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# Introduction: Paradigms, Theism, and the Parity Thesis

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## Introduction: Paradigms, Theism, and the Parity Thesis

Few claims are more controversial than that beliefs about God are rational. Challenges to theism are many and diverse, ranging from the problem of evil to the meaninglessness of theistic utterances. Given this healthy and robust religious skepticism, it is somewhat surprising and refreshing to discover philosophers who claim that beliefs about God are not only rational but just as rational as many nontheistic beliefs that nearly everyone accepts as obviously rational. In short, they argue for a kind of epistemic parity between theistic and nontheistic beliefs.

Perhaps this claim is less surprising in light of twentieth-century developments in epistemology, philosophy of science, and other related fields. The profound difficulty of spelling out the rationality of scientific claims and theories is by now well known among philosophers. Not only are scientific claims difficult to pin down vis-à-vis rationality, but the notion of rationality is itself, to understate the point, less than obviously clear. In fact, it is considered vital these days to spell out what is meant by the term "rational" before discussing whether a given belief *is* rational. Since my topic is the rationality of belief in God, I should be, accordingly, expected to do just that. Nevertheless, although I am prepared to point toward the neighborhoods in which to find the notions of rationality that are my concern here, I do not provide detailed directions at this early stage. There are two reasons to be reticent. First, the neigh-

borhoods are crowded and not well lit. Second, the work of the philosophical mapmakers in this area is work in progress; many concepts of rationality are currently being explored, and the two philosophers on whom I concentrate—William P. Alston and Alvin Plantinga—are directly in the thick of these explorations. Since in this essay I consider, as well as extend, the thought of two working epistemologists, it is important to note that their thinking on these topics has developed over several years. In short, any map of the neighborhoods will be quite complex, and thus to point at this juncture to details would be to run ahead without preparation into the dark. It is better to let the details unfold as we proceed. Be that as it may, maps start out only as sketches, and thus it serves us well if some account of the parity thesis can be given, leaving the details of description until needed.

### 1. The Parity Thesis and Epistemic Status

As noted, some philosophers claim that theistic beliefs (*viz.*, beliefs about God or his activity) are as epistemically viable as commonly held nontheistic beliefs. I call this claim the “parity thesis”:

Parity Thesis<sub>1</sub> (PT<sub>1</sub>): Theistic beliefs have the same epistemic status as commonly held but obviously rational nontheistic beliefs.

There are many questions to ask about PT<sub>1</sub>. What is epistemic status? What is rational belief? Which theistic beliefs have the suggested status? which nontheistic beliefs? For example, is the belief that God loves me, formed under conditions often considered adverse to the truth of that belief—say, having experiences of great evil—just as epistemically viable as the belief that I see a computer while I am looking at a computer and other conditions are normal? The first issue to note is a point now widely accepted among epistemologists. The applicability of epistemic notions is context-dependent. Thus, any version of the parity thesis must be tied to specific conditions. So:

Parity Thesis<sub>2</sub> (PT<sub>2</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, a theistic belief (of a certain kind) has the same epistemic status as a nontheistic belief (of a certain kind),

where the “certain kinds” must be specified.

What does it mean to say that two beliefs have the same epistemic status? Alston describes what he calls the “epistemic point of view.” He writes that “that point of view is defined by the aim of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs,” where the qualification about a “large body of beliefs” is added in order to avoid reaching the aim simply by believing only what is obviously true.<sup>1</sup> In regard to the epistemic point of view, there are many important notions that range, on the positive side, from certainty through knowledge to (something like the inelegantly stated) not deontologically unacceptable, with many rungs on the ladder in between.<sup>2</sup> To discover the many related notions, and understandings of those notions, one can begin considering philosophers (standing in a long tradition) who think knowledge is justified true belief. Depending on whom one reads, *justification* is understood as anything from epistemic dutifulness to reliability or coherence. And *rationality* can be understood as what Plantinga calls “Foley rationality” after Richard Foley’s account in *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* in which rationality is aligned with action aimed at some goal.<sup>3</sup> Or it can be understood as a deontological notion dealing with one’s noetic duty. As well, rationality can be thought of in terms of noetic virtue. Finally, some epistemologists use the term *warrant*. Plantinga, for example, separates warrant or positive epistemic status (that thing, enough of which, along with true belief, is sufficient for knowledge) from justification because the latter term suggests “duty, obligation, permission, and rights—the whole deontological stable.”<sup>4</sup> And, he notes, the

1. William P. Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” in Alston, *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 83; originally in *Monist* 68 (1985): 57–89.

