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Background Beliefs, Religious Plurality, and the Parity Thesis

The goals of this chapter fall into two groups. The first group deals with tying together several loose ends surrounding the role of background beliefs in CP or, more generally, in noninferential mediated practices. Thus in Section 1 I answer the question whether Alston is better off, epistemically, with CP than Plantinga is with an exaggerated Alstonian epistemic practice. The second group surrounds the issue of why Alston himself finally abandons the parity thesis between PP and CP. The goals of the remaining sections are first to explain Alston's position on how religious diversity affects the rationality of engaging in CP and second to explain how his view fits in with the argument of this essay, as far as we have reached.

1. The Resurrected Evidentialist

My argument in Chapter 7 suggests that Plantinga's defense of PT_{PI} , or more specifically PT'_{PI} , must appeal to an exaggerated version of CP, thus opening the door to an arbitrary generation of beliefs or demanding a retreat to natural theology or other discursive bases for theistic belief. I conclude that PT'_{PI} , and hence PT_{PI} , are not true. Does PT_A fare any better? This question cannot be answered without some further work. I argued that both CP and PP, as Alston construes them, are practices in which there is a

lingo-conceptual link between the experience and the belief generated by that experience: if one believes "I see a tree," then one does not fail to affirm, when queried, something like "I am being appeared to treely"; if one sees God's creative work in this flower, then one does not fail to affirm, when asked, something like "I am being appeared to God-createdly." But I have also argued that CP is a noninferential mediated practice whereas PP is a conceptual-reading practice. The background belief challenge suggests that there can be nothing in an experience itself that allows one to describe the phenomenology of the experience by propositions such as "It is of God." This is true for the same reasons that no experiential phenomenon can itself be described as "It is of Tim Tibbetts." In short, background beliefs are important when it comes to the experience of, and corresponding beliefs about, epistemically unique and spatiotemporal nonrooted individuals. The time has come for a further analysis of this claim, especially as it applies to CP.

PP does not simply generate, as noted in Chapter 2, beliefs about epistemically unique physical objects; that is, it also generates beliefs about certain kinds of things, it classifies things. It is this fact, among others, that allows PP to be a conceptual-reading practice. We all seem to share, roughly, the same conceptual scheme, or at least we do pragmatically. Once PP is set into motion by an experience, the belief generated is one in which the physical object scheme allows us to read off a physical object belief. But there is a distinction to be made between PP as a classifying practice generating beliefs such as "Those are desks" and "These are trees" and the epistemic practice (or subpractice)¹ that allows us to generate beliefs about epistemically unique physical individual objects, such as "*The desk in my office is brown*" and "*The tree in my front yard needs cutting down.*" One simple way to individuate between these two practices is to recall a point I made in discussing Alston's account of perception, namely, that with PP one has a set of concepts (e.g., tree, house, car) that can be applied in situations that are novel to the perceiver. One can immediately objectify new perceptual experiences into physical object concepts, since the concepts are general enough to apply to newly experienced objects. This is not the case with epistemically unique physical objects such as Suzie's house. One may have the concept

1. I believe the best choice here is a subpractice; see Chapter 11 for details.

"house" before seeing the buildings in a neighborhood that is new to one's experience and hence be able to identify the buildings as houses. But one does not have a complete enough concept of Suzie's house before an experience (obtained in person or through someone's description of the house—see Chapter 3, Section 4) of Suzie's house, since that concept is not a general one applicable to many houses but a unique one that applies only to Suzie's house. So, one cannot have detailed concepts of Suzie's house before being "introduced" to the particular house that is Suzie's. And reapplication of such concepts relies on having memories, not of other houses that are like Suzie's (or at least not solely so) but of this particular house and one's earlier experiences of it. In short, the concepts we attach to unique objects are attached not by our being able to recognize, for example, that this is a house of the Suzie kind (as if there were more than one house that is Suzie's) but rather by our remembering earlier experiences of this (numerically the same) house. This distinction in approach suggests a distinction in epistemic practice. As I argued in Chapter 3, in PP the concepts that attach to epistemically unique physical objects are made up of kind concepts and information about local spatiotemporal location. Insofar as this position is right, then the practice, or subpractice, of forming beliefs about epistemically unique physical objects is a conceptual-reading practice. Let us call this (sub)practice that generates beliefs about epistemically unique physical objects the "unique physical object practice."

Parallel to the distinction between PP and unique physical object practice, we should recognize a distinction between what I call "religious practice" and CP. Since CP generates beliefs about the unique God of the Christian faith, it seems somewhat parallel to unique physical object practice and its generation of beliefs about epistemically unique individuals. The practice that allows us to form beliefs with religious (as opposed to specifically Christian) content seems parallel to PP. The content of these religious beliefs is a little hard to spell out, but perhaps one could point to phenomenological analyses such as Rudolf Otto's *mysterium tremendum*.² Many (dare I say most?) humans have at least a (more or less)

2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (1923; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 12–30.

vague sense of a reality beyond the merely physical or even the merely (humanly) personal. But as the plurality of religions indicates, there are many ways to understand this reality. At the bottom of all these, I suggest, is this awareness of a nonhuman, non-physical reality. Religious practice puts us into contact with this reality. The additional and uniquely Christian beliefs generated do not come via religious practice but through CP, a practice that allows us to identify the experience as an experience of God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, or the First Person of the Trinity, that is, as an experience of an epistemically unique individual. It is CP, and not religious practice, that clearly is a noninferential mediated practice.

