

Epistemology and Abortion: A Fresh Look

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ABSTRACT: Linda Zagzebski's new and widely read text, *On Epistemology*, offers several keen insights into the structure of cognition, the intellectual virtues of the conscientious person, the role of self-trust, and the phenomenon of conversion. Here I suggest how we might apply her insights to today's abortion debate. In doing so, I distinguish between the needs of relative newcomers to the debate and those of longtime activists. In addition, I explore the link between Zagzebski's emphasis on self-trust and John Henry Newman's epistemic personalism.

IN OFFERING A FRESH LOOK at the epistemology of abortion, I see three heartening "signs of the times." The first is that recent opinion polls find that more Americans now identify themselves as "pro-life" than as "pro-choice."¹ The second is the political persistence of pro-life advocacy. Consider its vigor in the national health care debate.² The third is most telling: ready access to, and wide use of, pre-birth ultrasound technology.³ The captivating images that it brings to new parents encourage a strong pro-life spirit. Indeed, within the past year Jorge Lopes has developed rapid prototyping to convert ultrasound and MRI data to life-sized plaster models of living embryos.⁴

To be sure, people read the signs of the times in different ways. Yet

¹ "More Americans 'Pro-Life' Than 'Pro-Choice' for First Time," Gallup Poll, May 15, 2009; "The New Normal on Abortion: Americans More 'Pro-Life,'" Gallup Poll, May 14, 2010.

² For recognition of this point see Sharon Lerner, "Nowhere to Hyde," *The Nation* (April 19, 2010), p. 4. Thanks to Rachel M. McNair for calling attention to Lerner's observations.

³ Oklahoma's new legislation requiring that abortion minded women view ultrasound images of their developing babies is noteworthy.

⁴ See "'Groundbreaking' Invention Creates Life-sized 3D Models of Unborn Children," *Catholic News Association*, July 1, 2009.

we search out signs because we think that they have an underlying intelligibility. How might we bring this intelligibility to center stage? Epistemology, that is, the theory of belief and knowledge and, most importantly, understanding, gives us a way to do so.

In the next decade hundreds of philosophy teachers and their thousands of students will read and discuss Professor Linda Zagzebski's engaging epistemological prospectus. Zagzebski has authored a range of full length studies. Her slender new text *On Epistemology* will win her a wider audience, and it is this text that is the springboard for my comments.

Let me begin with a question that a graduate student, reading *On Epistemology*, posed for consideration. "Given that epistemically conscientious people are on opposite sides of the abortion debate, is there a middle position that might satisfy their core concerns?" Ah, yes, where are we to find the middle ground? (And where, to look in a dark room for a black hat that isn't there?) Still, the student's question was sincere, and many sincere people join in raising it. Might we not again search for a *via media*, for a moderate middle? There remains, of course, the *caveat*: hope cannot come at the expense of truth.

An answer to the student's question depends on two prior questions. There is, first, the theoretical question: what is it to be epistemically conscientious? The second question follows by way of application. Just what are the core points of dispute in the abortion debate?

On Being Epistemically Conscientious

For Zagzebski, we are epistemically conscientious when we are serious about identifying, and adhering to, the *right* ways of believing so that we might come to know and understand. What is it, though, that motivates us to take on this epistemic enterprise? We do so because, by nature, we want true beliefs about what we care about; and we want thereby to come to know and understand what we care about.⁵ Surely, for example, we care about those whom we love. Because we care, we are serious about coming to believe what is centrally true about them;

⁵ Linda Zagzebski, *On Epistemology* (Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 2009), especially Chapter One: "Epistemic Value and What We Care About," pp. 1-24.

and we hope thereby to come to know and more fully understand them as they are.

Let us, then, place ourselves straightway *in medias res*. Do we care about our love-making? Yes. And when we respect ourselves, we care greatly. Do we care, as well, about the life to which our love-making gives rise?⁶ Yes. And if we are decent, we again care greatly. An epistemically conscientious person, it follows, will want to form true beliefs about the living, if not yet born, human being that sexual intercourse brings into existence. Such a person will seek the biological and philosophical beliefs that lead to an understanding of the nature and worth of this new creature fashioned from love.⁷

On Self-Trust

Doubtless, the conscientious seeker of such an understanding will find that others, perhaps no less conscientious, come to different understandings about this new life. Still, our seeker will sustain the right measure of self-trust. Though not sufficient for epistemic conscientiousness, self-trust is necessary to achieve and sustain it. Minimally, self-trust confirms that one's cognitive capacities function well, unless they are specifically shown not to. Self-trust assures one that the world does not systematically elude one's cognitive grasp.