2. Two points need to be mentioned here. First, perhaps the ladder metaphor is misleading, unless the ladder is more like a rope web with connections in all directions. The notions of rationality, epistemic justification, warrant, and truth are connected in many ways and not in any neat or obvious fashion. See Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” and Alvin Plantinga, “Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function,” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 1–50. Second, I say “positive,” for one might say that there is a range of negative epistemic notions as well. For example, there is Roderick Chisholm’s notion of withholding judgment, as well as all the notions surrounding what is *irrational* to believe.

3. Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

4. Plantinga, “Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function,” p. 3. Plantinga most fully makes the distinction between warrant and justification in *Warrant: The*

latter notions do not play a direct role in knowledge at all. In somewhat the same vein, but for different reasons, Alston argues that justification is not necessary for knowledge.<sup>5</sup> The important point is that there is no single nor even a mere handful of central epistemic notions.

Given that epistemic notions are so disparate, one should wonder how the parity thesis, as described above, is to be understood. It is difficult to give a general but interesting version of the thesis; it is better to evaluate detailed and specific versions. But this makes matters complex, for there are perhaps as many detailed versions as there are understandings of epistemic notions. As first steps toward spelling out at least some of these more specific versions, consider that  $PT_2$  remains open in at least three ways: (1). It remains open with regard to the exact nature of epistemic status. For example, is it a normative notion or a truth-conducive notion, and, if it is normative, how are we to understand the nature of the normative account? (2). It remains open with regard to various epistemic features beliefs falling under it might have. For example, even though two beliefs might have the same epistemic status with regard to a normative, permissive justification, they need not have the same status in terms of other features necessary for knowledge—say, Plantinga's notion of warrant—or, perhaps, in terms of other kinds of justification—say, a truth-conducive kind (where a belief's being justified comes to something like “more probably true than false” or perhaps “at least likely to be true”). (3). It remains open not only with regard to the *kind* of epistemic status but to the *level* or *strength* of that status. Given, for example, that two beliefs have a certain kind of truth-conducive justification, one may have more of that kind of justification than the other. So, although both are justified, one is more probably true than the other.

Perhaps to close at least this last bit of open-endedness, the parity thesis is best stated in this way:

Parity Thesis<sub>3</sub> ( $PT_3$ ): Under appropriate conditions, a theistic belief (of a certain specified kind) has at least the same kind and level of epistemic status as a nontheistic belief (of a certain specified kind).

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Current Debate, and *Warrant and Proper Function* (both New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

5. See Alston, “Justification and Knowledge,” in *Epistemic Justification*.

But since it is not just beliefs with which epistemologists are concerned but also the practices that generate them and the people who form the beliefs and follow the practices, the final general account of the parity thesis is this:

Parity Thesis: Under appropriate conditions, (1) *S*'s engaging in an epistemic practice *EP*, which generates theistic beliefs (of a specified kind), or (2) *S*'s believing that *p*, where *p* is a theistic belief (of a specified kind), has the same level and (specified) kind of epistemic status as (3) *S*'s engaging in an epistemic practice *EP*<sup>\*</sup>, which generates nontheistic beliefs (of a specified kind), or (4) *S*'s believing that *p*<sup>\*</sup>, where *p*<sup>\*</sup> is a nontheistic belief (of a specified kind).

This is a very general claim. In order that the parity thesis have some epistemological teeth, the practices or beliefs on both the theistic and nontheistic sides of the balance need to be specified and described in more detail. For example, suppose the thesis claimed something like this:

Parity Thesis<sub>sense perceptual</sub>: Under appropriate conditions, theistic beliefs about God's presence in my life and the practices that generate them have the same level of deontological epistemic justification as sense perceptual beliefs and the practices that generate them.

Although one might wish for more specificity yet (e.g., what are the appropriate conditions, what exactly is deontological justification, and what are the inner workings of sense perception and the theistic belief-forming practice?), at least this version has some bite and, in fact, is a claim with which many—theists and nontheists alike—might disagree. It is clear that one cannot decide on the truth of the parity thesis unless specific versions are laid out for inspection.

