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A Review of Linda Zagzebski's *Epistemic Authority*

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*Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief*

Linda Zagzebski

Oxford University Press (reprint 2015)

296 pp.

Like with her celebrated *Virtues of the Mind*, Linda Zagzebski again examines the application of concepts familiar in a different normative domain to the epistemic domain. In this case, the connection is with social and political philosophy and with the concepts of authority and autonomy in particular. The book covers a broad range of contemporary epistemological topics, attempting to gain insights from those in social and political philosophy. In what follows we will briefly summarize the book and raise several points of criticism.

### Analyzing the Chapters

Zagzebski makes her own position of the book clear from the outset—that subjects should indeed take beliefs on the authority of others, and in fact must do so to act rationally. However, before this argument is given, she insists that the reader understand why there is such a “strong proclivity” to denying this argument (6). In Chapter 1, Zagzebski follows the historical progression of thought that led to this cultural pattern, arguing that it has led to our modern societies to have a strong emphasis on autonomy and egalitarianism, ultimately diminishing the value of authority outside of oneself.

In chapter 2, Zagzebski develops her account of trust. She defines “trust” as a combination of epistemic, affective, and behavioral components that lead us to *believe* that our epistemic faculties will get us to the truth, *feel* trusting towards them in that respect, and *treat* them respectively (37-8). She argues that this trust is rational upon reflection, relying on her understanding of what it means to be rational, “to do a better job of what we do in any case—what our faculties do naturally” (30). According to her, we naturally try to resolve *dissonance*, where dissonance equates to internal conflict between a person’s mental states. She concludes that epistemic self-trust is the most rational response to dissonance, including the one produced upon discovery of epistemic circularity: the problem that one has no way of telling whether one’s epistemic faculties are reliably accurate without depending on those same faculties.

Zagzebski moves toward the substance of her argument in her third chapter. She argues that considering how one’s faculties are bound up with both the desire for truth and the belief that they can access the truth, commits one to trusting the faculties of others. This leads into Zagzebski’s principle of “epistemic universalism,” which asserts that another person having some belief itself is a *prima facie* reason to believe it, given that the other person’s epistemic faculties are in order and that they are epistemically conscientious.

Zagzebski expands the circle of trust to include emotions in Chapter 4. She argues that we have the need to trust in our emotional dispositions, in particular the emotion of admiration, that will then give us another foundational reason for epistemic trust in others (75). In

regards to our natural emotion dispositions she says that “we need basic trust in the tendency of our emotion dispositions to produce fitting emotions for the same reason we need basic trust in the tendency of our epistemic faculties to produce true beliefs” (83). It is from this emotion of admiration that we can then conscientiously trust in other epistemic exemplars.

In chapter 5, Zagzebski argues that authority in the epistemic realm is justified. Based on Joseph Raz’s account of political authority, she defines *authority* as a “normative power that generates reasons for others to do or believe something preemptively” (102). Here a preemptive reason is one that replaces other reasons the subject has and is not simply added to them. Zagzebski proposes an epistemic analogue of Raz’s Preemption Thesis, which states that the fact that an authority has a belief  $p$  is a preemptive reason for me to believe  $p$  (107). She also formulates epistemic analogues for Raz’s Normal Justification Thesis in order to justify taking a belief on epistemic authority. Zagzebski proposes that the authority of another person’s belief is justified for me when I conscientiously judge that I am more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief, or that I am more likely to form a belief that survives my conscientious self-reflection, if I believe what the authority believes than if I try to figure out what to believe myself (110-1).

In the sixth chapter, Zagzebski focuses on the concept of testimony as it relates to epistemic authority, advocating for a trust-model of testimony. On her account, testimony is a contractual “telling” which occurs between a teller and hearer, in which both sides have responsibilities. The teller implicitly requests the hearer’s trust and assumes the associated responsibility. The hearer also has expectations of the teller, especially when a future action is carried out according to the content of the teller’s testimony. Because of this contractual nature, the standard of conscientiousness is higher in testimony than in the general formation of a belief. The authority of testimony is justified both by the fact that believing the testimony will more likely get the truth than self-reliance, as well as the fact that beliefs obtained through testimony are more likely to survive self-reflection than those formed through self-reliance.

Zagzebski turns her attention to epistemic communities in Chapter 7. She argues that epistemic authority in communities can be justified by one’s conscientious judgment that one is more likely to believe the truth, or to get a belief that will survive one’s self-reflection if one believes what “We” (the community) believe rather than if one tries to figure out what to believe by oneself in a way that is independent of “Us.” Here communities are seen as an extended self. Zagzebski would argue that communally acquired beliefs are more likely to survive *communal reflection*, which follows from her “extended self” argument. Thus, as long as one accepts one’s community as an extended self, one can in this way acquire reasons to believe on the authority of one’s community.

