



Abstract:

In this paper, I address Linda Zagzebski's analysis of the relation between moral testimony and understanding arguing that Aquinas's eudaimonism provides a basis for a solution to how one may use moral testimony in her cultivation of moral understanding and related virtuous acting. I proceed by offering an overview of Zagzebski's account of epistemic universalism, which maintains that the fact that another person believes *p* is a *prima facie* reason to believe *p*. The second part addresses the problem of moral testimony insofar as testimony does not seem capable of producing moral understanding. The third section covers Aquinas's characterization of the eudaimonist framework, particularly in terms of his understanding of *prudentia* and *docilitas*. The final section adapts Aquinas's notions to provide a solution to the considered problem of moral testimony.

Keywords: *Happiness, Linda Zagzebski, morality, testimony*

Introduction

Linda Zagzebski offers a compelling and fresh account of the nature of and justification for epistemic authority. She first introduced her key ideas in the article "Ethical and Epistemic Egoism and the Ideal of Autonomy"¹ and then provided a comprehensive account in her *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy of Belief*. In this paper, I address her notion of the relation between moral testimony and understanding and argue that Aquinas's eudaimonist ethical account provides a basis for a solution to how one may use moral testimony in her cultivation of moral understanding and related virtuous acting.

I proceed by offering an overview of the key aspects of Zagzebski's account relevant to my argument. The second part addresses the problem of moral testimony insofar as testimony does not seem capable of producing moral understanding. The third section covers Aquinas's characterization of the eudaimonist framework, particularly in terms of his understanding of *prudentia* and *docilitas*. The final section adapts Aquinas's notions to provide a solution to the considered problem of moral testimony.

Zagzebski's Basic Account

Zagzebski formulates two basic positions that relate to how the beliefs of others ought to impact an epistemic agent's own beliefs—that is, given that someone else believes *p*, what sort of evidence does that provide for her to believe *p*. Zagzebski refers to the positions as epistemic egoism and epistemic universalism. She begins with a comparison of ethical and epistemic egoism. She characterizes epistemic egoism or epistemic self-reliance in terms of a default distrust in the beliefs of another person as evidence for one's

¹ "Zagzebski, Linda. "Ethical and Epistemic Egoism and the Ideal of Autonomy." *Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* 4:3, 2007, 252-63, p. 252.

own beliefs. Epistemic egoism admits of two versions: extreme and standard. “According to the extreme egoist, I have reason to believe *p* only when the direct exercise of my faculties gives me reasons for *p*.”² The core idea is just as the ethical egoist does not place ethical value on the interests of another, such that she never acts for the sake of another person’s interests unless those interests happen to overlap with her own, so the epistemic egoist places no epistemic value on the belief and associated testimony of another person.

Zagzebski cites Elizabeth Fricker’s characterization of an ideal epistemic agent, who is superior to humans, capable of deriving all knowledge from her own powers and doing so; such an agent does not epistemically depend on anyone else and, thereby, embodies epistemic self-reliance.³ Zagzebski notes that most egoists make accommodations for trusting others and, hence, are not this extreme. In its place, they endorse what she calls “standard epistemic egoism,” of which she states:

The standard egoist agrees with the extreme egoist that no belief is justified unless it is ultimately based on reasons he has acquired by the direct use of his own faculties. The difference is that the standard egoist is willing to use his faculties to determine that he has reason to believe that another person is a reliable source of true beliefs. The reliability of the source must be justified by beliefs he has using his own perceptual faculties, memory, and reasoning.⁴

While standard egoism might be more palatable than the extreme form, Zagzebski contends that both are untenable, and we ought, instead, to endorse epistemic universalism, the view that maintains that “the fact that another person has a certain belief always gives me *prima facie* reason to believe it.”⁵ In other words, our default position should be to trust other persons’ beliefs as evidence for our own to the same extent as we trust our own. However, as Zagzebski notes, this trust can quickly be defeated by various factors, including the perception of a lack, on their part, of epistemic conscientiousness—the disposition to form beliefs out of a concern for the truth.

Zagzebski’s argument concerning the incoherence and untenable nature of epistemic egoism centers on an analysis of the nature and role of self-trust in the epistemic life. The argument runs as follows: Self-trust—the trust that one’s cognitive faculties are reliable—cannot be established by reasoning; any such attempt would inevitably be circular. Furthermore, there is no relevant difference between one’s own cognitive equipment and the equipment of other epistemic agents, particularly if the other agents exhibit conscientiousness; that is, the other agents use their cognitive equipment in a truth-seeking manner. Consequently, there is no *prima facie* rational reason to trust my own faculties but distrust others.

² Zagzebski. *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy of Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 52.

³ Elizabeth Fricker. “Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy.” In Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Epistemology of Testimony*, pp. 225-250. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 243. While this is an ideal, Fricker does not think it is realistic in actual life and endorses a view similar to what Zagzebski calls “standard epistemic egoism.”

