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The Rationality of Religious Belief from the Perspectives of John Greco and Linda Zagzebski

An Inadequate Defense Grounded in the Epistemology of Testimony

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Abstract

The rationality of religious beliefs has been a central topic in philosophical inquiry throughout history. Recently, two prominent epistemologists, John Greco and Linda Zagzebski, have defended this rationality within the framework of the epistemology of testimony. Greco, through his general anti-reductionist approach, asserts that religious knowledge is transmitted to recipients via reliable channels of transmission. Zagzebski, on the other hand, argues for the rationality of religious belief by justifying religious authority through a conscientious, self-reflective trust in others—a trust that stems from trust in oneself, which she presents as a deliberative reason. In this paper, we critically analyze the views of Greco and Zagzebski, alongside Jennifer Lackey, to demonstrate the inadequacies in their arguments. Specifically, we aim to critique these two thinkers by examining the logical implications of their positions, ultimately showing that their arguments for the rationality of religious belief are not valid. We identify three key issues with Greco's perspective: (1) it fails to eliminate the influence of epistemic luck; (2) it does not adequately apply to fundamental religious beliefs, which are essential for participation in religious communities; and (3) it encounters the "garbage problem," which remains unresolved. Similarly, we highlight three problems in Zagzebski's view: (1) her approach could classify the beliefs of communities such as terrorists and racists as rational; (2) it necessitates accepting the testimony of authority figures even when they are clearly erroneous; and (3) deliberative reasons are insufficient in addressing significant issues. Therefore, attempting to prove the rationality of religious belief through the epistemology of testimony, at least as proposed by Greco and Zagzebski, leads to a dead end.

Keywords: Rationality of Religious Belief, John Greco, Linda Zagzebski, Jennifer Lackey, Epistemology of Testimony.

Introduction

If we set aside those who consider religious belief irrational and worthless, those who view religious belief as rational and valuable can be categorized into several groups. Historically, until the 19th century, evidentialism dominated the intellectual landscape, with religious belief considered rational because it was grounded in evidence based on foundational beliefs. However, starting in the 19th century, figures like Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein



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argued that religious faith and belief were valuable but not necessarily tied to rational reasoning. In the latter half of the 20th century, with the rise of externalism in epistemology, new perspectives emerged that affirmed the rationality of religious belief without requiring arguments in its favor or belief in it. More recently, with the advent and development of social epistemology, John Greco and Linda Zagzebski have established, in two different ways, the rationality of religious belief within the framework of the epistemology of testimony. In this research, adopting an analytical-critical approach, we will first present the views of these two thinkers. Then, by critically examining the logical implications of their arguments, we will demonstrate that their approach is insufficient in achieving its intended goal. However, while testimony is not entirely without value, it should be seen as contributing to a degree of probability when considered alongside other evidence.

Research Findings

Greco suggests that religious knowledge and reasonable religious belief can be achieved through means other than testimony. He then examines whether three skeptical arguments against religious belief—namely, the argument from luck, the argument from peer disagreement, and Hume's argument from testimony about miracles—achieve their intended effect. Greco argues that the answer is negative, as all three arguments rest on a controversial assumption about the nature of testimony-based evidence and knowledge. The assumption is that testimony serves as a source of knowledge generation rather than merely knowledge transmission. If we accept the possibility of knowledge transmission and assume that religious knowledge is formed in the speaker through means other than testimony, then, provided the transmission is reliable and occurs within a framework of social relations and institutions designed for this purpose, the believer's true belief will not be the result of mere chance. Zagzebski contends that the authority of one's religious community is justified through conscientious judgment. She argues that our pre-reflective self has three components related to truth: a natural desire for truth, a natural belief that this desire is satisfiable, and a natural trust in the adequacy of our faculties to attain truth. Considering the epistemic, affective, and behavioral components of trust, it follows that our belief in the satisfiability of our natural desire for truth is embedded within our trust in our epistemic faculties. Since these faculties operate within an environment, trust in them inherently includes trust in the suitability of that environment. Whether directly or through the faculties of others, this trust extends to the faculties of others as well. Thus, it is natural for us to believe the words of others in our pre-reflective state. Furthermore, through reflection, we recognize that trust in oneself is rational. Consequently, when we act conscientiously in an epistemic sense—when our desire for truth is self-reflective and we utilize our faculties to the fullest to reach the truth—we realize that many others share this same desire and faculties. In such cases, our trust should logically extend to them as well. This constitutes a deliberative reason, a first-person justification connecting one to the truth of a proposition (P). However, there are at least six significant issues with these views, three concerning Greco and three concerning Zagzebski. First, Lackey argues that the reliability of a process does not preclude the influence of luck. There can be two types of luck: in some cases, the output is true by chance (as seen in standard Gettier cases), while in others, the acquisition and use of a reliable process is itself due to luck. Second, even if Greco's anti-reductionist approach is correct, it does not apply to fundamental religious



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beliefs. These beliefs are both deeply significant, influencing all aspects of a person's life, and serve as prerequisites for entering religious communities. Third, Greco faces the "garbage problem," a challenge he has yet to resolve. Fourth, Lackey critiques Zagzebski's view for potentially justifying the beliefs of irrational communities, such as terrorists, racists, and cults. Fifth, according to Lackey, Zagzebski's approach makes it difficult to reject an authority's testimony even when it is clearly false or outrageous, as her view treats such testimony as a preemptive reason. Sixth, deliberative reason is insufficient when addressing significant religious questions, such as the existence of God or the afterlife, which are among the most critical questions in human life. The answers to these questions, whether positive or negative, profoundly impact all aspects of an individual's life or society. Nonetheless, it is possible to differentiate between fundamental beliefs based on their degree of importance and impact. In such cases, Zagzebski's view may be appropriately applied to certain beliefs.

Conclusion

Both Greco's and Zagzebski's approaches have fundamental flaws, making them unsuccessful in proving the rationality of religious belief through the epistemology of testimony. However, if the scope of religious beliefs is limited and their implications are reduced, testimony—when combined with other evidence—can contribute to a degree of probability. Furthermore, if it can be demonstrated that these testimonies come from individuals with epistemic virtues and that there is a significant amount of such testimony, this probability can be strengthened. Therefore, establishing the rationality of religious belief based on the epistemology of testimony hinges on proving the antecedent of this conditional proposition, which future research could explore further.

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