In chapter 8, Zagzebski examines moral epistemic authority and its limitations. Zagzebski sees no reason to deny that there are epistemic exemplars in the moral domain, considering the rejection of moral truth and egalitarianism as possible reasons for rejecting moral authority. She argues that testimony is not an adequate model for most moral learning

because of two limitations: (1) testimony lacks motivational force and (2) it does not offer understanding. According to her, the way in which one can get a moral belief from another person has to do with the emotion that grounds such moral judgment. She claims that testimony is able to convey conceptual judgment and relevant similarities to persons or situations that elicit emotional response, but this is not sufficient to produce the emotional response itself (172). It follows then, she argues, that “I do not take a belief on authority; I take an emotion on authority, and the emotion is the ground for my moral belief” (174). The argument gets extended in the following chapter to religious authorities. Applying her earlier argument to this context, she defends the claim that individuals often conscientiously judge that if they believe in accordance with their religious community they will do better, and so often individuals are justified in deferring to their religious community.

In Chapter 10, Zagzebski turns to the contemporary debate concerning peer disagreement. As she diagnoses the debate, it is primarily a conflict between the competing values of egalitarianism and self-reliance. Zagzebski sees steadfast views of disagreement overvaluing self-reliance and stronger conciliatory views overvaluing egalitarianism, and finds both mistaken. Her own take on the debate is to construe peer disagreement as a conflict within self-trust, where one finds dissonance amongst the things that she trusts (her opinion, her peer’s opinion, etc.). Given this, and her preceding argument, Zagzebski’s recommendation is to resolve the dissonance in a way that favors what one trusts the most when thinking conscientiously about the matter. There is thus no universal response to disagreement. How any given disagreement is to be handled will depend upon the particular details of the case, in particular, which psychic states the subject trusts the most. For instance, one’s trust in a particular belief may be stronger than one’s trust in what appears to be evidence to the contrary, in which case it would be rational to resolve the dissonance while maintaining one’s belief.

In the final chapter of *Epistemic Authority*, the author primarily seeks to elucidate her notion of autonomy, ultimately to defend the claim that autonomy is not compromised by her model of epistemic authority. Autonomy is the primary property and function of Zagzebski’s “executive self,” which seeks to eliminate psychic dissonance through self-reflection. Zagzebski claims that conscientious judgment and self-reflection are the most reliable ways of avoiding epistemic dissonance—that being conscientious is the best one can do. She maintains that we should trust in the connection between rationality (as manifest in the act of conscientious self-reflection) and actually being right, because self-reflection is the only way we can assess if our beliefs have survived (which in turn is the only way we can get the truth).

### **Assessing *Epistemic Authority***

We turn now to a critical assessment of the book.

One general concern is with Zagzebski's account of rationality and epistemic justification, which is central to her overall argument. She claims that, "rationality is a property we have when we do what we do naturally, only we do a better job of it" (30), and of central importance here is our natural desire to achieve a harmonious self. (31) Dissonance amongst our psychic states (beliefs, desires, emotions, etc.) is thus to be avoided, and a conscientious judgment about what states will harmoniously survive our self-reflection is what justifies those states. A problem for this account is that it is not sufficiently truth connected.

Zagzebski attempts to adequately connect her account to truth through the achievement of psychic harmony. She claims that, "the ultimate test of whether my faculties have succeeded in fitting their objects is that they fit each other." (230) Such a coherentist account, however, is fraught with well-known problems. There are many ways of having harmonious states that are nothing close to truth conducive. The problem comes from the fact that harmony can be achieved in more than one way. In fact, any state can be protected so long as one is able to make accommodations elsewhere. Zagzebski recognizes this fact, and claims that some ways of resolving dissonance are better than others, but these preferential ways are simply those that one conscientiously judges to not create future dissonance. Such an account simply doubles down on trusting harmony and can be seen to give the wrong verdicts.

For instance, consider a father whose son is away at war. Suppose that the father then is given a substantial body of information that his son has been killed. However, the father simply cannot come to believe that his son has died. It is psychologically impossible for him, and he recognizes this fact. In terms of planning his psychic future then the belief that his son is alive will clearly be part of the picture. He can be certain that this state will survive his reflection (even his conscientious reflection) since he recognizes it to be psychologically immovable. Thus, his only paths to harmony are to distrust and abandon all states in conflict with that belief. It is apparent, however, that such a course of action is not to be recommended, and the remaining belief that his son is well is not justified for him. Sometimes, doing one's best is not good enough. This holds in epistemology as well. While the father ought not be faulted for his belief, it is not justified for him.