⁴ Zagzebski, pp. 54-55.

⁵ Zagzebski, p. 58.

In short, self-trust is pre-rational and trusting oneself commits one to trusting the operation of *any* relevantly similar cognitive equipment as such and not simply one's own; therefore, self-trust commits the agent to a default trust in the beliefs of other epistemic agents who are conscientious to the degree as oneself; a person need not use her own powers to ascertain the reliability of other agents. Zagzebski further contends that an agent who values her own cognitive faculties simply because they are hers values herself more than the truth, which would be an instance of extreme ethical egoism in the realm of the intellect, a position she contends no one would explicitly defend.

Zagzebski's analysis of the relation between self-trust and trust of others establishes that any characterization of epistemic egoism that values the use of one's own cognitive faculties more than those of others must be incoherent. The logic of self-trust commits one to a default trust of others who are as conscientious as oneself and, thus, a rejection of both forms of epistemic egoism. To reiterate a key point of universalism, the fact that another person assents to *p* is a *prima facie* reason to assent to *p*; or in terms of testimony, universalism maintains that one should consider the testimony of a conscientious believer as evidence in favor of *p*, even if one does not have evidence of the other's reliability.

Moral Testimony

Zagzebski turns to an analysis of moral beliefs and how the above considerations affect how we should treat testimony about moral propositions and associated beliefs. She contends that the moral domain involves complexity not found in garden variety beliefs, and, therefore, the fact that another person has moral belief *p* does not necessarily mean that I should accept *p*, even if the other person is conscientious and other defeaters are absent. She focuses upon two problems: first, beliefs based on testimony lack motivational force, and second, they do not yield understanding. She argues that the nature of a community allows for the transmission of both motivation and understanding, though the process is complex. I wish to focus only on the second issue of moral understanding. Nothing I say undermines her case for the role that a community, either religious or other, may play in the communication of moral beliefs. Rather, I think there is a simpler way, which is compatible with her epistemic universalism, that moral understanding can be transmitted.

Zagzebski characterizes moral understanding as follows:

Moral understanding includes seeing the connection between moral reasons and moral judgments, and perhaps also the connection between certain emotional and moral judgments. Understanding permits us to see how to extend a moral judgment to different situations, and to see how distinct moral judgments relate to each other, perhaps because they are grounded in the same general value or principle.⁶

The problem facing moral testimony is that even if it can provide epistemic justification, it does not seem capable of producing this sort of understanding. Understanding requires not just true moral beliefs but also the grasp of the connections and relations between the beliefs and the reasons why they are true. For good, virtuous actions, knowing that a moral

⁶ Zagzebski, p. 175.

proposition is true is insufficient; one must also know why it is true. The “why” cannot be transmitted via testimony, only the “that.”

In short, even if we accept epistemic universalism, moral testimony alone, since it does not transmit understanding, fails to produce what is necessary for conscientious moral acting. Again, Zagzebski contends that communities provide the resources to overcome this limitation. Nonetheless, I think classical eudaimonism provides a much simpler link between testimony and moral understanding compatible with epistemic universalism.

Aquinas on *Prudentia* and *Docilitas*

My basic contention is this: a person’s apprehension that a testifier possesses a share of eudaimonia or happiness bridges the gap between moral testimony and moral understanding. In other words, perceiving that the testifier exhibits happiness gives a person a sense of why she should act on the basis of the testimony. The moral testimony creates the conditions by which she does not merely know that she should do such and such but also why, at least in a preliminary sort of way. She understands the precept’s connection to the attainment of happiness. I think any eudaimonist account could accommodate this point, though for the sake of this paper, I will focus on Aquinas’s version. His thoughts of the nature and place of docility in the context of self-direction provide an attractive framework to develop my thesis.

According to Aquinas, each person has the responsibility of leading and directing oneself to *beatitudo* or happiness and *prudentia* constitutes the key virtue pertaining to this activity, as it is the virtue that perfects practical reason. He notes that prudence involves three acts: counsel, judgment, and command:

Prudence is *right reason applied to action*...Hence that which is the chief act of reason in regard to action must needs be the chief act of prudence. Now there are three such acts. The first is *to take counsel*, which belongs to discovery, for counsel is an act of inquiry...The second act is *to judge of what one has discovered*, and this is an act of the speculative reason. But the practical reason, which is directed to action, goes further, and its third act is *to command*, which act consists in applying to action the things counseled and judged.⁷

The activity of prudence, then, includes taking stock of one’s own moral knowledge and applying it to a given situation. Aquinas notes that this process also includes seeking the counsel of others, discussing this aspect when he considers prudence’s eight integral parts, of which *docilitas* or docility is one.