I believe, however, that the general version of the parity thesis captures something of the spirit of the work of both Plantinga and Alston and, more generally, of the position sometimes called Reformed epistemology. This is a self-descriptive term used by some philosophers associated in one way or another with Calvin College

and the Reformed tradition in Christian theology.<sup>6</sup> Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff are two central figures of this group. Alston, another central figure, is not of Reformed theological background, at least in the same sense. He has, nevertheless, worked extensively with Plantinga and Wolterstorff on the epistemology of religion. For ease of discussion, I simply baptize Alston a Reformed epistemologist. Although I believe each of the Reformed epistemologists would agree (or would have agreed, given some of their writings) in spirit with the parity thesis, each of them has a different picture of which theistic beliefs (or practices) and nontheistic beliefs (or practices) have epistemic parity. As noted, I focus here on the work of Plantinga and Alston. I take their work as normative of the approach of Reformed epistemology.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Paradigms of Rational Belief

If one ignores the claims of global skepticism by turning one's philosophical back on the skeptic, certain kinds of beliefs emerge as paradigms of rationally held beliefs—beliefs about medium-sized physical objects, for example. Indeed, Alston takes such beliefs to be central when he concentrates on what he calls “perceptual practice” (PP) and its deliverances as paradigmatically rational.<sup>8</sup> It is rational, he admits, to believe that there is a tree in front of me only under certain conditions, for example, when the lighting is sufficient or when my perceptual faculties are operating normally. But given these conditions, many physical object beliefs—specifically those we form using sense perception and its related epistemic practices—are paradigm cases of rational beliefs.<sup>9</sup> Alston also pro-

6. There appears to be no necessary connection between the epistemological accounts developed by the Reformed epistemologists and the theological tradition with which they have been identified.

7. Another way to think of Reformed epistemology is to note its reliance on, and use of, the work of Thomas Reid. All these philosophers, Plantinga, Alston, and Wolterstorff, appeal at various points to Reid's work.

8. See Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

9. The phrase “physical object beliefs” is much broader than the phrase “perceptual beliefs.” But many of our physical object beliefs result from the use of our perceptual capacities. My concern is with physical object beliefs taken in the nar-

vides a detailed account of the nature of the rationality qua justification he has in mind. Even without considering those details, one can see clearly, given his comparison of perceptual and theistic beliefs and practices, that Alston has held some version of the parity thesis in several works.<sup>10</sup>

Plantinga likewise is concerned with certain paradigm cases of rational belief. He includes cases of perceptual belief such as that I now see a tree (when I am looking at one), but his range of admissible beliefs is larger than simply the set of sense perceptual beliefs. He suggests that it is perfectly rational to believe that that person is in pain (when she is writhing in pain before us) and that I remember eating breakfast this morning (when it seems to me that I remember eating breakfast). Here we see Plantinga's willingness to include in the set of paradigmatically rational beliefs two other kinds of belief often held to be problematic for human rationality—memory beliefs and beliefs about other minds. This inclusivism, long characteristic of Plantinga's work, is indicative of the spirit of the Reformed epistemologists.<sup>11</sup> Both Alston and Plantinga have appealed to fairly weak notions of rationality: Alston appeals to weak, normative justification, Plantinga to proper basicity, where this notion is to be understood within a normative account of rationality in which one is permitted to believe, or where one is within one's rights in believing, a proposition.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the parity thesis emerges.

In the broader work of Alston and Plantinga there are variations on this theme. The work of Plantinga since about 1986 concentrates on what he calls "warrant"—as Plantinga says, that thing, enough of which, along with true belief, gives humans knowledge. And Alston is well known for his work in general epistemology. Nevertheless, Plantinga's work on epistemology from about 1979

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rower sense of those delivered by perception. Unless a cleaner distinction is called for, I do not make it.

10. He moves away from this position in Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991). I have more to say about this in Chapter 8.

11. See, for example, Plantinga, *God and Other Minds: A Study in the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967).

12. See Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," and Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," both in *Faith and Rationality*.

through 1986 is concerned to evaluate the charge that one cannot rationally hold theistic beliefs since such beliefs are supposed to be noetically deficient, whereas perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other minds are not. And in several essays Alston considers both normative and evaluative accounts of justification where he appears not to be concerned about knowledge per se. I use these earlier works, where various accounts of the parity thesis emerge, as a springboard for a broader discussion that includes consideration of later developments.

It seems fair to say, overall, that Alston and Plantinga point to three pivotal kinds of belief as paradigms of rational belief: (perceptually delivered) physical object beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other minds. To facilitate discussion in the remaining pages, let us take the following as examples of members of the set of paradigm rational beliefs.

- (1). A tree is there.
- (2). That person is in pain.
- (3). I ate breakfast this morning.

