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The Doxastic Practice Approach

We have thus far considered two different versions of the parity thesis. Neither of them is successful, or so I have argued. There is a third possibility, however, one that emerges from some claims in Alston's "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology." My goals in this chapter are to explain Alston's doxastic practice approach, to explain the parity thesis that emerges from that approach, and to show how the background belief challenge applies to it. This is the last of the parity theses I mine out of Alston's work.

1. A Doxastic Practice Approach to Epistemology

In the essay in question, Alston suggests a second approach to the issue of being justified in a belief that a practice is reliable. He distinguishes between metaepistemology and substantive epistemology. The former is "a view about epistemology, its nature, conduct, methodology, and prospects—rather than a position developed in the prosecution of the discipline itself."¹ The latter is the doing of epistemology proper—the discovery of epistemic practices, exploring how they are structured, what the criteria of justi-

1. Alston, "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach to Epistemology," in *Knowledge and Skepticism*, ed. M. Clay and K. Lehrer (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989), p. 24.

fication or rationality are, and so forth. The distinction is important for my argument, for one cannot decide about the viability of the parity thesis without understanding the connections between epistemic justification and reliability, and one cannot understand these connections without understanding at what level one's questions about them arise.

So, in "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach," a metaepistemological essay, Alston gives an account of the *rationality* of engaging in an epistemic practice with an eye on the issue of whether an epistemic practice is reliable. This contrasts with the epistemological essay, "Epistemic Circularity," in which Alston defends, using the more direct approach considered in Chapter 4, the thesis that one can be *justified* in believing that a practice is reliable. How do these approaches fit together? The burden of this section is to outline Alston's argument in "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach" with a view to explaining how that argument impinges on the conclusions of "Epistemic Circularity." In particular, I aim at spelling out the connections Alston thinks there are among rationality, justification, and reliability, for we cannot get clear about the final version of Alston's parity thesis unless we are clear about these connections.

The central question of "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach" is how one is to determine which, if any, epistemic principles are adequate or, in other words, what it takes to be justified in accepting a principle of justification. That, of course, depends on what justification is. Alston works here with the truth-conducive account discussed in Chapter 4. Given this account, to show that a principle is acceptable one must show that it specifies a reliable mode of belief formation. But to do this is to rely, at some point, on a circular argument, since every mode of belief formation belongs to a basic practice. As we have seen in "Epistemic Circularity," Alston argues that not all circular arguments are logically so and in particular argues that one kind of circular argument can lend support to beliefs about reliability. In short, "epistemic circularity does not prevent one from showing, on the basis of empirical premises that are ultimately based on sense perception [where sense perception is his example of an epistemic practice], that sense perception is reliable." The problem with this, as he puts it, is that "whether one actually does succeed in this depends on one's being justified in

those perceptual premises, and that in turn, according to our assumptions about justification, depends on sense perception being a reliable source of belief. In other words, *if* (and only if) sense perception is reliable, we can show it to be reliable. But how can we cancel out that *if*?"²

The problem, otherwise stated, is that, given this approach to justifying reliability beliefs, any belief-forming mechanism or practice can be validated, on certain assumptions:

If all else fails, we can simply use each belief twice over, once as testee and once as tester. Consider crystal ball gazing. Gazing into the crystal ball, the seer makes a series of pronouncements: p, q, r, s. . . . Is this a reliable mode of belief-formation? Yes. That can be shown as follows. The gazer forms the belief that p, and, using the same procedure, ascertains that p. By running through a series of beliefs in this way, we discover that the accuracy of this mode of belief-formation is 100%! . . . Thus, if we allow the use of mode of belief-formation M to determine whether the beliefs formed by M are true, M is sure to get a clean bill of health. But a line of argument that will validate any mode of belief-formation, no matter how irresponsible, is not what we are looking for. We want, and need, something much more discriminating.³

This "retesting" approach for showing a practice reliable appears to be what Alston advocates in "Epistemic Circularity," although there he fills in the details of how the argument might go. If I am correct about this, then Alston is between a rock and a hard place. On the rocky side, he has to show why my suggestions about the unavailability of the retesting for CP do not vitiate the skeptical claim that all practices have "trivial self-support" (as Alston later calls it) and therefore why we should not use the retesting approach to evaluate a practice's reliability. On my account, PP turns out to be epistemically superior to CP. In other words, even given the antecedent assumption of reliability needed for the soundness of the argument (to the conclusion that a practice is reliable and hence justifiably engaged in), there are some practices for which trivial self-support is not forthcoming. CP is one such practice. But Alston rejects the possibility of using the retesting approach to

2. Ibid., p. 3.

3. Ibid.

the end of showing a belief in reliability justified. He instead claims that all practices appear to have this trivial self-support, and thus that we need some other way of adjudicating between practices in terms of their reliability.

