

Comments on Battaly on Zagzebski Zagzebski-Palooza (July 2022)

Let me just say that it's such a huge honor to have been asked to contribute to the Lindapalooza today. There's simply no other philosopher or friend who has made a bigger impact on the direction of my career and even my family than Linda, so to have this opportunity means a lot. So, thank you—Wayne, Jason, and Heather—for organizing this event and inviting me into it.

But now for my comments on Heather's paper:

Professor Battaly has done a great service for us in offering such an insightful reading of Professor Zagzebski's collected works in epistemology. And her attention, in particular, to the contours of epistemic conscientiousness throughout Zagzebski's thought tracks closely with my own reading of the relevant material. In this brief commentary, then, let me begin by emphasizing that, all in all, I find a lot more agreement than disagreement between Battaly's views and my own.

Let me begin, as does Professor Battaly, by getting Zagzebski's definition of knowledge before us. As Linda defines knowledge, it is "getting the truth through conscientious believing". Now, that definition is actually a bit too wordy for me because it contains a redundancy. As Zagzebski understands acts of intellectual virtue, they are always *successful* at reaching the truth, and so, any belief that results from an act of intellectual virtue will be a true belief. There's no need to state that explicitly. And so, we can define knowledge even more simply as just *conscientious believing*. For if a belief is actually conscientious, then that belief *must* be true; otherwise, it would fail to satisfy the success condition for acts of intellectual virtue.

Why do I emphasize this aspect of the definition so much here? My reason is that the epistemic troubles Battaly ascribes to Zagzebski's views turn, fundamentally, on two issues: Zagzebski's definition of knowledge as conscientious believing and her definition of acts of intellectual virtue as successfully reaching truth. Now to Battaly's worries.

Battaly tells us that her main worry about this analysis of knowledge is that "it precludes people with epistemically vicious motivations from having knowledge" (4). For instance, she gives the example of a vain scientist who is exclusively (or predominately) motivated by fame or prestige; and consequently, they cannot gain knowledge. Why? Because conscientious believing—i.e., knowledge—must be *motivated* by truth, and the scientist is motivated by something else, something vicious. Thus, the scientist cannot come to know.

Battaly considers two responses to this worry given by Zagzebski. The first response is to ascribe a *proximate* motivation for truth to the vain scientist, but I think such a response is really a change in subject. Whatever a proximate motivation might be—e.g., maybe its instrumentally valuing truth insofar as it gets the scientist prestige or maybe the scientist has *mixed* motivations whereby she values both truth and prestige intrinsically—it need not be present in the counterexample. We can stipulatively exclude these nuances, and the problem remains. The second response, then, is, I think, more promising.

On the second response, the vain scientist fails to know because she fails to get *credit* or acquire the beliefs *because of* a conscientious motive.¹ Battaly observes, however, that surely there is *some sort* of credit due to the scientist for acquiring true beliefs. It's just not the credit associated with conscientious motivations. She (Battaly) then asks *why* we would not want to ascribe at least some low-grade knowledge to the scientist? At this point, it's worth recalling that Zagzebski does distinguish the "lofty state" of knowledge found in Plato, for instance, from the empirical knowledge with which many recent epistemologists have been concerned. Thus, I suspect Zagzebski might be happy to grant this sort of low-grade knowledge in cases such as these while preserving her loftier virtue definition elsewhere.

But I want to press this further still because it seems to me that the real culprit in this definition of knowledge is less about including intellectual virtue as a constituent of knowledge as it is about Zagzebski's requirement that there be a success condition on something *counting* as an act of intellectual virtue. And perhaps this is just an internalist inclination, but it seems to me obvious that someone could be wholly motivated by a desire for truth and possess all manner of epistemic skills but, due to an inhospitable epistemic environment, fail to succeed in getting the truth. Evil demon worlds certainly seem to fit the bill, but then, one must either bite the bullet and deny that being motivated by and acting *in accordance* with virtue is sufficient for exercising the virtue—i.e., an externalist analogue—or sever the connection between exercising intellectual virtue and acquiring truth—i.e., an internalist analogue.

Now, this is relevant to Battaly's later worry about including conscientiousness as a virtue, for she contends that, on Zagzebski's account, a conscientious person need not satisfy the *success* condition for intellectual virtue. The problem for Zagzebski here is that she *defines* a conscientious person as one who "is disposed to care about truth and disposed to use her faculties as best she can to try to get truths" (6). But, of course, the distance between *trying* to use one's cognitive faculties well and *succeeding* is one with which we are all intimately acquainted. It is this distance between trying and succeeding that Battaly takes advantage of.

Battaly describes an intellectually 'servile' person who excessively defers to others on matters of what to do or think because of unduly low degrees of epistemic self-trust. This person is disposed to use her faculties as best she can and cares about truth; it's just that even when she would do better to trust her own faculties, she still defers to others. And Battaly wants us, then, to ask: can we really describe this as a case of someone who is *truly* conscientious? She thinks not *if* we keep the success condition on intellectual virtue in the picture. Here's her argument.

Battaly denies that the servile person is successful at using her faculties as best she can to get truths. I'm not so sure we should deny this. Of course, the servile person would do well to trust her faculties more, but if you have an epistemically rational degree of self-trust that's fairly low to begin with, then even if that degree of self-trust doesn't match with your actual reliability, it's not clear to me why your reliability should be the determining factor of whether you are using your faculties well instead of your degree of epistemic self-trust. If the latter, then the servile person does seem to be conscientious. It's just that the lack of other virtues or bad epistemic luck explain their epistemic failures.

¹ Battaly switches examples here, but I think the point can be made without doing so here.

And this brings me to two closing observations. First, whether or not there could be a conscientious servile person also turns on whether Zagzebski would affirm an appropriately moderated unity of the virtues thesis. It might be that someone can only have the virtue of conscientiousness if they also possess some balanced degree of intellectual pride and humility (or some other such intellectual virtue). If so, then there might be a sense in which even if Battaly is right to describe the servile person as lacking conscientiousness, the situation described is in some sense an impossible one, since it proceeds on the assumption that conscientiousness could be possessed independently of these other virtues.

But, lastly, I'd like to briefly touch on the final note left to us by Battaly. When discussing Zagzebski's idea that continuing to trust our faculties upon reflection (in order to reduce internal dissonance) is a rational starting point that gets us out of epistemic circularity worries, Battaly balks at the description of such trust as *epistemic*. She writes,

“If resolving dissonance and increasing inner harmony are themselves pragmatically beneficial, then it can be *pragmatically rational* to resolve dissonance by trusting the reliability of our faculties, even if we haven't shown that they are likely to be reliable. But, it can't be epistemically rational to trust their reliability unless we have shown that they are likely to be reliable (Alston 1993, pp. 130-3)” (9).

This last claim, that trusting our faculties is epistemically rational *only if* we have shown their likely reliability, seems false to me. Much hinges on how one defines and understands epistemic rationality here. If, for instance, one's epistemic equipment counts as properly functioning only when one trusts that equipment to some degree, and if a proper functional account of epistemic rationality is correct, then Zagzebski's claim that trust in oneself is epistemically rational clearly follows, whether or not one has arguments in hand for the reliability of one's faculties. In light of this, then, I'd like to hear more from Battaly on why she hesitates to ascribe epistemic rationality to the resolution of dissonance described at the end of her essay.