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Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief,* Oxford University Press, 2012

The epistemology of testimony is one of the most explored fields in the contemporary philosophy of knowledge. Sometimes the question of evidence leads to the problem of epistemic authority, although not systematically and often merely as a corollary. Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski moves in the other direction: in examining the question of authority, she confronts the problem of the right to believe in testimony. The question examined in the book is this: 'If I am a conscientiously self-reflective person, should I ever treat another person as having a kind of normative epistemic power that gives me a reason to take a belief preemptively on the grounds that the other person believes it?' (p. 103) She answers yes. In Christian religions, and in other religions as well, epistemic authority plays a crucial role. First, we are supposed to believe revealed claims on the authority of God speaking through a book; additionally, many Christians think that we are supposed to believe claims on the authority of the Church.

There is a way to defend epistemic authority on the basis of *anti-individualism* in epistemology: namely, the thesis that our thoughts are constitutively what they are in virtue of relations between the individual in those states and a wider reality, including the testimony of the people around us. There is also a *political* defence of religious authority. Joseph de Maistre advocated a theocracy in which religion was to play a highly pivotal role, teaching the subjects blind respect for authority to the complete exclusion of any individual reasoning. Linda Zagzebski says nothing of such defences, epistemological or political, of religious authority. She evidently hopes to give a 'friendlier' account of authority – one that will not appear disturbing in a postmodern context. She explicitly says that she defends 'the existence of epistemic authority on grounds that almost all modern philosophers would accept' (p. 2). Her aim is to reconcile two ideas that seem incompatible: *epistemic authority*, on the one hand, and epistemic *autonomy* – which she introduces through references to Descartes, Locke and Kant and understands as an important contribution of Modernity – on the other.

Zagzebski adopts 'the point of view of the subject' – a self-reflective person who asks herself how she could get the beliefs she accepts through reflection (p. 2). 'We do not like to be dominated' (p. 27), she says (even if Montaigne's friend, Étienne de La Boétie, maintained precisely the opposite a long time ago). For Linda Zagzebski, 'When I am conscientious, I will recognize that the fact that someone else believes *p* gives me a *prima facie* reason to believe *p* myself, and I have a stronger reason when I conscientiously judge that she has the same qualities I trust in myself, or when my trust in her is based on trust in my emotion of epistemic admiration for her in some circumstances' (pp. 103-104). She defends this view in the first four chapters of the book, where the notions of 'self-trust' and 'trust in others' are analyzed. The other chapters of the book examine 'the authority of testimony', 'epistemic authority in communities', 'moral authority', 'religious authority', and also the question (very popular today) of epistemic disagreement, and finally the question of autonomy of the self, which is in any case implicit in each chapter.

Zagzebski says that examples of extreme religious egoists – those who think that another person's belief never gives me a reason to believe the same – are legion in contemporary philosophy. But what she calls 'standard religious epistemic egoism' (p. 183) – the view that another person's belief gives me a reason to believe it, but only if I have evidence in favour of her reliability as an epistemic source – is an even more widespread idea. Zagzebski examines the *consensus gentium* argument for belief in God, showing how it could follow from the necessity of my epistemic self-trust in other people's belief in God. 'A parallel argument can be given for atheism', she claims, which renders the *consensus gentium* argument from self-trust the friendliest kind of argument that a theist could propose to the atheist. But she also defends the *Justification of Religious Authority Thesis*: 'The authority of my religious community is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that if I engage in the community, following its practical directives and believing its teachings, the result will survive my conscientious self-reflection upon my total set of psychic states better than if I try to figure out what to do and believe in the relevant domain in a way that is independent of Us.' (p. 201) So religious authority is justified in the same manner that epistemic authority is justified in general: on my own judgment, on the condition that my judgment is *conscientious.* And this is the reason why opposition between epistemic autonomy and epistemic authority is rejected.

Zagzebski's book is full of brilliant analyses. For example, the third chapter, 'Trust in Emotions', shows why and how 'a conscientious person should treat emotion dispositions the same way she treats her epistemic faculties' (p. 86). Another example, about religious matters, is the distinction between three models of religious tradition: one reducible to chains of testimony; another that is based upon the recipient's experiences; and a third based upon the recognition of a high point in the past that constitutes what must be preserved by the transmission. Zagzebski has also interesting remarks about the debated question of doxastic voluntarism (she defends a version of it), saying that she does not see 'that it is any harder to believe on command than to believe testimony' (p. 5).

Clearly, in attempting to reconcile epistemic autonomy with epistemic authority, a crucial role is given to the self, in particular to the conscientious self. This self examines its own thoughts and weighs their epistemic value. It takes charge of itself and corrects itself. This self is a really a good epistemic person! It becomes more and more harmonious through introspecting itself, 'and hence in some deeper way, more a self' (p. 33). So the notion of self-trust is finally identified as a sort of transparency of consciousness to itself: 'one of the things I do when I am conscientious is to look for reasons or evidence of my beliefs.' (p. 57) Here we have moved closer to Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Transparency of the Ego* than to Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*! No *akrasia* for this gentle self, taking care of himself or herself with a benevolent eye to other selves. 'The self that investigates, reasons, reflects, and sometimes changes its mind, is myself.' (p. 208)

This is an intensely interesting view. But if you are simply not convinced of the existence of something (or someone) called 'the self', perhaps believing this to be one of the more ridiculous creations of modern thinkers from Descartes to Bergson and beyond, and if you also subscribe to the arguments advanced by moral philosophers against the possibility of self-transparency along with Wittgensteinian arguments against exploits of self-attention to oneself, then you will not be convinced by Zagzebski's attempt to reconcile epistemic autonomy and epistemic authority. What is meant exactly by the expression 'my mode of access to my conscientiousness'? If you suppose such an access to such an entity as 'my consciousness', then the problem of authority becomes rather easy: be serious, look carefully at your reasons for believing things, and you will find that, in some cases, epistemic authority makes sense.

But the problem is to know what it means exactly to be conscientious about one's reasons, and also what it means to be conscious of one's own conscientiousness.

There is another, very different, account of self-trust, understood not as conscientiousness but as a virtuous disposition. A reader of Linda Zagzebski's book, *Virtues of the Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), might have expected to find that sort of dispositional account developed in her new book. It would have been interesting also to explore *vices* in this domain: when self-trust is not at all relevant, when acceptance of epistemic authority is not a good thing, in contrast to those cases where such self-trust and acceptance constitute virtuous behaviour. But such is not the direction that Zagzebski has taken in *Epistemic Authority*. The distinction proposed between theoretical (third-person) reasons and deliberative (first-person) reasons also reflects her new direction. 'Nobody but you can have your experience.' (p. 65) Fine, but is this a deep remark on the nature of consciousness, or is it a grammatical remark, as Wittgenstein suggests? And does it mean that we have experience, or consciousness, of our own experience? That first-person reasons can be distinguished from impersonal reasons surely does not necessarily imply such an internalist and introspective account of the human mind. And is it also true that 'a community is like a self in that it has beliefs, historical memory, and reasoning faculties, and it has self-trust' (p. 222)? That we can predicate properties of collective entities – e.g. that we can say 'This football team is quite good' – does not establish that a community is an *individual* or 'like a self', and even less that it *is* a self.

Even if Zagzebski's new book is interesting, and in many respects brilliant, it is deeply unconvincing, because it grounds epistemic authority on a doctrine of the transparency of consciousness, a doctrine that, in the current climate of philosophical thought, is perhaps even more doubtful than an adherence to epistemic authority itself.