Which brings us to the hard place: PT_{AS} appears to be trivially true. If all practices can be shown to be reliable via this trivial self-support, then not only is PT_{AS} true, but a parity thesis stating that all practices have J_{eg}^* is true. This is obviously not the case, as Alston clearly assumes in the essay under consideration. Nevertheless, let Alston's point stand, and let us see how he makes out his case in answering the question he sets before us: how are we to adjudicate among epistemic practices in terms of their reliability? I return to this rocky terrain in the next section.

What is the doxastic practice approach? Alston relies on the work of Wittgenstein (stripped of its verificationist assumptions) and Reid to help him out. Several aspects of their thought are helpful. First, "we engage in a plurality of doxastic practices, each with its own sources of belief, its own conditions of justification, its own fundamental beliefs, and, in some cases, its own subject matter, its own conceptual framework, and its own repertoire of possible "overrides." These practices, although distinct, are not wholly independent and are engaged in together rather than separately. Furthermore there are "generational" and "transformational" practices, the former producing beliefs from nondoxastic inputs, the latter transforming belief inputs into other beliefs. Each of the generational practices has its own distinctive subject matter and conceptual scheme. Second, "these practices are acquired and engaged in well before one is explicitly aware of them and critically reflects on them." Practice thus precedes theory: first we must learn to engage in a practice, and only then can we reflect on its nature. Third, practices of belief formation develop in the context of wider spheres of practice. For example, "we learn to form perceptual beliefs along with, and as a part of, learning to deal with perceived objects in the pursuit of our ends." Finally, "these practices are thoroughly *social*: socially established by socially monitored learning, and socially shared."⁴

So far, says Alston, this is just cognitive social psychology.

4. Ibid., pp. 5–8.

What has this to do with epistemology? Here he shifts to an indirect approach. Rather than asking how psychology helps us determine which epistemic practices are reliable—in other words, a question about epistemic justification—he asks what resources the approach gives us for determining whether a given practice is *rationally* accepted or engaged in.

There are, says Alston, two positions one might take on the connection between psychology and epistemology. The first, “autonomism,” “holds that epistemology is autonomous vis-à-vis psychology and other sciences dealing with cognition. It holds that epistemology is essentially a normative or evaluative enterprise, and that here as elsewhere values are not determined by fact.” The difficulty with this position is just that there appear to be no nonarbitrary standards by which to carry out an evaluation of epistemic practices. To evaluate epistemic practices one must engage in them. According to “heteronomism,” in contrast, “if the epistemologist is to escape such arbitrariness, he must content himself with delineating the contours of established doxastic practices, perhaps neating them up a bit and rendering them more internally coherent and more consonant with each other. He must give up pretensions to an Archimedean point from which he can carry out an impartial evaluation of *all* practices.”⁵ There is, then, an antinomy between autonomism and heteronomism.

Alston’s solution to the antinomy is twofold. First, he notes that neither side does full justice to epistemology. Autonomism has the difficulties already noted and is forced to recognize that the attractiveness of certain principles lies simply in the fact that we learned to engage in practices in which those principles are embedded and we did so before reflecting on the practices. On the other side, the heteronomist fails to recognize that to relegate epistemology to a corner where its only task is to tidy up its principles is to overlook the nature of epistemology as a philosophical enterprise, an enterprise that asks *general* questions. Second, he distinguishes between “a more or less tightly structured *practice* with more or less fixed rules, criteria, and standards, on the one hand, and a relatively free, unstructured “improvisational” activity on the other.” The former is more or less narrowly confined by antecedent rules and pro-

