously did not claim that all people or all believers are anonymous Christians, that is why I am talking about "a theory similar to Rahner's theory", i.e. a theory that would extend Rahner's distinction to all believers).

14 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe, Peter Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 106.

15 André Comte-Sponville, *L'esprit de l'athéisme: Introduction à une spiritualité sans Dieu* (Albin Michel, 2006), Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Harvard Univ. Press, 2013).

16 Karl Barth, "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion," in *Christianity and other religions: Selected readings*, ed. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Fortress Press, 2001), 7.

17 One should also mention the third explanation as to why people come to the same belief that does without reference to the truth of the belief nor with reference to the theory of evolution. One could, for example, argue that this convergence of opinions is not the result of an independent search: students passing an exam can, for example, copy the answers from one another (Kelly, "Consensus Gentium", 152). In the case of the belief in God, one could, for example, point out that people mostly acquire religious convictions by testimony from a small number of sources. The theistic beliefs are passed through generations by the influence of parents, education, social environment or even state. A proponent of the *consensus gentium* argument, Linda Zagzebski, writes: "Most people who believe in God come to do so in the early part of their lives by testimony from their parents and other trusted adults. It is doubtful that the beliefs children get from adults have much more credibility than the beliefs of

This analogy, however, hinges on the assumption that the datum to explain is the acquisition of theistic belief by a supermajority of the world's population. It fails once we realise that the true datum is the premise stating that people are generally religious. If this is the case, one could successfully argue that being religious is a kind of disposition to behaving in a certain way (that sometimes expresses itself in some form of idolatry), to which we are predisposed by our genetics. Therefore, the debate opens up for evolutionary explanations. Daniel Dennett, for example, argued that natural selection over the ages favoured religious people because in times when there was no medicine they were the ones susceptible to the only accessible drug — hypnosis¹⁸. According to the theory promoted by Dennett, the gene responsible for being susceptible to hypnosis (VMAT-2) is the God gene that is so coveted by biologists. The gene promoted survival-enhancing behaviour in its carriers and therefore it spread across the human species. This theory explains the popularity of religion in a way that has nothing to do with considerations about the logical value of theism, and, additionally, the theory welcomes the fact of the diversity of religions, which is a challenge to the proponents of Kelly's interpretation of the common consent argument. It also suits the picture of the contemporary decline of religion, especially among educated people, since being susceptible to hypnosis presents no merits to us anymore. Obviously, one cannot falsify Dennett's proposal but, on the other hand, it shows that a theory based on theory of evolution can explain the universality of religious belief and treat religion as merely a natural phenomenon, and Kelly cannot simply dismiss it. Summing up, claiming that the best explanation for the fact that almost everybody arrives conscientiously, while exercising his/her cognitive faculties during his/her life, at the hypothesis that God exists and sustaining this hypothesis is the fact that God exists, sounds quite possible. But claiming that the best explanation for the popularity of the phenomenon of religion is that God exists is a different thing. It certainly does not seem to be the most probable explanation for the fact in question.

In my opinion, Thomas Kelly concentrates too much on the alleged unanimity of belief in God's existence as if it could by itself yield evidence in favour of the existence of God. This unanimity is dubious, given the fact that people worship various gods or that they practise religion that involves no gods at all (e.g. religions consisting only in rituals worshipping dead ancestors). However, this does not mean that the common consent argument cannot give a *prime facie* reason for the belief in God's existence — it is just not the universality of theistic beliefs that the proponent of the argument should concentrate on. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, whose views I shall present in the next chapter, has recently shown another way to interpret the common consent argument in which the focal point is the question: "Is our trust in the testimonies of others justified or not?"

EPISTEMIC SELF-TRUST AND THE EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY

Zagzebski criticises epistemological foundationalism in her works, according to which knowledge arises directly from perception, memory, introspection or reason. Zagzebski agrees with William Alston or Richard Foley, who asked how one could confirm the credibility of, for example, perception as a source of direct knowledge if not by means of perception¹⁹? In other words, she thinks that one cannot escape a vicious circle when justifying the reliability of the sources of our knowledge. Hence she concludes that

the adults alone, so we probably should discount the number of children's beliefs as relevant to the *consensus gentium* argument" (Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 185). This could explain why, for example, Islamic beliefs are so popular in Arab countries. The proponent of the common consent argument could, however, argue that religious and theistic beliefs were acknowledged in relatively independent and even isolated groups separated from one another by time, space, languages and level of cultural development. "There are a great many beliefs in God that were independently acquired in widely separated communities with little if any influence from each other" (Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 186). One could explain the unanimity of religious beliefs by reference to the mutual influence of believers only within a specific religious group, but the same tactic does not work when one has to explain the overall popularity of the belief in God. Therefore, the third explanation of the agreement about the theistic belief is no threat to the common consent argument.