When I refer to the paradigm beliefs, I have these examples in mind, although they are simply representative of the set of paradigmatically rational beliefs more broadly construed as the sets of (perceptually delivered) physical object beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs about other minds.

Given these examples, the parity thesis has the following application. The beliefs that

- (4). God created the world.
- (5). God created the flower that is before me.
- (6). God forgives my sin.

have the same level and kind of epistemic status as (1), (2), and (3). Of course, the kind must be specified, and one must leave open the possibility that other kinds of epistemic status may accrue to either theistic or paradigm beliefs while not accruing to the others. The strongest versions of the parity thesis have it that theistic and paradigm beliefs have exactly the same kind and level of epistemic sta-

tus and that that level and kind are the best (or strongest) kind of justification available.<sup>13</sup> But the central point is that any skepticism with regard to the specific kind of justification laid at the feet of the paradigm beliefs is a skepticism to be laid at the feet of the theistic beliefs, and vice versa. I do not mean to claim, and neither does Plantinga or Alston, that there are no differences among (1), (2), and (3) or among (4), (5), and (6). The point is rather that the general kinds of consideration that go into providing the rationality of the paradigm beliefs also go into providing the rationality of theistic beliefs, and vice versa.

### 3. Goals

If the parity thesis captures a central claim of Reformed epistemology, then Reformed epistemology puts forth an intriguing claim. That theistic beliefs may have the same epistemic status as other more commonly accepted nontheistic beliefs is a suggestion many theists would surely welcome. But do theistic beliefs have such a status? My overarching goal is to argue that, strictly speaking, none of the versions of the parity thesis attributable to Alston or Plantinga is successful. Each one fails because of a lack of recognition of the necessary role of an epistemic base—a set of background beliefs—in the formation and justification of certain kinds of belief. But I do wish to defend, and work within, the general spirit of the Reformed epistemological frame work. Insofar as I have success in the latter task, this is an essay in Reformed epistemology (i.e., in its spirit) rather than an essay on Reformed epistemology (i.e., critical of it). Insofar as I have success in the former, this is also an essay on Reformed epistemology.

My aims fall into three categories. First, I wish to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the rationality of belief in God, for much disagreement about it remains. It does seem to a great many philosophers of religion that belief in God is rational. I throw in my lot with these. But there is disagreement among philosophers of religion not only about whether theistic belief *is* rational but also

13. It should be noted that what counts as best may need analysis. One might ask, best for what—truth, living a peaceful life, being happy?

about *how* it is rational. I hope to add at least a modicum of insight into this latter debate.

My second area of concern is to provide an account and analysis of various versions of the parity thesis and related suggestions arising out of Reformed epistemology. The claims of Alston and Plantinga are my focus, and I present some criticisms of the positions of each. I believe these criticisms raise some difficult, and overlapping, challenges to each of their more or less explicit versions of the thesis, in particular where epistemic parity is said to exist between sense perception and theistic epistemic practices. But there are also problems when some of their more recent work is applied to other versions of the parity thesis, versions that I construct based on their fundamental strategies. I explore these as well.

I weigh Alston's and Plantinga's various parity theses and find them wanting. In particular, their accounts of theistic experience and the epistemic practices that generate theistic belief need refining. Once this is done, the third aim can be fulfilled: to suggest and defend a version of the parity thesis that does not fall prey to the criticisms laid against the theses suggested by Alston and Plantinga. As well, I draw several important parallels between the two practices to which this new parity thesis calls attention. Hence, I attempt to make a positive case for the plausibility of the parity thesis thus understood. Overall, then, I hope to clarify and defend the project of Reformed epistemology.<sup>14</sup>

14. There are two respects in which I am hesitant to characterize my position as Reformed. The first is that both Alston and Plantinga take foundationalist positions in their epistemological theories. As becomes clear, I am less sanguine about foundationalism than either Alston or Plantinga. But Wolterstorff's position is not (or at least not clearly) foundationalist, and so perhaps my position is not ill-described as Reformed. Second, both Plantinga and Alston are unabashed metaphysical realists. Since my philosophical youth, I too have been so unabashed. In (what I hope is only) my early mid-life, I have become unsure of this position. (Do philosophers qua philosophers have mid-life crises?) But I need not commit myself to one position or the other here, since much of what I say is, I believe, compatible with a metaphysical realist position. Whether or not one's being a metaphysical realist is a necessary condition of being epistemologically Reformed is not an issue I enter here.