Conscientiousness and Other Problems: A Reply to Zagzebski

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We'd first like to thank Dr. Zagzebski for engaging with our review of *Epistemic Authority*. We want to extend the dialogue by offering brief comments on several issues that she raised.

**Conscientiousness**

In our review we brought up the case of a grieving father who simply could not believe that his son had died despite conclusive evidence to the contrary. This case struck us as a problem case for Zagzebki's account of rationality. For Zagzebski, rationality is a matter of conscientiousness, and conscientiousness is a matter of using your faculties as best you can to get to truth, where the best guide for a belief's truth is its surviving conscientious reflection. The problem raised by the grieving father is that his belief that his son is still alive will continuously survive his conscientious reflection (since he is psychologically incapable of believing otherwise) yet it is clearly an irrational belief. In her response, Zagzebski makes the following claims,

> A. "To say he has reasons to believe his son is dead is just to say that a conscientiously self-reflective person would treat what he hears, reads, sees as indicators of the truth of his son's death. So I say that a reason just is what a conscientiously self-reflective person sees as indicating the truth of some belief." (57)

and,

> B. "a conscientious judgment can never go against the balance of one's reasons since one's reasons for p just are what one conscientiously judges indicate the truth of p." (57)

These claims about the case lead to a dilemma. Either conscientiousness is to be understood subjectively or objectively, and either way we see some issues. First, if we understand conscientiousness subjectively, then the father seems to pass the test. We can suppose that he is doing the best he can to believe truths, but the psychological stability of this one belief causes the dissonance to be resolved in atypical ways. So, on a subjective construal of conscientiousness, he is conscientious and his belief about his son has survived conscientious reflection.

We can stipulate that the father is doing the best he can with what he has, yet his belief is irrational. Zagzebski's (B) above seems to fit a subjective understanding of conscientiousness and leads to such a verdict. This is also how we read her in *Epistemic Authority* more generally. Second, if we understand conscientiousness objectively, then it follows that the father is not being conscientious. There are objectively better ways to resolve his psychic dissonance even if they are not psychologically open to him.

So, the objective understanding of conscientiousness does not give the verdict that the grieving father is rational. Zagzebski's (A) above fits with an objective understanding of conscientiousness. The problem with the objective understanding of conscientiousness is

that it is much harder to get a grasp on what it is. Doing the best you can with what you have, has a clear meaning on the subjective level and gives a nice responsibilist account of conscientiousness. However, when we abstract away from the subject's best efforts and the subject's faculties, how should we understand conscientiousness? Is it to believe in accordance with what an ideal epistemic agent would conscientiously believe?

To us, while the objective understanding of conscientiousness avoids the problem, it comes with new problems, chief among which is a fleshed out concept of conscientiousness, so understood. In addition, the objective construal of conscientiousness also does not appear to be suited for how Zagzebski deploys the concept in other areas of the book. For instance, regarding her treatment of peer disagreement, Zagzebski claims that each party should resolve the dissonance in a way that favors what they trust most when thinking conscientiously about the matter. The conscientiousness in play here sounds quite subjective, since rational resolution is simply a matter of sticking with what one trusts the most (even if an ideal rational agent wouldn't be placing their trust in the same states and even when presented evidence to the contrary).

**Reasons**

Zagzebski distinguishes between $1^{st}$ and $3^{rd}$ person reasons, in part, to include things like emotions as reasons. For Zagzebski,

> "1st person or deliberative reasons are states of mind that indicate to me that some belief is true. 3rd person, or theoretical reasons, are not states of mind, but are propositions that are logically or probabilistically connected to the truth of some proposition. (What we call evidence is typically in this category)" (57)

We are troubled by the way that Zagzebski employs this distinction. First, it is not clear how these two kinds of reasons are related. Does a subject have a $1^{st}$ person reason for every $3^{rd}$ person reason? After all, not every proposition that is logically or probabilistically connected to the truth of a proposition is part of an individuals evidence or is one of their reasons. So, are the $3^{rd}$ person reasons that one possesses reasons that one has access to by way of a first-person reason? How could a $3^{rd}$ person reason be a reason that I have if not by way of some subjective connection?