18 Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Penguin Books, 2007), 137.

19 Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (CUP, 2001), William P. Alston, *Beyond 'Justification': Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2005).

one has to simply accept the epistemic presumption in favour of cognitive faculties — “we therefore need self-trust in our epistemic faculties taken as a whole” (Trinkaus Zagzebski 2011, 24). Self-trust — Zagzebski claims — is something pre-reflective, not based on any philosophical argument. This conclusion is rich in consequences, with the most important claim (with respect to the point of our interest) that epistemic self-trust commits us to trust in others: “There is an epistemic presumption in favour of the veridicality of the deliverances of the faculties of other persons until shown otherwise by a further use of my faculties” (Trinkaus Zagzebski 2012, 185). This presumption is the result of the observation that other persons basically have the same cognitive faculties (so there is no reason for thinking that I am more reliable with respect to obtaining the truth than others) and that they generally aim at truth when exercising these faculties. Hence we are committed to a general trust in their faculties. Zagzebski adds that when we discover in other persons such cognitive virtues as conscientiousness²⁰, our reason to trust them becomes stronger and, as she calls it, becomes a “particular self-reflective trust in others”²¹. The second case, when our epistemic trust in others becomes more justified, is when large numbers of people share the same belief. These observations result in Zagzebski’s conviction that in the absence of any reason to believe or disbelieve *p*, and in the absence of any reason to trust or distrust a person, if a person believes that *p*, I acquire a *prima facie* (defeasible) reason to believe that *p*, and when a number of people independently come to believe that *p*, the reason becomes stronger²².

ZAGZEBSKI'S VERSION OF THE CONSENSUS GENTIUM ARGUMENT

One can easily notice how Zagzebski’s theory of epistemic authority impacts the debate on the common consent argument: if what Zagzebski says about our commitment to trust others’ assessments of truth is right, then the fact that one person believes that God exists gives me a *prima facie* reason in favour of theism. The reason gets stronger even more once we realise that many millions believe in God, and it gains even more if it is true that they acquired their belief independently²³. Zagzebski presents her own version of the *consensus gentium* argument based on the aforementioned assumptions:

1. I must have a general attitude of self-trust in my epistemic faculties as a whole. This trust is both natural and shown to be rational by philosophical reflection.
2. The general attitude of epistemic self-trust commits me to a general attitude of epistemic trust in the faculties of all other human beings.
3. So the fact that someone else has a belief gives me a *prima facie* reason to believe it myself.
4. Other things equal, the fact that many people have a certain belief increases my *prima facie* reason to believe it, and the reason gets stronger when the beliefs are acquired independently.
5. The fact that other people believe in God is a *prima facie* reason to believe that God exists, and the fact that many millions of people constituting a very high majority believe or have believed in prior ages that God exists increases my *prima facie* reason to believe in God myself.²⁴

20 Zagzebski describes the virtue of epistemic conscientiousness as “a conscious desire [to get the truth] accompanied by the attempt to satisfy it with all of one’s available powers” (Linda T. Zagzebski, “Epistemic Self-Trust and the ‘Consensus Gentium’ Argument”, in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, ed. Kelly J. Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon (OUP, 2011), 26).

21 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 184.

22 Zagzebski, “Epistemic Self-Trust and the ‘Consensus Gentium’ Argument”, 22. Zagzebski uses the concept of a *prima facie* reason in order to underline that the belief that *p* justified only by the word of another person is not a sufficient reason for the belief that *p*. She also notices that “a belief independently acquired by large numbers of people is more trustworthy than the belief of one or a few” (*Ibid.*, 32). However, she does not want to stress the independence condition too much. Even if a belief shared among a large number of people comes from one source, it still presents an argument in favour of the truth of this belief because it means that many people exercising cognitive faculties comparable to mine and aiming at the truth have acknowledged the trust-worthiness of the source.

