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Believing on Authority

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Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski's *Epistemic Authority* (2012) is a welcome exploration of the relationships between, on the one hand, the so-called "cognitive" notions associated with epistemology (particularly knowledge, belief, justification, reflection, and rationality), and on the other, the commonly classified "affective" notions of trust, desire, emotion, and reliance. In particular, she argues that the connection between them arises from our recognized dependence, both practically and rationally, upon epistemic authority, whether that authority resides in our own cognitive faculties or emotions, or in others' faculties and expertise. Such epistemic authority applies not only to mundane empirical matters such as our immediate natural environment, but also to the domains of morality and religion.

There is much to commend in this book. Zagzebski's treatment of these issues is thorough, and admirable for its broad vision of uniting social epistemology with topics in moral and political philosophy as well as philosophy of religion. Here I will concentrate on three main topics. In §1 I present some challenges for Zagzebski's view of rationality as it relates to self-trust; in §2 I consider how her view of authority relates to some issues of epistemic authority in testimony; and in §3 I raise some difficulties for her treatment of epistemic authority as it relates to religious epistemology.

1   Self-Trust and Rationality

Zagzebski begins by considering the ways in which we often encounter cognitive "dissonance," wherein we experience conflict amongst our mental states, including beliefs, emotions, desires, and decisions (2012, 29). She treats this notion of dissonance as basic, and notes that "Many times when there is dissonance, the self automatically adjusts by giving up one of the states that conflict" (2012, 30). Given this starting point, she gives us a working definition of "rationality" thus:

> I think that the awareness of dissonance resolved without effort gives us our initial model of what rationality is. I say that because I think that rationality is a property we have when we do what we do naturally, only we do a better job of it. To be rational is to do a better job of what we do in any case—what our faculties do naturally. (2012, 30)

From here Zagzebski proceeds, following Foley (2001) and Alston (2005), to argue that realization of the fact that there is no epistemically non-circular argument for the reliability of one's faculties leads us, upon reflection, to put our trust in our cognitive faculties as reliable means of getting the truth. But for Zagzebski, such self-trust is not the result of realizing that we lack "full reflective justification" (in Alston's phrase), only after which we *then* resort to trusting the cognitive faculties we could not non-circularly prove to be reliable; rather, self-trust in our cognitive faculties is pre-reflective, operative even before we assess the matter of whether we have any epistemic reason or justification for trusting them.[1]

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[1] A reason for Zagzebski's view here is that she understands trust as a three-place relation—"One trusts something for some purpose or in some respect"—where the state of trust combines epistemic, affective, and behavioural components: "when I trust x for purpose y, (1) I *believe* x will get me y, (2) I *feel* trusting towards x for that purpose, and (3) I *treat* x as if it will get me y" (2012, 36–37). (One obvious difficulty is that clause (2) contains 'trusting', even though clauses (1)–(3) appear to offer at least a "first approximation" of an analysis of what it is for one to trust something for some purpose. Perhaps this is easily remedied by instead having clause (2) read thus: I feel *hopeful* that x will get me y.)

Discovery that epistemic circularity must be involved in any attempt to justify our reliance on our cognitive faculties for getting the truth leads, Zagzebski thinks, to a feeling of dissonance, because we naturally desire to seek the truth, and as self-conscious and reflective beings we examine whether our faculties can be (non-circularly) shown to get us the truth. Though Zagzebski does not spell this out explicitly, the dissonance presumably comes from wanting something (full reflective justification) which, upon scrupulous reflection, we discover we cannot have. And to the extent that we believed, or assumed, that we could not acceptably trust our faculties without the wanted full reflective justification, we either must give up the desire for that strong a justification, or the belief that we must have it acceptably to continue trusting our faculties.