Self-trust, though, points to something more basic, something that John Henry Newman underscores. In his classic work of religious epistemology, *A Grammar of Assent*, he writes: "Everyone who reasons is his own centre...."⁸ Moreover, we cannot stand aside from ourselves, as it were, to evaluate our trustworthiness. "We are," he notes, "as little able to accept or reject our mental constitution, as our being."⁹ Yet we rightly speak of self-trust when we focus on a particular belief or set of

⁶ Whether we will care as much about the life that we bring about in a test-tube is doubtful.

⁷ For a Balthasarian *theology* of the creature of human love-making, see Kathleen Curran Sweeney, "Forgetting the Begetting: Why the Abortion Question is Fundamental" in *Logos* 13/1 (2010): 146-59.

⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, Introduction by Nicholas Lash (Notre Dame IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979), p. 271.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

beliefs.

With this in mind, self-trust places the burden of argument on the skeptic. Self-trust denies skepticism the intellectual default position. Beyond this readiness to call the skeptic's bluff, self-trust recognizes that disagreement with another reasonably conscientious person need not throw one's own belief into doubt. Indeed, were all our beliefs to require the *universal* agreement of reasonable people, we would lack the requisite beliefs for epistemic inquiry or moral *gravitas*.¹⁰

A pair of examples comes to mind. First, for a political case from a different era, consider Governor Adlai Stevenson and Senator Robert Taft. Both were reasonable. Still, they disagreed on a wide range of policy questions. Neither, I think, needed to qualify his beliefs simply because the other did not hold them. We might instructively contrast their substantive debates with our own epistemic milieu. Neither Stevenson nor Taft would let marketing strategies supplant principled political debate. Neither nattered about civility.¹¹ Much less would either voice the sophist's question "Who's to say?" to neutralize a disputed moral judgment.

Consider, for a second example, epistemic self-trust in light of our convictions about how to show love for the creature that love-making brings into existence. The presumption is that one might reasonably love this creature. The presumption is that one might reasonably believe that such a love is incompatible with destroying this creature. That someone else either does not have such a love or does not recognize what it rules out, does not in itself offer grounds for changing one's own beliefs and practices in such matters of life and death.

¹⁰ In a preliminary survey for an ethics course, I ask students to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement: "A moral claim, e.g., slavery is wrong, is true only if everyone believes that it is true." Thus illustrated, most *disagree* with the claim. As the course develops though, students commonly *affirm* the claim with some other example in mind.

¹¹ Civility can be a mixed blessing and is hardly a virtue. John Bunyan's Mr. Worldly Wiseman introduces Civility as the son of Legality; both are ready to relieve Christian of his burden. John Bunyan *The Pilgrim's Progress*, Introduction by H. Elvet Lewis, (London UK: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1907), p. 20.

The Enlightenment Worry

Or perhaps it does. Linda Zagzebski identifies “the Enlightenment Worry” as the view that “[i]rresolvable disagreement over a belief threatens the conscientiousness of the belief.”¹² She links it with an *intellectual equalitarianism* that claims that “all normal human beings are roughly equal in their capacity to get knowledge.”¹³ Suppose, then, that John does think that others are roughly as intelligent and as conscientious as he is. Suppose, for a first example, that John does, and that Mary does not, believe that there is intelligent extra-terrestrial life. Assume, too, that they are roughly equivalent in their intelligence and epistemic conscientiousness. We might plausibly say that their disagreement, once acknowledged, offers *some* challenge to the conscientiousness of their respective beliefs.

For a second example, let’s return to the critical conflict in question. Suppose that someone disputes my belief that abortion destroys a human being who is both the gift of love-making and worthy of love. Assume that the one who challenges my beliefs is roughly as intelligent and ordinarily as epistemically conscientious as I am. Ought I to admit, then, that our disagreement offers *some* challenge to the conscientiousness of my belief?