23 Zagzebski, “Epistemic Self-Trust and the ‘Consensus Gentium’ Argument”, 33.

24 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 186.

Zagzebski's argument differs in two important aspects from the one defended by Thomas Kelly. First, Zagzebski uses the expression: "many millions of believers", which, I think, gives an advantage to her version of the argument because in order for her argument to be valid one does not need to entangle oneself in the statistics of religious adherents. Zagzebski's argument is immune to the kind of accusation I made with respect to Kelly's argument, i.e. that there are so many religious convictions, often contradicting one another, that it is highly controversial to attribute faith in God to a supermajority of the world's population. The universality of religious beliefs is not required for Zagzebski's version of the common consent argument — it is enough to state that belief in God is widespread, which does not seem controversial at all. Of course, one could respond with the observation that it is neither controversial to state that there are plenty of atheists, and this could lead to the conclusion that their beliefs support the comparatively strong but contradictory (in comparison to the corollary of the *consensus gentium* argument) conclusion that there is no God, but this is a conclusion that a proponent of the common consent argument could welcome since the whole argument in its contemporary versions is not designed to prove God's existence but only to provide a (potentially defeasible) reason in favour of God's existence. What could truly invalidate the theistic argument is the convincing proof that atheists are somehow cognitively superior to theists; that they represent an intellectually more sophisticated and epistemically more conscious part of humanity²⁵. Although there are some authors who would subscribe to such a hypothesis, taking into account the impressive list of the prominent theists it does not seem to be a promising path for the opponent of the common consent argument.

The second distinctive feature of Zagzebski's take on the *consensus gentium* argument is that it links the credibility of widespread convictions with trust in the cognitive faculties of other people, and she grounds the latter in self-trust: "I am rationally committed to not only thinking of others as trust-worthy, but to actually trusting them on the same grounds as I trust myself" (Trinkaus Zagzebski 2011, 31). Kelly's interpretation of the argument takes the form of the inference to the best explanation. In this kind of argument a philosopher takes the datum (in our case the fact that large numbers of people are religious) and searches for the fact that makes the datum comprehensible. He or she could and should be an objective arbiter of the truth, wondering what the reason is for which the datum occurs? In contrast to this kind of inductive arguments, Zagzebski's argument relies on self-trust. According to her, we are committed to take what large numbers of people believe as a reason to believe it ourselves just because we recognise the same cognitive faculties in other human beings, and because we trust our own cognitive faculties we are rationally justified in trusting others' cognitive faculties. Therefore, one has access, under Zagzebski's account, to a *prima facie* reason to believe in God only from a first-person perspective²⁶. This difference allows Zagzebski to avoid futile discussions about the naturalistic or evolutionary roots of religion and the reasons why people tend to acquire religious beliefs. What drives her reasoning is the egalitarian principle that all human beings share, more or less, the same cognitive capacities, that they all desire the truth and that many of them claim that God exists. The whole argument is based on these three premises and it avoids the debate about the causes of theistic beliefs.

THE SCOPE OF THE COMMITMENT TO TRUST

The focal point of Zagzebski's interpretation of the common consent argument are the consequences one could draw from the attitude of epistemic self-trust. Her argument hinges on the so-called "default rule for testimony" (DR). The DR states that if speaker S asserts that p to hearer H, under normal conditions, it is correct for H to accept as true S's assertion, unless H has special reason to object. Zagzebski would agree with the DR. It echoes her conviction about the presumption in favour of the veridicality of another person's beliefs and about the pre-reflective epistemic trust we grant others. If there are no ad-

25 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 187.

26 Zagzebski calls this kind of reason a deliberative reason and she discerns between deliberative and theoretical reasons (a theoretical reason is a fact accessible from a third-person perspective). Cf. Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 63–64.

ditional reasons in favour of believing or disbelieving p available to me, and I do not have any knowledge (including knowledge that would question someone's credibility) about the person who believes that p , then this person's belief that p is the only reason I have at my disposal, so I ought to believe that p . The main problem with the DR pertains to the fact that it assumes a very problematic standpoint of doxastic voluntarism. It is as if I force myself to believe that p without having good reasons in favour of p . I ought to believe p just because someone (even a complete stranger) says that p . Other critics of the DR underlined that one should always assess the speaker for trustworthiness: "To believe what is asserted without doing so is to believe blindly, uncritically. This is gullibility" (Fricker 1994, 145).