Docility is the readiness to be receptive to and learn from the counsel of others, particularly the wise. A person makes the counsel of another her own in virtue of a placement of trust in that person. This act of trust occurs within, and not external to, the context of prudence. A person judges that she does not possess adequate knowledge and then judges that another person could provide the necessary guidance. The main reason why Aquinas values docility is that some moral knowledge can be difficult to obtain,

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1948), II-II, 47, 8.

especially for those who lack relevant experience or find themselves in an unfamiliar moral situation. He states:

Prudence is concerned with particular matters of action, and since such matters are of infinite variety, no one man can consider them all sufficiently; nor can this be done quickly, for it requires length of time. Hence in matters of prudence man stands in very great need of being taught by others, especially by old folk who have acquired a sane understanding of the ends in practical matters...Now it is a mark of docility to be ready to be taught: and consequently docility is fittingly reckoned a part of prudence.⁸

Docility frees a person from the confines of her own ignorance and allows the knowledge of others to aid in her pursuit of happiness. Moreover, docility constitutes an essential or integral part of the activity of directing and leading oneself to happiness. Through it, a person apprehends that others possess a share of happiness and thereby she is right to trust in their counsel.

Aquinas and Zagzebski

According to Zagzebski, in many cases, the fact that another person believes p is a reason for the truth-seeking epistemic agent to believe p , provided that the other person is conscientious. However, if p is a moral proposition, then this simple relation may not hold, since adequate moral actions require the agent to not only know that p is true but also why it is true—to have moral understanding. I claim that a person can acquire the “why” or achieve minimally sufficient moral understanding provided that the person perceives the testifier possesses a genuine share of eudaimonia. For example, if Bob, who does not know whether he should give 10% of his income to charity, sees that Mary possesses objective well-being and she believes one ought to give 10% regardless of any other consideration, then Bob can understand why he should follow Mary’s lead. He is in a position to see not merely that he should give 10% but also why—to do so connects to happiness. By way of clarification, it should be clear that the moral testimony alone does not produce understanding. In order to grasp the connection between precept and happiness, each person needs to see for herself that the testifier possesses happiness. Understanding remains a first-person perspective sort of thing, but testimony can provide the content of the precept in question.

Aquinas’s account of docility provides a framework that can be adapted to account for the production of moral understanding from testimony within the universalist structure Zagzebski endorses. If nothing else, even if testimony conjoined with the recipient’s grasp of the testifier’s happiness does not result in understanding, we could say that Aquinas provides a good reason for the standard egoist to accept moral testimony. Again, the standard egoist is one who contends no belief is justified unless it is ultimately based on reasons she has acquired by the direct use of her own faculties, though she is willing to use her faculties to determine that she has reason to believe that another person is a reliable source of true beliefs. In effect, the testifier’s happiness would be proof of

⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 49, 3.

reliability. Nonetheless, my goal is to show the dynamism between testifier and happiness fits with universalism.

The way to do this involves a closer look at conscientiousness. The conscientious person uses her cognitive equipment in a manner governed by the desire to get truth. For Aquinas, truth and goodness are convertible. Truth is being in relation to the mind, while goodness is being in relation to the will. In this case, true beliefs are good for the intellect. Anything good for a part of a person is constitutive of her good as such; it is something that is constitutive of happiness. Therefore, when self-trust entails that I should trust another person's beliefs, provided that she is conscientious, I am simultaneously in a position to acquire moral understanding from her moral beliefs, as her conscientiousness is also indicative of her goodness or happiness.

We might question whether conscientiousness, even as indicative of a person's goodness, suffices as an appropriate threshold for happiness. In other words, since moral understanding requires the grasp of the connection between counsel and that person's happiness, we might suppose that the person has to be, at a minimum, happier than us. We, by way of supposition, are conscientious, so this would not necessarily be the case. I contend that it does suffice and the evidence for this is the reciprocity of moral counsel in actual life. Two equally conscientious people need not have identical moral knowledge. Mary knows more about charitable giving than Bob, but Bob knows more about self-control than Mary. In different circumstances, both can meaningfully acquire moral understanding from respective testimonies.

That being said, this view also allows for the possibility that if someone possesses a substantially greater share of happiness than oneself, her testimony would generate greater initial moral understanding relative to the case above. I think Aquinas has this latter circumstance in mind by specifying the wise, older moral agents as appropriate sources of counsel. He also specifies that perfect moral acting requires acting on one's own counsel.⁹ In terms of a complete account, then, I contend moral testimony can provide sufficient moral understanding to ground virtuously-directed action, but that the understanding preliminary and incomplete. Full moral understanding requires further inquiry and discovery beyond testimony.

In conclusion, we can employ and adapt Aquinas's notions of *prudentia* and *docilitas* to explain how basic moral understanding may be acquired through moral testimony in a concrete and practical manner. Moreover, since conscientiousness satisfies the condition for epistemic universalism, the fact that we can derive moral understanding from testimony adds to Zagzebski's case that epistemic reliance on others is both necessary for and beneficial to moral and epistemic agents.

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⁹ Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, 57, 5, objection and reply 2.