I do not think that in itself the disagreement, as I present it, does offer such a challenge. But why not? The disagreement about extraterrestrial life, though it might become highly complex, is chiefly a disagreement about what the disputants know or think that they know. But the disagreement about abortion, while it involves knowledge claims, leads to a disagreement in understanding. That is, I understand the pre-born and my relation to him or her in a way that sharply and systematically differs from how my interlocutor understands what is at issue. My understanding, though it calls into play complex knowledge claims, goes beyond the evidence that supports them and beyond their formally logical relations. My understanding embraces, as well as knowledge claims and their logical relations, primary modes of human acting, both on one’s own initiative and in the nexus of one’s

¹² Zagzebski, *On Epistemology*, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

interlinking human communities.¹⁴

On Knowledge vs. Understanding

Once again, Zagzebski is helpful in that she ably distinguishes between knowledge and understanding. Philosophers, at least since Descartes, have explored the sources and nature of knowledge chiefly in its propositional form. That is, their focus is on whether *S* knows that *p*. If *S* does know that *p*, then the next question is how *S* comes to know that *p*. If *S* does not know *p*, a consequent question is whether it is possible, given the relevant sources of knowledge, for *S* to know that *p*. To be sure, philosophers also explore the knowledge of how to do such-and-such. In doing so, they also recognize that *knowing how* is not reducible to *knowing that*.

And what about understanding? It involves propositional knowledge and oftentimes “how to” or technical knowledge. Yet understanding is more developed than either one, or even both taken together, and this is because understanding calls into play an explanatory network.¹⁵ One grasps this explanatory network in the relational context of an epistemic community. Often, the community is broadly educational in character. Education is itself a developmental process with a strongly affective dimension.

Just here a Thomist might introduce the role of *habitus*, that is, the quality of character by which one develops an affinity for or connaturality both with what one understands and with the community that makes it possible for one to understand. This connaturality requires receptivity on the part of one who would come to share in it. Once realized, it allows for the compassion that leads to solidarity. In this sense, Jacques Maritain sees logic, music, and architecture as grafting “the syllogism in the logician, harmony in the musician, [and]

¹⁴ Here I am not thinking of Wittgenstein’s language games; they are both less than universal and at times at odds with knowledge claims. See his *Lectures & Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, compiled from notes taken by Yorick Smythies, Rush Rhees and James Taylor, edited by Cyril Barrett (Berkeley CA: Univ. of California Press, 1972), especially pp. 56-59.

¹⁵ Zagzebski notes that philosophers have long explored understanding as “exhibited by giving an explanation.” See *On Epistemology*, p. 141.

equilibrium of masses in the architect.”¹⁶ Deeper still is source of the piety that one rightly exhibits toward one’s parents. Here Aquinas refers to our parents as our “connatural principle of being.” Reciprocally, a parent’s requisite solicitude for even adult children flows from being the source and principle of their lives.¹⁷

Borrowing from Maritain, we can give examples of how understanding goes beyond knowledge. A beginning student might identify a syllogism. But the logician gives an explanatory account of the many forms of inferential reasoning and what makes them truth-preserving. The neophyte struggles to play a first chord on his or her guitar. The classical guitarist deftly moves from chord to chord, knowing both the mood a particular composition evokes and why it does so. The building committee interviews a master architect for its newly funded facility. It is the architect, however, who understands the blueprints, as it were, from the inside.

In summary, understanding begins with both *knowing that* and *knowing how*. It further develops an explanatory grasp of what one understands and of one’s participation in a community of teaching and learning. Finally, it involves a quality of character that leads to an affinity for what one understands.

Let’s revisit now the impasse between the intelligent and epistemically conscientious pro-life advocate and the intelligent and epistemically conscientious abortion apologist. Let’s assume that, with regard to these qualifications, they are roughly equivalent. A review, however, of these qualifications leads us to competing sets of propositional knowledge claims. In addition, it leads us to evaluate each disputant’s grasp of technical questions about abortion. At this level, the disputants might well experience epistemic dissonance when they engage in debate.

Yet this level of the debate is not the most significant part of the abortion debate. The deeper level takes us to the role of understanding. Here the central question becomes: how does the pro-life advocate

¹⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, translated by Joseph W. Evans (New York NY: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1962), p. 12.

¹⁷ ST II-II, q. 101, a.2 and a.3.

understands abortion? It is as a violent rupture in the development of the pre-born in his or her elemental environment of nurturing. It is surely *not* understood as a right of bourgeois privacy, possessive individualism, ungrounded autonomy, or public health. In itself, then, moral disagreement about abortion at derivative and restricted levels is unlikely to compromise so basic an understanding of what is at stake.