The defenders of the DR, however, often indicate that we exaggerate the meaning of false testimonies: we normally expect them to be true, so we do not pay attention when they are indeed true. They would also underline that being honest and truthful is a pre-condition of human communication, that our upbringing and concerns for our reputation demand from us to tell the truth (the same requirement comes from the social bond that is created by the very fact of a conversation), and so forth²⁷. These arguments aim to show that if we care about the truth more than about our epistemic self-reliance, we should believe a speaker by his or her word. They constitute solid and extensive evidence that increases our epistemic trust in others. The defenders of the DR would claim that no matter how compromised doxastic voluntarism in the community of philosophers is, in everyday life we tend to follow the DR because aiming at the truth is more important than being epistemically self-reliant. Imagine that you are in a foreign city and you ask a passer-by for the way to a pharmacy and he or she gives you the directions. It seems that in a similar situation we would assume that we acquired a *prima facie* reason to believe that the pharmacy is where the passer-by told me it is. The reason would become stronger if other persons confirmed the information I had obtained from the first one. Self-trust in cognitive faculties and a widespread opinion alone seem to be enough to deliver strong evidence in favour of the opinion. It can also suggest that the *consensus gentium* argument is valid, however, I would argue otherwise.

Our intuition changes depending on what the subject-matter of the testimony of other persons is. My main point refers to the fact that Zagzebski's general principle of epistemic trust in others is grounded in a symmetry between mine and others' cognitive faculties²⁸. Trust in others is conditioned by self-trust. If that is right, then the limits of epistemic self-trust should be reflected in limited trust in the cognitive faculties of other people. Obviously, I trust myself when it comes to having knowledge about the locations of pharmacies in my hometown, therefore I am justified in trusting average people in that they know where a pharmacy is in their hometowns when they say so. On the other hand, knowing my limitations in mathematics and logic, I do not trust myself that the answer I get after solving a complicated mathematical puzzle is correct. If, additionally, I am aware that very few people have mastered mathematics to a degree that would let them solve the same puzzle, and that the symmetry between epistemic self-trust and trust in others holds, then, in my opinion, I am not entitled to take the answer I hear from a randomly met person as a *prima facie* reason in favour of the answer. It seems to me that one cannot claim that a person's belief that p gives me a *prima facie* reason in favour of p , unless we determine that p belongs to the kind of knowledge an ordinary person in a certain situation normally possesses²⁹. Hence it seems that the general principle of epistemic trust in others is not universal. It fails when it comes to areas demanding expertise knowledge, special scientific skills or extraordinary cognitive faculties. It does not deliver any grounds to believing others on their word in such cases.

Hence the crucial question with respect to the common consent argument reads as follows: "Is the problem of the existence of God an example of such a case?" Should we expect a justified belief from a randomly encountered person with respect to the existence of God just as we do when we ask about

27 Cf. Johnathan Adler, "Epistemological Problems of Testimony", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (2015).

28 "I am rationally committed to not only thinking of others as trustworthy, but to actually trusting them on the same grounds as I trust myself" (Zagzebski, "Epistemic Self-Trust and the 'Consensus Gentium' Argument", 31).

29 Elizabeth Fricker, "Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy", in *The Epistemology of Testimony*, ed. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (OUP, 2006), 234–35.

the nearest pharmacy? Or is the situation more similar to the case of solving a problem that requires detailed professional knowledge and outstanding cognitive values? In my view (and I follow the position of Thomas Aquinas in this regard), this is the latter case. Aquinas famously argued in *Summa Theologica* that: “even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors” (*Summa Theologica* I, 1, 1). Aquinas claimed, in the quoted fragment, both that (a) it is possible for a human being to discover the truth about God’s existence by him or herself and that (b) only a few have managed to do so. He also pointed to the fact that people held many contradictory claims with respect to God and religion. For Aquinas, this obviously proved that many of them had committed errors on their intellectual paths and it supported the claim that the question of the existence of God is of a complicated nature that requires outstanding cognitive faculties. St. Thomas mentioned, therefore, the need of a revelation in order to teach people about the existence of God, which indicates that a significant number of those who believed that God exists did not exercise their cognitive faculties but rather their voluntary ones. Even if we trust in their cognitive faculties, their belief in God does not provide a *prima facie* reason in favour of God’s existence. Summing up, Zagzebski’s argument does not work because of two reasons:

- (1) First, the solution to the problem of the existence of God requires outstanding cognitive faculties, which is not guaranteed by the general principle of epistemic trust in others,
- (2) Second, the fact that many people believe in God does not necessarily have anything to do with their cognitive faculties. Zagzebski’s argument (Cf. p. 2 and 3.) assumes this connection.