5. Ibid., pp. 10–11.

cedures that constitute the practice (although not everything is invariable). The latter calls for an exercise of “judgment” that relies on “no established rules or criteria [that] put tight constraints on what judgment is to be made in a particular situation.” Philosophy falls on the second side of the contrast and so the resolution to the antinomy is as follows:

The epistemologist, in seeking to carry out a rational evaluation of one or another doxastic practice, is not working within a particular such practice. Nor need she be proposing to establish a novel practice, the specifications of which she has drawn up herself in her study. On the other hand, she need not abjure everything, or anything, she has learned from the various practices she has mastered. She makes use of her doxastic skills and tendencies, not by following the relatively fixed rules and procedures of some particular practice, but by using all this in a freer fashion.⁶

Thus, the doxastic practice approach to epistemology recognizes the importance of what we learn at our mother’s knee but also the value of critical reflection on what we learn. This leaves unanswered the question with which Alston set out: how can we go about justifying epistemic practices as reliable? We cannot establish reliability for one practice without establishing it for all. But if we shift the question to, what is the rational attitude toward epistemic practices? some progress can be made. Rejecting the view that radical skepticism with regard to epistemic practices is viable, Alston notes that we can take all socially established practices to be *prima facie* rational; that is, we can take all socially established practices as “rationally engaged in, pending sufficient reasons to take any of them as unreliable, and pending any other sufficient disqualifying considerations, if any.”⁷ Why limit the scope to the socially established rather than opening it to all practices? Simply put, eccentric practices such as Cedric’s consultation of sun-dried tomatoes as an indicator of stock market activity do not have a track record. Only when a doxastic practice has persisted over many generations does it earn the right to be considered seriously. There is a presumption in favor of socially established practices which idiosyncratic practices do not have.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 12–14.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

If we are to evaluate practices then, we have to do it in terms of a negative approach. Which practices disqualify themselves? That depends on the kinds of considerations taken into account as potential disqualifiers. Alston suggests three. First, a practice can be disqualified by "persistent and irremediable inconsistency in its output." This counts as a disqualifier because massive inconsistency is a sure indicator of significant falsehood in one's set of beliefs. Second, a massive and persistent inconsistency between the outputs of two practices indicates that at least one of them is faulty. Alston suggests that we follow a conservative route at this point, taking the more firmly established practice over the less. His reason? It seems to him to be "the only principle that . . . [is] both unchauvinistic and eminently plausible."⁸

Alston's final suggestion "has to do not with a ground for definitive rejection, but with something that will strengthen or weaken the *prima facie* acceptability. The point is this. A practice's claim to acceptance is strengthened by significant 'self-support,' and the claim is weakened by the absence of such." How can Alston turn to self-support, since he has rejected epistemically circular considerations? There are, he says, different sorts of self-support. The sort of self-support in which the same belief is used both as tester and testee is too easy and provides only trivial results. Not all kinds of self-support are so trivial:

Consider the following ways in which SPP [sense perceptual doxastic practice] supports its own claims. (1) By engaging in SPP and allied memory and inferential practices we are enabled to make predictions, many of which turn out to be correct, and thereby we are able to anticipate and control, to some considerable extent, the course of events. (2) By relying on SPP and associated practices we are able to establish facts about the operations of sense perception that show both that it is a reliable source of belief and why it is reliable. These results are by no means trivial. It can not be taken for granted that any practice whatever will yield comparable fruits. It is quite conceivable that we should not have attained this kind or degree of success at prediction and control by relying on the output of SPP; and it is equally conceivable that this output should not have put us in a position to acquire sufficient understanding of the workings of perception to see why it can be relied on. To be sure, an

8. Ibid., p. 17.

argument from these fruits to the reliability of SPP is still infected with epistemic circularity; apart from reliance on SPP we have no way of knowing the outcome of our attempts at prediction and control, and no way of confirming our suppositions about the workings of perception. Nevertheless, this is not the trivial epistemically circular support that necessarily extends to every practice. Many practices can not show anything analogous; crystal ball gazing and the reading of entrails cannot. Since SPP supports itself in ways it conceivably might not, and in ways other practices do not, its *prima facie* claims to acceptance are thereby strengthened; and if crystal ball gazing lacks any non-trivial support, its claims suffer by comparison.⁹

This does not mean that we should expect all practices to be self-supported in the SPP way, for example, by predictive capabilities. Such requirements are neither necessary nor important for other practices. But we can and should look at other practices to consider their fruits and whether they are appropriate to the aims of those practices. The basic point is, however, that practices may or may not have self-support of this epistemically circular but nontrivial sort and thereby be strengthened or weakened from the point of view of their overall rationality.

