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Alston's "Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology" - Book Review

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Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology. By WILLIAM P. ALSTON. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989. 279 pages. \$34.95; \$12.95 (paper).

Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge. By WILLIAM P. ALSTON. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989. 354 pages. \$44.95; \$15.95 (paper).

Those familiar with the influence of William Alston on philosophy of religion and epistemology will soon recognize the value of these two volumes. Both collections of Alston's own essays, they illustrate the consistency of rigor with which Alston tackles philosophical problems, as well as the consistency of his position. The first brings together articles, all written since 1980, on various aspects of language about God (metaphor, literalness, reference), God's nature (foreknowledge, belief, immutability, simplicity), and God's relation to the world (morality, spiritual development). The second volume of essays, with the earliest piece written in 1971, deals with foundationalism, epistemic justification, internalism, externalism, and self-knowledge. In both works, the introductions help to delineate Alston's overall picture of his subjects—God, language, and epistemology.

General features of Alston's positions quickly surface. First, and perhaps foremost, is his realism in matters both theological and epistemological. An illustration of the former is Alston's commitment to a literal core of meaning with regard to talk about God. The latter appears in the externalist aspect of his epistemology, namely, that there must be a reliability constraint on epistemic principles so that when engaging in our epistemic practices we generate mostly true beliefs rather than false ones. A second general feature is Alston's antiscientism and antipositivism, illustrated by his willingness to take seriously the questions of the skeptic. He is clearly not a Wittgensteinian, for although the limits on our epistemic access to the world may make us "epistemologically humble," we still have access. Alston's emphasis on the multiple sources of belief and, in particular, religious belief, is the third general feature of the works. Influenced here by common sense, realist philosopher Reid, and, to some extent, by a nonpositivist reading of Wittgenstein, Alston encourages a broad approach to epistemic justification, including argument and many types of experience.

Alston says of his positions in philosophical theology that they take a middle way. This can easily be extended to both works. Taking neither obscure nor radical positions, Alston's writing in both epistemology and philosophical theology is commonsensical. Examples from each illustrate this point. In *Epistemic Justification*, Alston argues for an internalist externalism about epistemic principles. He carefully spells out different kinds of internalism: perspectival, accessibility, and consciousness. The first claims that what justifies one's beliefs can only be "what is within the subject's perspective in the sense of being something the subject knows or justifiably believes" (p. 233). The second suggests that what justifies can

only be “that to which the subject has cognitive access in some specially strong form” (p. 233). The third holds that only “those states of affairs of which the subject is actually conscious or aware can serve to justify” (p. 233). The first of these conceptions of internalism he rejects, for it relies on a deontological account of justification that too strongly assumes that we have voluntary control over our beliefs. The third he rejects since it requires an infinite regress of justification. The second is Alston’s chosen position, but even here he proposes a very weak accessibility constraint so as to rule out neither beliefs we typically take to be justified nor beliefs we typically take to be rational. On the other hand, the externalist aspect of his approach claims that “it is both necessary and sufficient [for what constitutes an adequate ground of belief] if the world be such that the ground be sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief, both necessary and sufficient that this actually be the case, and neither necessary nor sufficient that the subject have any cognitive grasp of this fact” (p. 244). Thus he combines what he takes to be the truth of two quite different positions into a middle way.

In *Divine Nature and Human Language*, the middle way also emerges in a number of instances. Alston argues in the first section that although we can make literal claims about God, we cannot do so in such a way that all the details are known. For example, in “Functionalism and Theological Language,” he suggests that “the common possession of abstract features is compatible with as great a difference as you like in the way these features are realized” (p. 66). Thus, a computer and a new acquaintance can both be “intriguing,” where the term is used with one sense, but where what makes one thing intriguing is quite different from what makes the other so. And so with God. God might be able to make something, as we humans do, and yet not *do* so in any way like the way humans do. A second example comes from a later essay where Alston compares the Thomistic and Hartshornean positions on attributes of God and attempts to keep the best of both. Hartshorne rejects the Thomistic proposal altogether, for he reasons that this position requires that one understand the attributes to be logically interconnected. Breaking the attributes into two groups, Alston argues that Hartshorne’s arguments linking them are faulty and suggests a “mixed” conception of the attributes made up of Thomistic (classical) and Hartshornean (neoclassical) attributes.

The books may be disappointing to readers outside the fairly narrow constraints of contemporary analytic philosophy because of the realist assumptions Alston makes. For example, theologians influenced by postmodernist considerations will find Alston’s emphasis on literal talk of God to be either unacceptable, given the relativistic and pluralistic situation in which we find ourselves, or simply out of touch with contemporary theology. There may also be resistance to Alston’s use of the technical terminology of contemporary analytic philosophy. Unless one is schooled in the terminology and its implicit distinctions and arguments, it may be difficult to see the larger painting for the dots of paint. On the other hand, for analytic philosophers, the discussions will not have this weakness. Alston has great breadth of knowledge in philosophy and draws on that knowledge to generate a tightly reasoned but measured approach to philosophical issues. His commonsensical but important distinctions need to be taken seriously, for they can help philosophers avoid certain problems that mark the philosophical map.

Philosophers of science, however, may find the works lacking a sensitivity to problems and developments in that field. Contemporary analytic epistemologists, including Alston, have not, perhaps, taken the findings of philosophy of science seriously enough, at least in terms of how those findings impinge on the theory of knowledge. The realism implicit (and explicit) in Alston's position is a large commitment for which the actual methodology of science may not allow.

Nevertheless, the two volumes are germane to the discussion of religion and science in a number of ways. Note, for example, Alston's comparison between the scientist's use of terms in technical yet literal senses and the theologian's capacity to do likewise (*Divine Nature*, p. 45). Also of interest is the antipositivistic, antiscientistic approach Alston takes. What does this entail for discussions of science and religion? Furthermore, the groundwork is laid, in these two collections, for a forthcoming monograph on the perception of God, in which Alston will be extending his already prolific contributions to that topic. He argues in essays already published but not anthologized in the two books being reviewed (see, for example, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983]), that the perception of physical objects and the perception of God are on equal footing epistemically. This position is to be further developed in the forthcoming book. Taken together, these two works and the third to come will provide much that is valuable for the discussion of the relationship of science and religion.

In short, these two volumes are well worth reading, even for those whose background in analytic philosophy may not be strong, for Alston's insights are helpful and his position moderate. Furthermore, the positions he takes here have an important role to play in his broader epistemology of religion, which is central to contemporary analytic thought on that matter. Alston's work should not be ignored.

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