THE PROPER CONSENSUS GENTIUM ARGUMENT

The above counter-arguments do not mean that one should disavow the common consent argument for the existence of God. Zagzebski herself gives us an indication of the way to save the argument when she notices that our trust in the cognitive faculties of other people operates at two levels:

1. The level of general trust. It is the question of our attitude to trust people by their words in the absence of any information about the subject matter or the credibility of the speaker.
2. The level of particular self-reflective trust in those whose conscientiousness I discover by being conscientious³⁰.

Apart from a pre-reflective attitude, we also tend to reflect on our practice of trusting others. As a result, we realise that one of the most efficient ways to form a true belief is to trust people whose cognitive faculties we admire. The notion of admiring is not used by accident: in Zagzebski’s view one can recognise somebody’s authority either on the basis of one’s emotions or on the basis of one’s intellectual considerations. According to Zagzebski, we ascribe authority to people who are characterised by the cognitive features we value in ourselves. The feature of conscientiousness comes to the fore, in her view, i.e. the feature of the conscious desire for truth “accompanied by the attempt to satisfy it with all of one’s available powers”³¹. It is obvious that if a person is characterised by such a feature, his or her belief matters much more to forming our belief than the opinion of a person who is not conscientious or with whom we are not acquainted with to a degree allowing us to form a belief about his or her conscientiousness.

Hence Zagzebski defines the so-called “Justification Thesis for the Authority of Belief” (JAB): “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”³². Let us imagine again that you are trying to solve a mathematical puzzle.

30 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 184.

31 Zagzebski, “Epistemic Self-Trust and the ‘Consensus Gentium’ Argument”, 26.

32 Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority*, 110.

You come up with a certain result (let us say “x”) but because of your awareness of your ignorance in the field of mathematics you do not think that you have a reason to believe that the result of the puzzle is x. Let us imagine that your friend, who has a PhD in mathematics and who has a history of correcting you many times in the past when it comes to mathematical and logical puzzles, and whose honesty you trust and whose qualifications you admire, tells you that the right answer is y. If you are convinced that you have a better chance of forming a true belief when you believe what your friend believes, then you recognise his or her epistemic authority in mathematics. Zagzebski claims, and in my opinion quite rightly so, that if an authority believes that p, then I have a *prima facie* reason to believe that p. This principle of self-reflective trust in epistemic authorities is immune to the kind of accusations I formed with respect to Zagzebski’s version of the common consent argument and, therefore, we are in a position to re-interpret this argument:

1. I must have a general attitude of self-trust in my epistemic faculties as a whole. One of the expressions of this self-trust is trust in my recognition of epistemic authorities.
2. My recognition of epistemic authorities commits me to trust in the faculties of those who I recognise as epistemic authorities.
3. So the fact that someone who I recognise as an epistemic authority has a belief gives me a *prima facie* reason to believe it myself.
4. The fact that many of those who I recognise as epistemic authorities have a certain belief increases my *prima facie* reason to believe it, and the reason becomes stronger when the beliefs are acquired by the epistemic authorities independently.
5. The fact that someone who I recognise as an epistemic authority believes in God is a *prima facie* reason to believe that God exists, and the fact that many of those who I recognise as epistemic authorities believe that God exists increases my *prima facie* reason to believe in God myself.

This version of the common consent argument, in my view the proper one, is also the most modest one — because what it takes as a significant datum are not the convictions of ordinary people but only of people who could be regarded as epistemic authorities, thus it cannot use the premise claiming that “all people”, the “dominant group of people”, “large numbers of people” or “many millions of people” believe in God. It is simply out of reach of anyone’s powers to recognise “large numbers of people” or “many millions of people” as authorities³³. However, one could still talk about a “significant number of...” or a “non-trivial number of epistemic authorities”. The modesty of the proposed version of the argument could be the reason for raising the question about the appropriateness of the term: “*consensus gentium* argument”. I would not argue with this accusation — what I wanted to stress is that there is a convincing way to defend the view in which in some cases the fact that other people believe in God is a reason in favour of the theistic belief. For many believers, the best evidence at their disposal supporting their beliefs is the fact that the people they consider to be authorities believe in God, and I have tried to show that there is nothing unreasonable in their conduct³⁴.