Alston closes the essay by considering the relationship between rationality as he construes it and the original issues of reliability and justification. As it turns out, the *prima facie* rationality of engaging in a practice entails neither the reliability of the practice nor a justification for a belief in its reliability. This is true, in part at least, because the notion of justification cum reliability is an "objectivist" notion whereas the notion of rationality is an "subjectivist" one, the former applying to beliefs, the latter applying to practices. Why the distinction?

The short story is this. I have tried to be objectivist as long as possible. But the difficulties in establishing justification (rationality) for beliefs in an objectivist sense drives us (sooner or later, and why make it any later?) to appeal to an internalist rationality for practices. If one still wonders why we couldn't have used an internalist conception of justification for beliefs in the first place . . .

. . . the answer is quite simple. So long as we consider beliefs in

9. Ibid., pp. 18–19.

isolation, we have no sufficient basis for an internalist judgment of rationality. . . . We come onto something really helpful only when we take the mode of belief-formation *concretely*, as an aspect of a practice that is socially established and that plays a central role in human life. Then, and only then, do we find reasons for a judgment that it is reasonable to engage in the practice.

What then is the connection between the rationality of a practice and its reliability? "To accept some doxastic practice . . . as rational is to judge that it is rational to take it as a way of finding out what (some aspect of) the world is like; it is to judge that to form beliefs in accordance with this practice is to reflect the character of some stretch of reality." This move does not imply an entailment of reliability by rationality. But logical entailment is not the only kind. There is pragmatic implication, for example, such as that found in belief; in believing p one is taking p to be true. But the belief in p does not entail p 's truth, and neither does rationality entail reliability. Nevertheless, judging a practice to be rational seems to imply that one soundly judges it to be reliable and also that one soundly judges it to be justifiably engaged in.¹⁰

2. Alstonian Justification Old and New Once More

How are Alston's various versions of justification and rationality related? We have seen some relations. My interest, however, is in connecting the conclusions of "A 'Doxastic Practice' Approach" to the two versions of the parity thesis I have suggested. One way to approach this task is to ask how Alston's notion of rationality is related to the notions of J_{ns} and J_{nw} as originally construed in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." Alston's original intuitions were to suggest that J_{nw} is the best we can do from the epistemic point of view, since J_e is out of reach. This leaves us with only a *prima facie* notion of justification. As we have seen, later he argues that J_{eg} is possibly attainable and that in fact it is the most desirable from the epistemic point of view. Later yet, he suggests that, although we may have the better kind of epistemic justification, full reflective justification is not possible. This leaves us with a notion of rationality spelled out in terms of what is *prima facie*.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.

Perhaps Alston's shift to the doxastic practice approach is connected to his original intuition—that J_e is not within our reach, or at least not fully so. Because Alston shifts ground when moving from justification to rationality, we end up not with J_{eg} plain and simple but J_{eg} understood through the doxastic practice approach that in turn leaves us with prima facie judgments as to the J_{eg}^* of a practice and thus the J_{eg} of its deliverances.

In the previous chapter I noted that much of our interest in PT_A derives from the supposition that both PP and CP are *only* J_{nw} . Since it looks as if PP is capable of being more strongly supported (from the epistemic point of view) than CP—for example, to the level of J_{eg}^* rather than just J_n — PT_A is not so interesting. We want something more than prima facie justification if we can get it, so PT_{AS} comes out as worthy of consideration. But now that we know that J_{eg}^* must be, so to speak, filtered through a doxastic practice approach, should we not recast Alston's parity thesis in terms of prima facie rationality? Since, according to Alston, all epistemic or doxastic practices can be shown to be reliable (using the trivial methodology he suggests and the assumption it makes), the interesting claim that a practice is reliable is disabled; no sorting among practices seems epistemically promising. The move to the question of rationality resurrects the possibility of sorting among practices. Although a judgment that it is rational to engage in a practice includes a sound judgment that the practice is reliable, the former entails neither that the practice is reliable nor our needing to show that the practice is reliable.