Self-trust is supposed to be "rational" because it helps us resolve this dissonance:

> Is it rational to have self-trust after reflection [on the circularity worry]? That depends, of course, on what we mean by rationality, and whether it applies to all three components of trust ... I said above that I think of rationality in the broad sense of doing a better job of what we do naturally in the use of any of our faculties ... Reflective self-trust resolves the dissonance we have when we discover epistemic circularity, and that seems to me to be rational. It is rational to believe that my faculties are trustworthy for the purpose of getting the truth; it is rational to treat my faculties as if they will get me to the truth, and it is rational to feel trusting of them in that respect. (2012, 43)

It is unclear to me how we ought to take Zagzebski's application of 'rational,' given her meaning for that term, to this particular instance of dissonance. If being rational is just doing a better job of what we naturally do anyway, then if we did (prior to reflection on the matter) trust our faculties as reliable at getting us the truth,[2] then continuing to trust them for this purpose after encountering the circularity worry would quite clearly

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[2]That is, trust them *selectively*, in the environments in which we recognise them to be most truth-conducive.

be continuing to do what we do anyway. But is continuing in such trust doing a 'better' job at it? This is hard to say; for on the one hand, maybe perseverance in trusting our faculties to get us the truth upon discovering that we cannot have the epistemic justification we wanted for it is doing it 'better,' for one trusts even without the rationale for doing so that one had hoped to find. But on the other hand, continuing to do something for which one discovers one lacks an epistemic justification is often taken to be problematic. Zagzebski writes that "It is rational to believe that my faculties are trustworthy for the purpose of getting the truth" even though I cannot find the non-circular justification for it that I had been seeking; and in general, if I find myself believing that *p* while having no evidence or epistemic grounds supporting *p*, continuing to believe *p* is normally thought to be less than epistemically rational (if not outright irrational), as that term is normally used. In short, stipulating that 'rational' means *doing better at what we do anyway* doesn't help us gain purchase on why continuing to trust our faculties for delivering the truth, though pragmatically inescapable,[3] is something worth doing or something we (epistemically) *ought* to do.

A related worry is that the dissonance which might be felt by a reflective person upon encountering the circularity problem is one that in fact needs no resolution, and if this is the case, there is no work for reflective self-trust to do. Zagzebski concedes that "Some forms of dissonance do not need to be resolved; we can get along well enough with the dissonance. This often happens with conflicting desires, or with a desire that conflicts with a belief" (2012, 31), and I've suggested above that it is the latter type of conflict that self-trust is supposed to resolve. But what if instead what we actually do quite naturally is simply accept that we must live with the dissonance, and ignore it? For one thing that we also do naturally is distract ourselves from the stressful facts of our existence: perhaps, with Hume, we resort to socializing and backgammon to take our minds off the dissonance that serious reflection can bring.[4] On Zagzebski's preferred idiom, this Humean method is 'rational,' because it would be doing

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[3]Fricker (2014, 179) uses this phrase.
[4]Hume, *Treatise* (1978 [1739–40]), Bk. I, pt. 4, sect. 7, para. 9.

better what we do naturally. But this coping strategy has little to do with resolving, as opposed to *avoiding*, the dissonance.

Notice the difficulty which Zagzebski's understanding of 'rational' raises for her arguments against the person who wants to trust his own faculties more than those of others (2012, 53). If someone thought he had no obligation to treat everyone as trustworthy whom he believes to be trustworthy, simply on the grounds that he prefers to trust himself and not others (or perhaps: trust himself more than he trusts others), Zagzebski thinks this would be "unreasonable" for the person who "cares about truth": for he would be more trusting of himself and his own faculties simply because such faculties are his own. But crucially, Zagzebski cannot say that doing this would be 'irrational,' for on her view of what makes something rational, doing so might well be rational.

2   Authority, Belief, and Testimony

How should we approach the connections between belief, authority, and believing another's testimony, that is, believing what someone tells us on their authority? A natural place to start notes that typically, we regard another as authoritative when we believe she has strong epistemic grounds for what she tells us, and in particular, when she *knows* the thing she tells us. Supposing she does know what she asserts to us, we arguably have all the epistemic reason we need to believe what she's told us; indeed, we value another's say-so in large part because that is a primary way by which we can gain knowledge, and as such, we tend to feel cheated when someone testifies in the absence of knowledge. Appropriately asserting or testifying that *p* may be understood thus as requiring *knowledge* that *p*, or at least some kind of epistemic condition, for that is the condition on which a speaker has the *authority* to assert that *p*.[5]

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[5]See Williamson 2000, chap. 11, esp. 257: "One can think of the knowledge rule as giving the condition on which a speaker has the *authority* to make an assertion. Thus asserting *p* without knowing *p* is doing something without having the authority to do it, like giving someone a command without having the authority to do so." For advances of this view, see Turri 2011, Benton 2011 and forthcoming, Buckwalter & Turri 2014, and Fricker 2014, 187, among others.