On Conversion

Nonetheless, some people do experience a conversion in their moral understanding of abortion. Rachel MacNair recently wrote of her own personal conversion.¹⁸ Again coming to our aid, Zagzebski offers us insight into epistemic conversion. It is, for her, a deep restructuring of one's belief system. In some few cases, she thinks that an epistemically conscientious person has a duty to convert. With such a conversion, one's initial self-trust gives way before a coherent belief-system and in discussion with an epistemically admirable person who presents it. Moreover, in such cases, public evidence is not the chief catalyst for conversion; rather it is a shift in one's emotions.¹⁹ MacNair, for example, writes of being "startled" by a former back-alley abortionist who, after *Roe v. Wade*, opens an office "literally on Main Street."²⁰ In contrast, Zagzebski's example of this phenomenon is theoretical and religious, the supposed case of one who converts to Hinduism.

Zagzebski means only to sketch what is at issue in conversion, and she welcomes its development. Reflecting on religious conversion, David Mills identifies the personal turn from debate to discovery.²¹ We can gain insight into this movement by using John Henry Newman's famed distinction between notional and real assent. In particular, we should consider the role that imagination plays in moving one from the former, which is abstract, to the latter, which is concrete. In discussing the limits of notional beliefs, Newman writes

¹⁸ Rachel MacNair, "My Personal Journey on the Abortion Issue," www.friendsjournal.org, retrieved 3/17/2010.

¹⁹ Zagzebski, *On Epistemology*, pp. 100-01.

²⁰ MacNair, "My Personal Journey on the Abortion Issue," p. 2.

²¹ David Mills, "The Anatomy of Conversion," *New Oxford Review* (April, 2010), pp. 22-26.

The heart is commonly reached, not through the reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions.... Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma: no man will be a martyr for a conclusion.²²

Imagination, as Newman deploys it, plays a critical role in his account of conversion. But imagination is personal in a way that inference is not. Without particular images, one rarely moves *from* an abstract propositional assent *to* a real assent to the truths by which one lives. Yet we cannot share particular images in the way that we might share abstract generalizations.

Indeed, we must seek out such images for ourselves, and when we find them we can experience them personally. Just here, I submit, we can return to the impact of pre-birth ultrasound technology welcomed at the start of this essay. The images that it brings us are striking, and they are especially striking for women and men who seek them out.

An Envoi

In summary, Linda Zagzebski's epistemology offers keen insights into the dynamic structure of cognition. It first calls attention to the qualities of the epistemically conscientious person. Then it links honest and informed inquiry with the need for self-trust. It highlights how the Enlightenment Worry tests this self-trust. It also helps us appreciate the pivotal distinction between knowledge and understanding. Finally, it encourages an epistemology of conversion.

My remarks, thus far, have suggested how we might apply Zagzebski's framework to the abortion debate with which we are so familiar. This application serves us well in clarifying what is at stake in the abortion debate for relative newcomers, and we need to remind ourselves that students have their own point of entry to that debate. But most of us here have been long engaged in this debate. Ordinarily, I venture to say, *we* do not find our opponents to have the propositional knowledge that comes with sustained epistemic conscientiousness.

Two main factors, I think, account for our experience. The first is that the arguments for abortion on demand, though shockingly weak, are

²² Newman cites this passage from an earlier work in *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, p. 89.

endlessly repeated. Whatever the few hard cases might be, the arguments to justify the tens of millions of abortions since *Roe v. Wade* patently fail. But what makes for the prevalence of such arguments? This question leads to the second factor. There is an epistemic numbness that comes into play when self-deception leads people to accept fallacious arguments. What Elizabeth Anscombe called “the endless twistiness of the human mind” has purchase here.²³ This epistemic numbness ushers in a numbness of conscience.²⁴ We must call it by name or ourselves succumb to it.

Here John Henry Newman helps clarify a judgment that might seem harsh. He distinguishes between one who investigates and one who inquires.²⁵ One’s inquiry demands that one be epistemically conscientious. Failing this, one lessens the likelihood of gaining the true and avoiding the false. But, for Newman, one who has come to understand a truth of great importance must not act as if he or she did not yet know that truth. To treat a truth as still in doubt is to forfeit that same truth.

Finally, Newman offers the pro-life activist pastoral as well as epistemic counsel. Do we experience times of difficulty? “Such anxieties and alarms,” he writes, “may be merely emotional...parallel to that beating of the heart before a battle, when standing still to receive the first attack of the enemy.”²⁶

What else to say? Only this: be afraid, yet doubt not.²⁷

²³ Elizabeth Anscombe, “War and Murder” in her *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Minneapolis MN: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 60.

²⁴ For the collapse of conscience, see John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* §24.

²⁵ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, pp. 159-60.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁷ Linda Zagzebski graciously commented on an earlier version of this essay. I thank Errol Harris for his “stage-setting.”