Given this suggestion, a new parity thesis emerges:

Parity Thesis_{Alston} (PT_A): Under appropriate conditions, both S 's engaging in CP and S 's engaging in PP are prima facie rational.

Understood in this way, Alston's parity thesis avoids the problems presented above but once again needs evaluation. Is it true?

The first thing to note is that PT_A does not fall prey to the charge that CP lacks indicators of reliability whereas PP does not, where this is taken to show that one is rational whereas the other is not. This charge is not successful against PT_A for the reasons Alston develops in defending CP's J_{nw} in "Christian Experience and

Christian Belief." Unlike PT_{AS} , where positive reasons are needed to show reliability, *prima facie* rationality and J_{nw} are explained in terms of negative conditions, namely, that a practice is *prima facie* rationally engaged in (or J_{nw}) unless there are reasons not to take it as rational (or justified). So a lack of confirmation or, for that matter, a lack of any indicator of reliability does not remove the *prima facie* rationality needed for PT_A .

But what Alston says does allow for various levels of strength of rationality beyond the *prima facie* when he points to various kinds of self-support for an epistemic practice. Significant self-support adds to the overall rationality of engaging in a practice. The trivial testee–tester type of self-support cannot help us distinguish among various strengths of rationality, for such support is, says Alston, available for all doxastic practices. But other kinds of self-support are not. For example, the predictability engendered by SPP, its usefulness in anticipating and controlling the course of events, and the fact that we can use SPP to understand how it operates provide self-support of a kind that not every practice has. Crystal ball gazing and the reading of entrails have neither these features nor anything analogous. Since SPP supports itself in ways it might not have, and in ways that other practices do not, its claims to rationality are stronger than they might otherwise have been.

But there is an important warning to consider here:

We must be careful not to take up another chauvinistic stance, that of supposing that a practice can be non-trivially self-supported only in the SPP way. The acceptability of rational intuition or deductive reasoning is not weakened by the fact that reliance on the outputs of these practices does not lead to achievements in prediction and control. The point is that they are, by their very nature, unsuitable for this use; they are not "designed" to give us information that could serve as the basis for such results. Since they do not purport to provide information about the physical environment, it would be unreasonable in the extreme to condemn them for not providing us with an evidential basis for predictive hypotheses. Similarly, I have argued in . . . ["Christian Experience and Christian Belief"] that it is equally inappropriate to expect predictive efficacy from the practice of forming beliefs about God on the basis of religious experience, and equally misguided to consider the claims of that practice to be weakened by its failure to contribute to achievements of this ilk. On the other hand, we can consider whether these other practices yield

fruits that are appropriate to their character and aims. And it would seem that the combination of rational intuition and deduction yields impressive and fairly stable abstract systems, while the religious experiential practice mentioned earlier provides effective guidance to spiritual development."¹¹

The lack of predictive efficacy of a practice does not show that the practice is unreliable. And we must not expect all practices to have the kind of nontrivial self-support that separates the nontrivially supported from the trivially supported in terms of rationality. Nor must we expect all kinds of nontrivial self-support to be alike. There are then at least two classes of doxastic practices: those that are trivially supported (all practices fall into this class) and those that have additional, nontrivial support (a subclass of the larger).

Can the differences among the nontrivial kinds of self-support allow us to divide the subclass into further subclasses in terms of strength of overall rationality? Perhaps, but Alston suggests no way to do this. In fact, one might make the following argument against such an adjudication. Since it is not the case that the result of SPP (its help in our getting around in the physical world) is epistemically superior to results of other practices (the building of stable abstract systems or spiritual development), how could one adjudicate between them? These goals and results are not epistemic but practical, and on that point the goals and results of each practice may simply be different. When the practices work well they are self-supported in a way that distances them from those that do not work well—those that are merely trivially self-supported—and thus strengthened in their claim to rationality. But once moved into the inner circle of nontrivially self-supported practices, further adjudication on epistemic grounds seems unlikely. For the goals and results are internal, as is the judgment that those goals are met by the results. It is the internal nature of the judgment that apparently disallows epistemic comparison of the winning practices. Thus it seems unlikely that one can successfully make out an argument that PP is more strongly nontrivially self-supported than CP on epistemic grounds. A challenge to PT_A based on that approach does not seem to have a high likelihood of success.