Zagzebski's approach to these matters differs greatly. She distinguishes first-personal deliberative reasons from third-personal theoretical reasons, and defends an account of epistemic authority entirely from the first-person perspective:[6] she says that "What is essential to authority is that it is a normative power that generates reasons for others to do or to believe something preemptively," where "preemption" is "a distinguishing feature of authority from the subject's perspective... A preemptive reason is a reason that replaces other reasons the subject has" (2012, 102).[7] Her "Preemption Thesis for epistemic authority" is this:

> 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. (2012, 107)

Thus Zagzebski is primarily interested in what it is for a person to be, or to be treated as, epistemically authoritative *for me*. On Zagzebski's view, someone's epistemic authority for me is intimately related to "my conscientious judgment[s]" that, if I believe what the authority believes rather than trying to figure out what to believe myself, I will be (i) more likely to form a true belief (**JAB 1**), and (ii) more likely to form a belief that survives my conscientious self-reflection (**JAB 2**).[8]

Applying this view to testimony, Zagzebski endorses a "trust model" of testimony and ties it to being justified in relying on another's authority:

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[6]Following Joseph Raz's (1988, 2009) account of political authority.

[7]"Believing what another person believes or tells me preemptively is parallel to doing what he tells me to do preemptively. In both cases what the authority does gives me a reason to believe or do something that replaces my other reasons relevant to the belief or act. The kind of reason authority gives me is what is essential to it" (ibid.).

[8] Zagzebski 2012, 110. Her **Justification Thesis 1 for the Authority of Belief (JAB 1)** reads: "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." I have difficulty understanding the language of another's authority being "justified by my conscientious judgment...," for it makes it sounds like whether they are authoritative depends on a normative condition made possible by my own judgment. It would also seem that the added "and avoid a false belief" is redundant, since if the target belief is true, it will avoid being false (assuming the law of non-contradiction).

the trust model of testimony is one in which telling gives the recipient a deliberative reason to believe what the speaker tells her. Trust is irreducibly first personal because it is a reason only for the person who has it. ... When you tell me that *p*, you ask me to trust you, and if I accept your invitation to trust, *I* trust *you*. (2012, 130–131)

Trusting your testimony to me gives me a reason for believing "that pre-empts my other reasons for and against believing" what you tell me (2012, 132). Justification Theses for the Authority of Testimony, similar to (**JAB 1**) and (**JAB 2**), are endorsed:

(**JAT 1**) The authority of a person's testimony for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to satisfy my desire to get true beliefs and avoid false beliefs if I believe what the authority tells me than if I try to figure out what to believe myself.

(**JAT 2**) The authority of a person's testimony for me is justified by my conscientious judgment that, if I believe what the authority tells me, the result will survive my conscientious self-reflection better than if I try to figure out what to believe myself. (2012, 133)

Zagzebski later shifts to plausible "Third-Person" versions of **JAT 1** and **JAT 2** as a way of handling the fact that authority seems less subjective than her first-personal principles make it out to be (cf. my worry in fn. 8): "my conscientious judgment" of **JAT 1** and **JAT 2** is replaced by "the fact that" in the Third-Person principles (2012, 137–138). Yet she contends that the Third-Person versions are "a natural consequence" of their first-person counterparts:

The point here is that if I can justify to others my taking a belief on authority under certain conditions, they can justify to me that I should take a belief on authority under the same conditions... It follows that the third-person justification of epistemic authority is a natural consequence of the first-person justification. (2012, 138)

But on the one hand, Third-Person **JAT 1** does not follow from (First-Person) **JAT 1**: the latter can be fulfilled, or used to justify one's own belief, even though the former is not fulfilled. This is because on (First-Person) **JAT 1**, one's conscientious judgment is what justifies one, *whether or not* the teller is in fact more reliable than oneself at delivering the truth; whereas on Third-Person **JAT 1**, what justifies one is the fact that the teller is more reliable at delivering the truth. And on the other hand, Zabzebski's direction of argument here seems to me to get things exactly backwards: I will conscientiously judge that someone can serve as authoritative for me (or someone else) precisely in the situation where I judge her to epistemically authoritative period. The latter condition is fulfilled when I judge her to know the proposition she is telling me or someone else, and in ideal cases I judge that because she does know it. In less than ideal cases where I've conscientiously judged someone to be authoritative when in fact she was not (e.g., when she doesn't know what she tells me), we'll be inclined to say that it was reasonable for me to believe on her authority even though she *lacked* epistemic authority on that occasion. Zagzebski's account does not deliver these results, and is to that extent counterintuitive.[9]

