Trust in Others and Self-Trust: Regarding *Epistemic Authority*

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Many thanks to Jensen Alex, Valerie Joly Chock, Kyle Mallard, and Jonathan Matheson (2017) for your extensive review of *Epistemic Authority* (2015). I have never seen a work by four philosophers working together, and I appreciate the collaboration it must have taken for you to produce it. I learned from it and hope that I can be a help to you and the readers of SERRC.

**What is Inside and What is Outside**

I would like to begin by summarizing the view of the mind I am using, which I hope will clarify the central place of conscientious self-reflection in my book, and the way that connects with reasons. I am using a modern view of the mind in which the mind has a boundary.¹ There is a difference between what is inside and what is outside. The mind has faculties that naturally aim at making our mental states fit the outside world in characteristic ways. Perceptual faculties, epistemic faculties, and emotional faculties all do that. They may do so successfully or they may not. So perceptions can be veridical or non-veridical; beliefs can be true or false; emotions can fit or not fit their intentional objects. This view of the mind leads to a generalization of the problem of epistemic circularity: we have no way of telling that any conscious state fits an external object without referring to other conscious states whose fittingness we can also question—hence, the need for self-trust. But we do have a way to detect that something is wrong with our connection to the outside world; that we have a mistaken perceptual state, a false belief, an inappropriate or exaggerated emotion, a skewed value, etc, by the experience of dissonance among our states.

For instance, a belief state might clash with a memory or a perceptual state or a belief acquired by testimony, or the cognitive component of an emotional state. Some dissonance is resolved immediately and without reflection, as when I give up my seeming memory of turning off the sprinkler system when I hear the sprinklers come on, but often dissonance cannot be resolved without awareness of the conflicting states and reflection upon them. Since the mind cannot get beyond its own boundary, all we can do is (a) trust that our faculties are generally reliable in the way they connect us to the outside world, and (b) attempt to use them the best way we can to reach their objects. That is what I call “conscientiousness.” I define epistemic conscientiousness as using our faculties in the best way we can to get the truth (48). Ultimately, our only test that any conscious state fits its object is that it survives conscientious reflection upon our total set of conscious states, now and in the future.

The authors raise the objection that my account is not sufficiently truth-centered because there is more than one way to resolve dissonance. That is, of course, true. The issue for a particular person is finding the most conscientious way to resolve the conflict, a question that sometimes has a plain answer and sometimes does not. The authors give the example of a father who cannot bring himself to believe that his son was killed in war even though he

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¹ It is not mandatory to think of the mind this way, although it is the most common view in the modern period. I am working on the difference between this approach and the more open view of the mind that dominated before the modern era in my project, *The Two Greatest Ideas*, Soochow Lectures, 2018.
has been given a substantial body of evidence of his son’s death. It is possible for the man to restore harmony in his psyche by abandoning any states that conflict with his belief that his son is alive. Why do we think it is not rational for him to do that? Because we are told that his own faculties are giving him overwhelming evidence that his son is dead, and presumably his faculties will continue to do so forever. His son will never return. If he is to continue believing his son is alive, he has to continuously deny what he is told by sources he has always trusted, which means he has to continuously fabricate reasons why the sources are no longer trustworthy and are compounding their mistakes, and why new sources are also mistaken. If some of his reasons are sensory, he may even have to deny the evidence of his senses. That means that he is not epistemically conscientious as I have defined it because he is not trying to make his belief about his son true. Instead, he is trying to maintain the belief come what may. But we are told that it is psychologically impossible for him to recognize that his son has died. If that is true, then it is psychologically impossible for him to be epistemically conscientious, and hence rational. I would not deny that such a thing can happen, but in that case there is nothing more to be said.

The Nature of Reasons

This leads to my view on the nature of reasons. Why do we say that the father has many reasons to believe his son is dead, in fact, so many that if he is rational, he will give up the belief that his son still lives? We say that because we know what conscientious people do when given detailed and repeated testimony by sources whose trustworthiness has survived all of their past conscientious reflection and with no contrary evidence. 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.

Self-trust is more basic than reasons because we do not have any reason to think that what we call reasons do in fact indicate the truth without self-trust. (Chap 2, sec.5). Self-trust is a condition for what we call a reason to be in fact an indicator of truth. That means that contrary to what the authors maintain, 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. There can, however, be cases in which it is not clear which way the balance of reasons go, and I discuss some of those cases in Chapter 10 on disagreement. Particularly difficult to judge are the cases in which some of the reasons are emotions.

