

SHORT ESSAY:
SHOULD WE GRANT EPISTEMIC TRUST TO OTHERS?

1. Introduction

In the essay “Epistemic Self-Trust and the Consensus Gentium Argument,” Dr. Linda Zagzebski examines the reasonableness of religious belief. More specifically, she argues that truth demands *epistemic self-trust*—roughly, a trust in the reliability of our own faculties. Furthermore, it is asserted that this self-trust commits me to an epistemic trust in others, which in turn provides grounds for believing that because many other people (to whom we have granted this epistemic trust) believe in God, this prevalence of belief thereby provides a reason for me to believe in God, too.

A critical step in Zagzebski’s argument is the move from epistemic self-trust to granting this sort of trust to other people—a move for which a sub-argument can be drawn out of her essay. My paper’s focus will be to examine Zagzebski’s sub-argument for her second premise (i.e., granting epistemic trust to others) to which I will advance two objections. My suggestion is that *if* either one of these two objections against the sub-argument goes through, then the second premise of Zagzebski’s *Consensus Gentium* argument fails, and in that case, the entire argument falls with it.

2. Zagzebski's *Consensus Gentium* Argument

Before delving into my objections, a brief and preliminary sketch of Zagzebski's view is in order.¹ To begin with, here is Zagzebski's formal argument as it appears in her essay:

Zagzebski's *Consensus Gentium* Argument from self-trust²

- Z1. Every person must have a general attitude of self-trust in her epistemic faculties as a whole. This trust is both natural and shown to be inescapable by philosophical reflection.
- Z2. The general attitude of epistemic self-trust commits us to a general attitude of epistemic trust in the faculties of all other human beings.
- Z3. So the fact that someone else has a belief gives me a *prima facie* reason to believe it myself.
- Z4. Other things being equal, the fact that many people have a certain belief increases my *prima facie* reason to believe it, and my reason is stronger when the beliefs are acquired independently.
- Z5. 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 strong supermajority believe (or have believed in prior ages) that God exists increases my *prima facie* reason to believe in God myself. Discounting for dependence, there are still many millions of people who independently believe or have believed in past ages in the existence of God.

Explanation of this argument is as follows. Premise Z1 appeals to the idea that humans have a natural desire for understanding, a natural belief that this understanding can be obtained, and—lacking non-circular justification for the belief that understanding can be obtained—we must therefore place trust in our own epistemic faculties (i.e., the faculties we use to form beliefs).

For Zagzebski, this trust has two components:³

Trust: One trusts 'X' IFF (1) One treats 'X' as trustworthy—deserving of trust; and
(2) One believes that 'X' is trustworthy.

Meanwhile, premise Z2—the focus of my forthcoming objections—follows from the argument that if Z1 is true, and if other people have the same sorts of faculties we have, and if we follow the principle of treating like cases alike, then we must grant this same sort of epistemic trust to

¹ Due to space limitations, my over-view of Zagzebski's main argument is regrettably brief.

² Zagzebski in Van Aragon (2011), pg. 34.

³ *Ibid*, pg. 25.

others. Premise Z3 follows from Z1 and Z2 to establish Zagzebski's notion of *epistemic universalism*—roughly, if *S* believes that *p*, then this fact gives me a reason to believe that *p*.⁴ Premise Z4 reasserts epistemic universalism when applied to a multiplicity of believers that *p*, but also introduces the notion of *independence of belief*—roughly, a property possessed by a belief in virtue of being acquired independently, rather than having been acquired via some other person's testimony. The idea is that an independent belief “weighs more”, if you will, than a dependent belief. Lastly, Z5 concludes that epistemic universalism, in tandem with the widespread belief that God exists, provides one with a *prima facie* reason to believe that God exists. Thus, concerning Zagzebski's original inquiry as to whether religious belief is reasonable, her consensus gentium argument demonstrates that it can be reasonable, and is so in light of others' responsibly formed beliefs.

2.1 Sub-Argument for Z2

As stated in the introduction, my goal is to demonstrate that Z2 should be rejected. But to do so requires examining the sub-argument for Z2, a formal presentation of which looks something like the following:

Sub-Argument for Epistemically Trusting Others⁵

- S1. 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 inescapable by philosophical reflection.
- S2. Other people's epistemic faculties are like mine.
- S3. We should accept this principle: 'Treat like cases alike'.
- S4. [So] The general attitude of epistemic self-trust commits us to a general attitude of epistemic trust in the faculties of all other human beings.

⁴ This definition is not taken from Zagzebski's essay. Rather, it is taken from her recent BLPR lecture on the same subject (see References).

⁵ This is my own formulation of Zagzebski's argument for Z2. I believe that it charitably captures Zagzebski's reasoning.

Explanation of this argument is as follows. Premise S1 is just the assertion of Z1 from the above consensus gentium argument. Premise S2 appeals to Zagzebski's idea that when we reason with *epistemic conscientiousness*—that is, the “quality of trying hard to get the truth,”—we will arrive at the truth of S2 by observing other people.⁶ Premise S3 is just Zagzebski's assertion of an intuitively agreeable principle which she takes us to be “rationally required to accept”.⁷ Finally, S4 concludes with the assertion that becomes Z2 in Zagzebski's consensus gentium argument.

3. Objections to the Sub-Argument for Epistemically Trusting Others

Although I object to the foregoing sub-argument, I accept as true both premises S1 and S3. Thus, my objections will be directed toward premise S2.⁸

3.1 Objection #1: Indirect vs. Transparent Faculties

Recall that premise S2 says that: ‘Other people's epistemic faculties are like mine.’