Furthermore, it would seem that Zagzebski's account of epistemic authority cannot explain our ability to identify who is epistemically authoritative in some domain even when they do not serve as authoritative *for us*. If I know that *p* and I can discern that you also know that *p*, then in seeing you tell Jane that *p*, I can judge that you are epistemically authoritative with respect to *p*, and worthy of Jane's trusting your testimony (on the matter of *p*, at least). Your epistemic authority concerning *p* does not, it seems, depend then on whether I or anyone else trusts you preemptively; what matters is whether you know, or are positioned to know, or are in some other strong epistemic position with respect to *p*.

Finally, it does not seem essential to your possessing that epistemic authority that, if I believe *p* on your authority, my doing so replaces my own evidential reasons for *p*. Suppose I begin with some evidence *E* for *p*,

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[9]Notice also that a deceived deceiver (someone who intends to provide me with false testimony, but mistakenly provides true testimony) lacks epistemic authority in my favored sense, but plausibly fulfils **JAT 1**. Thanks to Dani Rabinowitz for this example.

which I regard as not very strong. When you tell me that you know that *p*, my decision to believe it on the basis of your authority need not replace my reasons generated by *E*. Indeed, my having *E* in the first place enables me to view your testimony as confirming what *E* weakly supported, namely that *p*; and in the right kind of case, part of my reason for trusting you as authoritative on this matter might be precisely that your testimony accords well, and perhaps explains, the evidence *E* I already have. Indeed, if *E* is in fact decisive evidence for *p* but I do not appreciate this, then if your testimony that *p* includes information that helps me see how *E* confirms *p*, I may rely on your authority without it replacing *E*. (Another case: suppose I already know that Jack went up the hill. You then testify that Jack and Jill went up the hill. I can accept the conjunction that: [Jack went up the hill and Jill went up the hill] on your authority, even if doing so does not replace my earlier reason for believing that Jack went up the hill.) For all these reasons, it seems that the Preemption Thesis, at least for testimony, is implausible.

3   Authority and Religious Epistemology

In her chapter on religious authority, Zagzebski discusses how one can justify religious belief on the basis of others' religious beliefs, particularly given the *prima facie* reason available through a *consensus gentium* argument for theism from self-trust (2012, 185–188). More significant is her argument for believing on trust within communities (cf. also Chap. 7), especially communities of specific religious traditions; particularly incisive is her discussion of how such communities function as part of a religious tradition, and how the maintaining of, and the participation in, such a tradition over time depends on both the conception of divine revelation at work in such a tradition, which itself contributes to the structure of the tradition. The tradition's beliefs, its motivational, moral, and spiritual values, and its learned patterns of living are organized around the tradition's view of divine revelation: these components of the tradition reflect the tradition's view of how its participants' may learn from, or come into contact with, what God has revealed of God's self and God's purposes for

them.

A common way to understand divine revelation (at least within the monotheistic traditions) is to think of God's revelation on the model of a kind of divine testimony to us.[10] One model emphasizes a chain of unbroken transmission from original historical sources to whom God gave the revelation, and the work of the tradition is to maintain and hand on that testimony to later generations who are the ongoing recipients of the testimony. Another prominent model emphasizes instead the current recipient's experience of God rather than solely the original revelatory experience (though typically the recipient's experience is in some way mediated by interaction with the preserved historical account of earlier divine revelations). On this model, if Scripture preserves some of the original revelation by way of testimony, it nevertheless "speaks directly to the reader or hearer without any need for a tradition of interpretation of authority in its exposition and preservation" (2012, 194). On the Christian version of this model, the Holy Spirit enables this kind of first-hand contact with God: a person can, by the grace of the Holy Spirit's work, come to (or deepen one's) faith through receiving the Gospel proclaimed. (These are not the only two models, but such models are characteristic of many traditions, even within strands of a particular religion.) On either view, the tradition serves to preserve and interpret the divine testimony over time, and to shape its participants given the model of divine revelation with which it operates.