The fact that emotions can be reasons brings up the distinction between 1st person and 3rd person reasons, which I introduce in Chapter 3, and discuss again in chapters 5, 6, and 10. (The authors do not mention this distinction). What I call 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). 3rd person reasons can be laid out on the table for anybody to consider. I say that 1st person and 3rd person reasons do not aggregate. They cannot be put together to give a verdict on the balance of reasons in a particular case independent of the way they are treated by the person who is conscientiously reflecting. The distinction between the two kinds of reasons is important for more than one purpose in the book. I use the distinction to show
that 1st person reasons broaden the range of reasons considerably, including states of emotion, belief, perception, intuition, and memory.

A conscientiously self-reflective person can treat any of these states as indicators of the truth of some proposition. We think that we access 3rd person reasons because of our trust in ourselves when we are conscientious. And we do access 3rd person reasons provided that we are in fact trustworthy. This distinction is important in cases of reasonable disagreement because two parties to a disagreement share some of their 3rd person reasons, but they will never share their 1st person reasons. The fact that each party has certain 1st person reasons is a 3rd person reason, but that fact will never have the same function in deliberation as 1st person reasons, and we would not want it to do so.

The authors raise some questions about the way we treat our reasons when they are preempted by the belief or testimony of an authority. What happens to the reasons that are preempted? Using pre-emption in Raz’s sense, I say that they do not disappear and they are not ignored. They continue to be reasons for many beliefs. Pre-emption applies to the limited scope of the authority’s authority. When I judge that A is more likely to get the truth whether p than I am, then A’s testimony whether p replaces my independent reasons for and against p. But my reasons for and against p are still beliefs, and they operate as reasons for many beliefs outside the scope of cases in which I judge that A is an authority. Pre-emption also does not assume that I control whether or not I pre-empt. It is rational to pre-empt when I reasonably judge that A satisfies the justification thesis. If I am unable to pre-empt, then I am unable to be rational. In general, I think that we have quite a bit of control over the cases in which we pre-empt, but the theory does not require it. As I said about the case of the father whose son died in a war, I do not assume that we can always be rational.2

On Our Biases

The authors also bring up the interesting problem of biases in ourselves or in our communities. A prejudiced person often does not notice her prejudices even when she is reflecting as carefully as she can, and her trust in her community can make the situation worse since the community can easily support her prejudices and might even be the source of them. This is an important insight, and I think it can bolster several points I make in the book. For one thing, cases of bias or prejudice make it all the more important that we have trust in others whose experience widens and deepens our own and helps us to identify unrecognized false beliefs and distorted feelings, and it makes particularly vivid the connection between emotion and belief and the way critical reflection on our emotions can change beliefs for the better.

2 Christoph Jaeger offers extended objections to my view of pre-emption and I reply in Episteme, April 2016. That issue also includes an interesting paper by Elizabeth Fricker on my book and my reply. See European Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Dec. 2014, which contains twelve papers on Epistemic Authority and my replies, including several that give special attention to pre-emption.
My argument in Chapter 3 that epistemic self-trust commits us to epistemic trust in others, and the parallel argument in Chapter 4 that emotional self-trust commits us to emotional trust in others would be improved by attention to these cases. The problem of prejudice in communities can also support my argument in Chapter 10, section 4 that what I call communal epistemic egoism is false. I argue that communities are rationally required to think of other communities the same way individuals are rationally required to think of other individuals. Just as self-trust commits me to trust in others, communal self-trust commits a community to trust in other communities. Since biases are most commonly revealed by responses outside the community, it is a serious problem if communities succumb to communal egoism.

In the last section of Chapter 10 I propose some principles of rationality that are intended to show some consequences of the falsehood of communal egoism. One is the Rational Recognition Principle: If a community’s belief is rational, its rationality is recognizable, in principle, by rational persons in other communities. Once we admit that rationality is a quality we have as human beings, not as members of a particular community, we are forced to recognize that the way we are seen from the outside is prima facie trustworthy, and although we may conscientiously reject it, we need reasons to do so. It is our own conscientiousness that requires us to reflect on ourselves with external eyes. A very wide range of trust in others is entailed by self-trust. That is one of the main theses of the book.

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References