33 Unless someone ascribes the epistemic authority *a priori* to a person who belongs to a group of people about which we have experience that it mainly consists of people with epistemic authority, i.e. we ascribe *a priori* an epistemic authority to a person with an academic degree. That is why, in my opinion, arguments pertaining to the common opinion among scholars are so convincing. Although we cannot recognise individually the consciousness of every member of the scientific community, when a scientist believes that p, and p is a belief from the field of his or her professional interests, it is a *prima facie* reason in favour of p.

34 Although it is not the main subject of the paper, I would also argue that this version of the argument suits well the practice of invoking *sensus fidei* (i.e. the unanimity of believers in faith as evidence of the truth of the proclaimed tenets and dogmas) in the teachings of the Catholic Church; for example, Pope Pius XII invoked *singularis catholicorum antistitum et fidelium conspiratio* (“the outstanding agreement of the Catholic prelates and the faithful”) as one of the reasons to announce the dogma of the Assumption of Mary (*Munificentissimus Deus*, 12). Is the practice justifiable in the light of criticism of Zagzebski’s version of the common consent argument? It seems, after all, that Pius XII took the opinion of an average faithful person with respect to a complicated dogmatic matter as a *prima facie* reason to believe in the dogma of the Assumption. In my opinion, it is sufficient

This leads me to the next question: who can be an epistemic authority in the field of religion and religious beliefs? Who is an expert with respect to the question of the existence of God? One of the advantages of the argument I proposed is that one does not have to offer a definite answer, and the reason for it is that recognition of an authority is relative to self-trust. When the recognition of an authority is based, for example, on somebody's emotion of admiration, then the reasons for the recognition are, as Zagzebski would call them, deliberative, i.e. accessible from the first-person perspective, and, hence, subjective. What is, however, clear to me is that one cannot *a priori* exclude the possibility of authorities with respect to religious beliefs. Even if one rejects the idea of the experience of God or the mystical experience, and therefore disavows that anyone could enrich his or her evidence in favour of God's existence in a way parallel to how the testimony of an eyewitness broadens our knowledge about events and allows us to draw conclusions about it, one has to admit that there are people who are skilled in philosophy or theology or who possess a good understanding of theoretical arguments in favour of belief or disbelief in God's existence and they are still theists. The fact that they believe in God presents a defeasible but nonetheless *prima facie* reason to believe.

SUMMARY

In my opinion, the question of the correctness of the common consent argument boils down to the problem of the epistemic religious authority. If someone appears to me to be an ignorant, or if I am not acquainted with somebody, then I cannot force myself to trust his or her beliefs about such important matters as the existence of God. However, I have argued in this paper that if one does indeed recognise in the people around him or her many that are capable of giving valuable insight into this problem (if one believes that one is better positioned to obtain the truth when one follows the belief of the people one admires), and if their beliefs converge in the conclusion that God exists, then their agreement in this belief amounts to strong (but still defeasible) evidence in favour of the existence of God. If one interprets the *consensus gentium* argument this way, then perhaps its spontaneous rejection in the contemporary philosophy is worth reconsidering.

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to look at the first official acknowledgement of *sensus fidei* that took place at Vatican II in order to state that the practice is justified. In *Lumen gentium* one can read: "The whole body of the faithful who have an anointing that comes from the holy one (cf. 1 Jn. 2:20 and 27) cannot err in matters of belief. This characteristic is shown in the supernatural appreciation of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people, when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' they manifest a universal consent in matters of faith and morals" (*Lumen gentium*, 12). Even if one does not accept the possibility of appreciating the faith through the Holy Spirit, one has to notice that in the practice of invoking the unanimity of beliefs among the faithful, recognition of their epistemic authority (possessed by the fact of having been anointed by the Holy Spirit) comes to the fore. Thus the fact that a believer thinks that *p* amounts to a *prima facie* reason in favour of *p* only because the Church recognises an epistemic authority in that believer. Moreover, someone who accepts the possibility of appreciating the faith through the Holy Spirit can rightfully draw the conclusion, as Vatican II did, that ascribes *sensus fidei* the status of an important "theological source" of revelation.

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