The objection I want to raise appeals to Zagzebski's notion of epistemic conscientiousness in the use of one's epistemic faculties. Consider the following passage from Zagzebski:

“Trust in my own conscientiousness is...something that is **transparent** to my mind...I know how hard I am trying...In contrast, my reason to believe other people are conscientious depends upon observations of those people...So my grounds for believing other people are conscientious is **less direct** than my grounds for believing that I am conscientious.”⁹

What this passage highlights is that there is an obvious difference between my faculties and the faculties of others, namely this: The conscientiousness of *my* faculties *can* be known ‘transparently’ by me. On the other hand, the conscientiousness of *other's* faculties *cannot* be

⁶ Zagzebski in Van Aragon (2011), pg. 26.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 30.

⁸ Thanks are owed to James Smartt, Thai Le, and Daniel Lawrence for the discussion wherein I began to formulate these objections (see References).

⁹ *Ibid*, pg. 30; my emphasis.

known ‘transparently’ by me. Instead, I have to rely on observing other people, and then I can indirectly infer that they are, indeed, conscientiously using their faculties.

I imagine an analogous situation might be one where I am jogging at the track. There are beads of sweat on my red face, and I transparently come to see that I feel very hot (temperature); I can *feel* it, and the sensation is clear and immediate. Consequently, I think to myself ‘I feel very hot’. Meanwhile, I see Frank jogging around the track. Because I cannot know transparently that he is hot (temperature), in order to find out whether he *is* hot, too, I must rely on making observations about him, and then making judgments about my observations. I see him, and I see his red face and the beads of sweat on his face. So I think to myself ‘Frank feels very hot’. But as it turns out, he has just arrived at the track, and he is suffering from swine-flu. He is sweating and red-faced because of his illness, and in fact if he were queried, he would report feeling markedly chilled, *not* hot. So the problem is that not only are my observations and judgment’s apt to be wrong, but more importantly, their wrongness stems from a real difference between the degree to which *his* inner states are accessible to me, and the degree to which *my* inner states are accessible to me.

So, if my reasons for self-trust are (largely) because I have transparently come to see my own epistemic conscientiousness, and my reasons for trusting others is (largely) because I have indirectly come to see their epistemic conscientiousness, then there is a difference here with regard to our faculties. If there is such a difference, then these cases are *not* alike, and thus shouldn’t be treated as such. And if *that* is the case, then we can reject S3, which in turn undermines Z2, which in turn causes the consensus gentium argument to fail.

3.2 Objection #2: Against S2—Limited Observation, Limited Trust

The second objection (and, I believe, most effective) is again directed toward S2, and basically asserts that we don't really know the truth of S2. To begin, consider that Zagzebski asserts the following:

“my trust in others depends upon my beliefs that they are like me,” and that “my reason to believe other people are conscientious [like me] depends upon observations of those people and inferences about their inner efforts from their external behavior.”¹⁰

So, we are told that trust in others requires beliefs about those people, and a crucial belief necessary to granting them trust is that they are epistemically conscientious. But to know that they are epistemically conscientious requires that I observe them and make inferences about their inner workings. So, on Zagzebski's account, if I am to trust another, then I must observe them and judge their conscientiousness. To illustrate, if I am to establish that Frank is feeling very hot, I must make observations of him, and make judgments about my observations. Regardless of how successful I am in making inferences about Frank, if I don't even observe Frank, then I haven't even got the grounds on which I can establish whether he is feeling very hot.

My thoughts on this—which constitute my second objection—are as follows. If in order to establish the belief that others are using their faculties in a conscientious manner I need to conscientiously observe folks' external behaviors—and can consequently grant them the same sort of trust I have in myself— then if I haven't observed a person's external behaviors, then I do not have grounds to form the requisite belief, and thus cannot grant them trust. If that's the case, then I would only be permitted to grant trust to those whom I have observed. And those I have observed is a relatively small number of people. Thus, I can only actually grant trust to a small number of people. And if I can only grant this trust to a small number of people, then it doesn't matter how many people say they believe that God exists, because I can only count as reasons for

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pg. 30.

my own belief those beliefs which are held by the people of whom I have made careful observations, and to whom I have granted trust.

I submit that because of the restriction of only granting trust to those whom I have observed, Z2 ought to be modified to read something like this:

Z2*: The general attitude of epistemic self-trust commits us to a general attitude of epistemic trust in the faculties of all other human beings *whom I have conscientiously observed and judged.*

If we replace Z2 with Z2*, then the conclusion of Zagzebski's consensus gentium argument is radically different, sanctioning a reason to believe that God exists *only* in the case that the individuals whose beliefs I take as reasons have been properly vetted by my conscientious judgment. We would then discount the number of believers who did not acquire their beliefs independently (as Zagzebski suggests), AND discount the number of believers that have not been properly vetted. This number would more than likely no longer be in the millions. So, on this objection, even if the consensus gentium argument still goes through, the consensus that ultimately counts toward giving me a reason to believe is rather scant, and perhaps not even enough to give me a reason to believe.

4. CLOSING

Zagzebski puts forth a compelling spin on the consensus gentium argument for the reasonableness of religious belief. But it appears that the move from epistemic self-trust to epistemic trust in others is rather worrisome. I have suggested that there are two objections to Zagzebski's argument, the success of either one of which entails the rejection of Z2, and thus the entire consensus gentium argument falls with it.

REFERENCES

1. Zagzebski, Linda in van Aragon, Raymond (2011), *Evidence and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 22-36.
2. Zagzebski, Linda (Mar. 6th, 2014). “Is it Reasonable to Believe in God?”, *Bellingham Lectures in Philosophy & Religion*. Lecture conducted from Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA.
3. J. Smartt, T. Le, and D. Lawrence, personal conversation (Mar. 4th, 2014), Bond Hall 422.