Zagzebski argues that her approach to authority can serve as an important justifier for the religious believer insofar as she has argued that such a believer can justifiably trust the authority of the tradition. She expresses dissatisfaction with recent religious epistemology which focuses too much on either first-hand experience or on the chain model of testimony: for

> I can trust my tradition more than my own experience in many

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[10]Aquinas's view of revelation (in *Summa Theologiae* IIaIIe, Qu. 6. Art. 1), whereby one's will with a divinely inspired inclination moves the intellect to accept primary truths of faith, is arguably non-testimonial; cf. Hawthorne 2013, esp. §3. Another noteworthy exception is Maimonides' non-testimonial account; see Rabinowitz 2013, Ch. 2, esp. 82ff., as well as Stern 1998; for similar accounts in the Islamic tradition, see Davidson 1992.

cases, and of course my experience is limited to the experience of one person. Given that we reasonably take beliefs from others or based on the experience of others, the structure of the process by which those beliefs are dispersed within a community and continued through the future life of the community needs epistemological models. ... I am suggesting a rule of justification that bypasses the chain model... (2012, 202)

Furthermore, she is dissatisfied with the evidence view of testimony (2012, 128–131) particularly as applied to divine revelation: "Religious faith is impossible to explain, much less justify, on the evidence view of testimony. That view forces us to either redefine faith as belief on a certain kind of evidence, as Locke did, or we must say that faith is non-rational, based on emotions that have nothing to do with epistemic justification" (2012, 202). Having dispensed with first-person experience, with chain models of divine revelation, and with the evidence view of testimony, Zagzebski clears the way for her trust model of divine testimony operative within a communal tradition.

While I don't disagree with some of her reasons for dissatisfaction here, I do not think that we are forced to choose between a trust model and an evidence model when it comes to divine testimony; nor does it seem right to say that religious faith is impossible to explain, or justify, on the evidence view. Religious faith may be understood in terms of evidence; Lara Buchak (2012, 2014) has offered an account of having faith (expressed through action) where such faith can be rational given its relation to evidence, including religious faith. Moreover, insofar as a tradition decrees as sacred texts which are thought to document some original divine revelation, those texts form a portion of the divine testimony that may be evaluated by historical standards of evidence (to say nothing of evaluating such documents for authenticity). Finally, endorsement of a trust model of divine testimony may bring with it a concern for evidence because one will regard oneself as trusting the whole of a tradition for aid, at times, in determining what exactly the *content* of divine testimony is: for example, I must evaluate my own tradition's claims about who God is, what demands God may make of me, or what God may be trying to teach

me, when attempting the (communal, not merely individual) process of discerning what God is revealing (or has revealed) to us or to me. This requires weighing evidence about my tradition's trustworthiness on such matters, including the evidence that the tradition's resources may under-determine exactly what, and how, God is communicating to us presently.

There is a more fundamental worry, however. On Zagzebski's trust model of testimony, S's telling you that *p* invites you to trust S regarding *p*, and when you accept that invitation, you believe *p* on S's authority. But this model seems to assume that one knows who—namely, S—is telling you that *p*. A major difficulty with applying this model to divine testimony is that the believer must believe, or take on faith, that what has been testified to her really is from God (what if it is in fact generated subliminally by her own self-interests?). The first-personal deliberative nature of the reason for acceptance is lost if one is in serious doubt about the source of the testimony. Even if one is confident of God's existence, the process of discerning whether some seemingly divine testimony—be it a recent insight, spiritual directive, theological interpretation of Scripture, etc.—is really from God can be a difficult epistemic task.[11] And it seems to me that this epistemic task cannot be separated from the relevance of evidence, including how the testimony of Scripture, its interpretation in one's tradition, and the testimony of spiritual exemplars provides a kind of evidence for how one ought to evaluate (purported) divine testimony. But even once one satisfies oneself that some revelation is from God, Zagzebski is right that the invitation to trust remains; and in the divine case, one's ability to trust God concerning such testimony, and the outcomes of acting upon it, is part and parcel of what it is to have faith in God.[12]

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[11]Though some times it may be immediately clear: see Wolterstorff (2010, 317–322) for discussion of such a case.

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