11. Ibid., p. 19.

But this argument needs to contend with two issues. First is the issue of evaluating CP and PP in terms of the closeness of the cognitive connection between the experiences and the beliefs generated by the practices. Recall that CP and PP seem to differ on whether they are conceptual-reading practices or noninferential mediated practices. I argued that PP is the former, CP the latter, and that Alston needs to refine further the notion of J_{nw} . Taking *prima facie* rationality and its connections to epistemic justification and reliability as further refinements of the general idea behind J_{nw} , or at least of Alston's initial intuition that J_{nw} is the best we can do epistemically, perhaps it can be suggested that there are levels of strength within the winning circle of epistemic practices. Would such adjudication among levels be an epistemic adjudication? I believe so, but I postpone the detailed argument for this point until Chapter 8.

Second, if, as Alston says, the features of predictability, universal engagement, and like conceptual schemes are "desiderata for an epistemic practice" from a cognitive point of view, then PP is superior in that way to CP and to all other practices that fail to have those features, by his own admission.¹² Of course, that things "go more smoothly, more satisfyingly," from the cognitive point of view when certain features are present does not in itself show that a practice with those features is reliable. On this point Alston seems quite correct. But it does show, on Alston's terms, that a practice failing to have those features, or analogous features, does not have as strong a rational claim. This is indicated by Alston's unwillingness to accept those doxastic practices that are idiosyncratic or not socially accepted, such as Cedric's sun-dried tomato approach to the stock market or the use of entrails for teaching us about political events. These idiosyncratic practices lack the significant self-support of the predictable SPP, for example.

But can we rank practices within the *subclass* of the nontrivially self-supported by kinds of self-support? We can, given Alston's admission that, "if we were shaping the world to our heart's desire, I dare say that we would arrange for our practices to exhibit these features [e.g., predictive power, universal engagement, and

12. See Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," pp. 123–24, for details.

so forth],” after which he goes on to argue that CP and PP are both J_{nw} *even though the former lacks the features whose presence would increase its cognitive attractiveness*.¹³ But this ranking is done from the cognitive point of view, and one wonders what cognition has to do with epistemic justification. Being cognitively more satisfying does not provide evidence of reliability and hence does not provide evidence of justification either. Perhaps the best we can say is that the cognitive attractiveness influences only one’s rational engagement in a practice. And, as Alston argues, rationality and justification are not the same thing. But that cognitive attractiveness influences the rational acceptance of a practice does at least indicate our preference for certain kinds of practice over others (e.g., predictive practices over nonpredictive), and accordingly we can rank practices in terms of their desirability from a rational-cognitive point of view. The more desirable a practice is from the cognitive point of view, the more rational it is to engage in that practice. This point links to the first issue, for surely it is more desirable from the cognitive point of view to have our beliefs closely read off our experiences; the distinction between conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices becomes important at precisely this juncture. Insofar as a practice puts our beliefs more directly in touch with the experiences that generate them than not (that is, insofar as a practice is a conceptual-reading practice rather than a noninferential mediated practice), it is more rational to engage in that practice.

Is there a direct connection between the nontrivial self-support to which Alston points (predictive power or spiritual formative power) and conceptual-reading versus noninferential mediated practices? If being conceptually read is more cognitively satisfying than being noninferentially mediated, then one might suggest that only practices that are the former are also predictive or universally engaged in. But this is not the case, since there are epistemic practices that seem to be neither conceptually read nor predictive, for example, pure mathematics. Pure mathematics, it would seem, should rank fairly high in terms of our rational engagement therein. Nevertheless, just as we would construct the world, if we could, in such a way that our experiential epistemic practices had

13. Ibid., p. 124.

the features of predictability, universal engagement, and so forth, so we would construct the world such that our experientially based practices were of the conceptual-reading sort. Such a world is more desirable from the cognitive point of view. That we have such a wish allows for a ranking of strengths of rationality on the *simple* ground that one practice more immediately connects the beliefs it generates to the experiences on which it rests than others.