The relation between these two kinds of reasons deserves further development since Zagzebski puts this distinction to a great deal of work in the book. The second issue results from Zagzebski's claim that, "1st person and 3rd person reasons do not aggregate." (57) If $1^{st}$ and $3^{rd}$ person reasons do not aggregate, then they do not combine to give a verdict as to what one has all-things-considered reason to believe. This poses a significant problem in cases where one's $1^{st}$ and $3^{rd}$ person reasons point in different directions.

Zagzebski's focus is on one's $1^{st}$ person reasons, but what then of one's $3^{rd}$ person reasons? $3^{rd}$ person reasons are still reasons, yet if they do not aggregate with $1^{st}$ person reasons, and

1st person reasons are determining what one should believe, it's hard to see what work is left for 3rd person reasons. This is quite striking since these are the very reasons epistemologists have focused on for centuries.

Zagzebski's embrace of 1st person reasons is ostensibly a movement to integrate the concepts of rationality and truth with resolutely human faculties (e.g. emotion, belief, and sense-perception) that have largely been ignored by the Western philosophical canon. Her critical attitude toward Western hyper-intellectualism and the rationalist worldview is understandable and, in certain ways, admirable. Perhaps the movement to engage emotion, belief, and sense-perception as epistemic features can be preserved, but only in the broader context of an evidence-centered epistemology. Further research should channel this movement toward an examination of how non-traditional epistemic faculties as 1st person reasons may be mapped to 3rd person reasons in a way is cognizant of self-trust in personal experience —that is, an account of aggregation that is grounded fundamentally in evidence.

**Biases**

In the final part of her response, Zagzebski claims that the insight regarding prejudice within communities can bolster several of her points. She refers specifically to her argument that epistemic self-trust commits us to epistemic trust in others (and its expansion to communities), as well as her argument about communal epistemic egoism and the Rational Recognition Principle. She emphasizes the importance of communities to regard others as trustworthy and rational, which would lead to the recognition of biases within them— something that would not happen if communities relied on epistemic egoism.

However, biases have staying power beyond egoism. Even those who are interested in widening and deepening their perspective though engaging with others can nevertheless have deep biases that affect how they integrate this information. Although Zagzebski may be right in emphasizing the importance of communities to act in this way, it seems too idealistic to imply that such honest engagement would result in the recognition and correction of biases. While such engagement might highlight important disagreements, Zagzebski's analysis of disagreement, where it is rational to stick with what you trust most, will far too often be an open invitation to maintain (if not reinforce) one's own biases and prejudice.

It is also important to note that the worry concerning biases and prejudice cannot be resolved by emphasizing a move to communities given that communities are subject to the same biases and prejudices as individuals that compose them. Individuals, in trusting their own communities, will only reinforce the biases and prejudice of its members. So, this move can make things worse, even if sometimes it can make things better. Zagzebski's expansion of self-trust to communities and her Rational Recognition Principle commits communities only to recognize others as (*prima facie)* trustworthy and rational by means of recognizing their own epistemic faculties in those others.

However, doing this does not do much in terms of the disclosure of biases given that communities are not committed to trust the beliefs of those they recognize as rational and

trustworthy. Under Zagzebski's view, it is possible for a community to recognize another as rational and trustworthy, without necessarily trusting their beliefs—all without the need to succumb to communal epistemic egoism. Communities are, then, able to treat disagreement in a way that resolves dissonance for them.

That is, by trusting their beliefs more than those of the other communities. This is so even when recognizing them as rational and trustworthy as themselves because, under Zagzebski's view communities are justified in maintaining their beliefs over those of others not because of egoistic reasons but because by withstanding conscientious self-reflection, they trust their beliefs more than those of others. Resolving dissonance from disagreement in this way is clearly more detrimental than it is beneficial, especially in the cases of biased individuals and communities, for which this would lead them to keep their biases.

Although, as Zagzebski claims, attention to cases of prejudice within communities may help give more importance to her argument about the extension of self-trust to the communal level, it does not do much in terms of disclosing biases inasmuch as dissonance from disagreement is resolved in the way she proposes. Her proposal leads not to the disclosure of biases as she implies, but to their reinforcement given that biases—although plausibly unaware—is what communities and individuals would trust more in these cases.

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**References**

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