A related issue concerns the role of reasons on Zagzebski's account. From the outset, Zagzebski's account centers around trust. The motivation for this seems to be that there is no non-circular defense of the reliability of one's faculties. However, it is not clear what Zagzebski makes of such epistemic circularity. It might be thought that it is implied to be defective, but if so, it would be nice to hear more about the problem since many epistemologists have defended some kind of circularity. Adding to the confusion, however, is Zagzebski's claim that she, and others, have "strong circular reasons to trust her epistemic faculties" (93). If such circular justification is possible, then the motivation for the role of trust is diminished. In addition, a large portion of the book is dedicated to arguments that individuals have various kinds of *prima facie* reasons (i.e. to believe what others believe, to trust others as I trust myself, to trust those who are conscientious).

While the arguments for these principles are quite plausible, there are several reasons to be unsatisfied. First, missing from the account is anything about the strength of these reasons

or what kind of considerations would defeat these reasons. Without this further information, it is unclear what to make of these reasons and how they affect our overall outlook. Second, it is difficult to see what role these reasons can play in Zagzebski's overall account of rationality and justification. Since, for her, rationality and justification are a matter of one's conscientious judgments, the role of reasons seems to drop out entirely.

One's reasons may influence their conscientious judgments, but they needn't, and when one's conscientious judgments go against their reasons, on Zagzebski's view they ought to go with their judgment. For instance, in applying her account to the epistemic significance of disagreement, Zagzebski's proposal is to resolve the dissonance resulting from discovered disagreement in accordance with what one conscientiously accords the most trust. However, on her account, significant errors regarding what one conscientiously trusts have no role to play in terms of what the subject is justified in believing. Many will see this as a significant cost since misplaced trust is not without epistemic consequences. A final concern with Zagzebski's account of reasons concerns her preemption thesis.

Zagzebski claims that, "the fact that the authority 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" (107). This thesis raises some questions (i.e. where do those reasons go and can they ever return?) as well as some problems. One problem concerns ability. It is unclear how one would be able to comply with this principle and replace their current reasons. A deeper problem, however, concerns the consequences of compliance. If one loses their own reasons on an issue, they could lose information critical to both the future evaluation of the putative authority and the relevant claim. This seems to allow for a dangerous way for a putative authority to maintain its authority because the other reasons in the domain have been replaced and are no longer relevant.

Zagzebski also fails to consider cases in which an epistemic authority abuses his/her authoritative status. For instance, a noticeable gap in the book is the lack of attention paid to the problem of epistemic injustice. Perhaps even more worrisome is that Zagzebski's account appears to actually exacerbate the problem of epistemic injustice. Prejudices can be, and often are, unintended. That is to say that a prejudiced person is likely unable to recognize his/her own prejudices. Further, biases are sticky—they don't change easily.

Given all of this, it appears that the best way to avoid future dissonance is by adjusting the states that conflict with the biases. While such an accommodation of biases might be the most effective route to harmony, it is surely not the rational course of action. When biases survive reflection, the subject's conscientious judgment is informed by prejudices that are both unfair and unfounded. Thus, Zagzebski's account can be both epistemically and morally defective. Epistemically, because the hearer would miss out on a truth that, according to Zagzebski, he/she is naturally interested in acquiring (33), and morally, because an epistemic injustice could be inflicted on a person/community as a result. The apparent rational survival of biases affects our ability to accurately trust others and recognize epistemic authorities.

This problem only seems to get worse when applied to epistemic communities. Consider intergroup bias and groupthink—a community is very likely to acquire and entrench beliefs that confirm the community's group identity, while simultaneously believing that it is thinking conscientiously. The epistemic opacity which was concerning at the individual level is only aggravated at the community level.

For Zagzebski, the community itself was formed out of chains of individual conscientious judgments, meaning that both individual and group distortions are compounded upon one another in any given community. If the gender bias survives a community's reflection, then, under Zagzebski's account, the community could be justified in trusting the belief that a female scientist is distrustful even when there is evidence against such belief and/or against the bias itself. This would lead to community reinforcement and distancing from others given that the community would trust the way in which they acquire beliefs (which includes trusting the bias even when they fail to recognize it) and distrust those communities that acquire beliefs in a way they don't trust (without the bias). This appears to be highly problematic.

Zagzebski's *Epistemic Authority* will no doubt play a role in shaping a number of the contemporary epistemological debates. Her connections drawn to political philosophy provide a novel way of viewing a number of epistemological problems. While we find a number of problems with Zagzebski's final account, *Epistemic Authority* will be of value for anyone interested in engaging in these debates.

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