Thus the ranking of practices from within the subclass of rational practices is quite complex. It involves ranking certain features dealing with the internal goals of a practice to its deliverances (e.g., does the practice aim to be predictive and is it? vs. does the practice aim to develop its participants's spiritual formation and does it?). But it also involves sortings on the basis of whether a practice is experientially based (pure mathematics vs. PP or CP) as well as rankings among experientially based practices in terms of how closely connected the beliefs it delivers are to the experiences that generate those beliefs. This last ranking seems to involve a significant epistemic aspect, for the noninferential mediated generation of beliefs involves other background beliefs that stand in need of epistemic justification, an issue to which I return in Chapters 7 and 8.

What does all this have to do with PT_{λ} ? I am suggesting that one can rank practices within the subclass of the nontrivially self-supported from a cognitive point of view and that, although some practices rank higher than others, this does not show that the lower are not *prima facie* rational. But then even though PT_{λ} may be true, it stands in need of further refinement, just as PT_A does. Although it is interesting that CP and PP are both *prima facie* rational, if there are further levels of strength of rationality to which we have access, then we ought to consider those. Although PP and CP may have the same kind of rationality—PP with its predictive self-support and CP with its spiritual development self-support—the former has a stronger level of self support; PP is a conceptual-reading practice and CP is only a noninferential mediated practice. As such, the former ranks more highly in terms of its overall rationality. Thus although PT_{λ} is, left without refinement, true, a closer analysis indicates that PP and CP do not have the same level of rational strength beyond the *prima facie* level, and a more circumspect statement of the parity thesis needs to indicate that difference in level.

The original thought behind the parity thesis was that PP and CP have the same kind and level of epistemic justification. Alston's epistemology seems to indicate that ultimate judgments of reliability, and hence justification, can only be done (in any helpful way) from the point of view of rationality.¹⁴ Does PT \star fulfill the original aims of Alston's project in comparing religious and non-religious beliefs and practices? Insofar as one's judgment that one's engaging in a practice is rational is a judgment that one's engaging in it is justified and that the practice is reliable, then yes it does. And perhaps that is the best we can do—a sort of meta-epistemological thesis that CP and PP are on a par. But even understood in metaepistemological terms, PT \star stands in need of further refinement because of the various strengths of the claims to rationality beyond the merely *prima facie* level.

In this and the previous several chapters I have argued that Alston's initial parity thesis stands in need of further clarification and that a stronger version based on his later work is not true. In Chapter 2 I raised difficulties based on distinctions between noninferential mediated belief formation and conceptual-reading belief formation. Applying those distinctions, I have suggested that, although noninferential mediated beliefs (or practices) and conceptual-reading beliefs (or practices) might be J_{nw} , the former are not as strongly justified as the latter. The distinction on which that argument rests was uncovered by considering the problems of identifying individuals. Such identifications require, following the background belief challenge, a special role for background beliefs (beyond mere concepts) in the generation of beliefs about spatio-temporally nonrooted individuals. The failure of the stronger version of the parity thesis (PT_{AS}) rests on a lack of inductive evidence for the claim that CP is reliable. This lack of evidence is traceable in part to a lack of regularity and predictability of the object the beliefs are about and hence a lack of confirmation for the deliverances of CP. But a further account of the parity thesis (PT \star) is developed in which the emphasis is shifted from epistemic justification to *prima facie* rationality. Here too there are various rankings

14. Internal judgments of reliability can be made within the practice on the basis of evidence.

beyond the prima facie one can give to practices and thus, although PT_{λ}^* is more refined than PT_A , it still needs to include a reference to the various ways a practice may be ranked. Once that is done, CP and PP, although both minimally prima facie rational, can also be shown to have different levels of strength beyond the prima facie. But we are primarily interested in the account of the strongest kind and level of rationality (cum justification) we can have, and we therefore want the parity thesis to reflect that strength. Since CP and PP can apparently be ranked beyond the prima facie level, and they turn out, if my argument is correct, to have different levels of strength beyond the prima facie, PT_{λ}^* is the strongest parity thesis we can have. Stronger versions turn out to be false. In short, PT_{λ}^* , like PT_A , does not reflect what more can be said. It is misleading in a certain way—leaving us, perhaps, with the false confidence that since both PP and CP have prima facie rationality they are equal in epistemic strength. They are not.