It is CP, then, as contrasted to religious practice, that requires the use of background beliefs. Religious practice does not, for we have a conceptual scheme that *alone* allows us to objectify our experience into the kinds of vague categories I suggested above.³ We need the background beliefs for the doctrinal content of the Christian beliefs. Do these background beliefs need justification? Here I plan to fulfill my promise of explaining why the ranking of PP over CP is an epistemic ranking and not merely one based on the cognitive desirability of PP's features over CP's.

I suggest that the background beliefs required in CP need justification as much as do those beliefs required for the exaggerated CP to which I appealed in discussing Plantinga. I argued in Plantinga's case that the content of the background beliefs is substantively theistic, for there is no necessary lingo-conceptual link between the experience generating theistic beliefs and the beliefs generated. To avoid arbitrariness in belief, then, the evidentialist's demands seem to press in on Plantinga's position. It is thus fairly

3. J. William Forgie's work, from which I drew the background belief challenge, may be faulty since it does not distinguish clearly enough between religious practice and other practices. If "God" picks out only the vague kinds of characteristics that religious practice allows us to, then Forgie's argument needs refining. Compare, for example, an epistemic practice that allows me to be justified in believing that I am in the presence of a human person as opposed to one in which I am justified in believing that I am in the presence of Tom Tibbetts. In the former, I do not have to identify the person as Tom or Tim, but in the latter I do. But it is only in the latter that I need background information in the form of beliefs. There is more on this general view in the text, but what is said there applies not only to Alston's work but to Forgie's as well.

obvious that theistic* beliefs need justification. Although perhaps less obvious, so do the background beliefs for CP. Are these substantively theistic in content? Yes, but not only so. They are substantively *Christian* in content. Even though what I have said about religious practice allows for some religious content in experiences generating religious beliefs,⁴ this experiential content itself does not allow for the generation of specifically Christian beliefs. The source of the Christian content, I suggest, rests entirely in the background beliefs—call them "Christian* beliefs." And surely these need justification.

Granting the need for a religious content in the experience generating Christian beliefs (to allow for the spirit of Alston's direct approach), there is still nothing phenomenologically in the experience that makes it a Christian experience. What would make an experience a Christian experience, as opposed to a merely religious experience? For that matter, what *could* make an experience a Christian, as opposed to a merely religious, experience? I propose that nothing in experience alone can do so. When one holds Christian* beliefs, one may take the experience (and perhaps legitimately so) to be Christian. But taking an experience to be explicitly Christian and its actually being so are not at all the same thing. Why, then, understand any religious experience to be a Christian experience? Why not Buddhist, or Hindu? There is, I suggest, a kind of arbitrariness in doing so, a kind of arbitrariness in the use of CP. Of course, one does not typically *select* CP over some other practice, such as a Hindu practice (except, perhaps, in cases of radical conversion). Rather, one grows into the use of CP. So the arbitrariness is not one of choice but one that presses the question, what justifies my practicing CP rather than some other noninferential mediated practice? To avoid this arbitrariness, Christian* beliefs need justification. CP's noninferential mediated nature makes it epistemically inferior to PP.

We can see the same point if we return to the background belief challenge. Compare the Tom and Tim Tibbetts case to the case of God. The reason one knows that it is Tim rather than Tom one

4. There is, in other words, a lingo-conceptual link between religious experience and the beliefs religious practice generates. I am not convinced that this is best construed theistically; it may be even vaguer than that.

sees in the next yard is not given by the phenomena but requires that one have the belief that Tom is out of town. This background belief to which one appeals is of a fairly high level in terms of its content vis-à-vis Tom and Tim. Furthermore, although we do come to recognize human persons by their features, actions, and personality, as Alston says, we do so only on being introduced to them and learning their individual names. Our background beliefs about the persons we know seem to be fully personal in their content. I remember (or at least it is within the range of my memory) that *Jack* appears the way this phenomenal experience I am now having appears. Thus, my noninferential mediated generation of the belief "This is Jack," is justified. It will not do, as Alston suggests, simply for it to be true that such and such an appearance is sufficient for the appearance to be "of Jack" in the circumstances in which I find myself.⁵ The circumstances are too important to be passed over so lightly, for it is these circumstances that contain the information enabling me to objectify this experience as an experience of Jack. Since the circumstances cannot be confined to spatiotemporal information picked up in the experience, this information must be brought to the experience, presumably as beliefs. The background beliefs needed for identifying individual persons seem always to have a content that contains reference to that unique person and thus, to avoid arbitrary application of proper names to phenomenal experiences that do not "contain" the proper-name information, the background beliefs need justification.

Why should it be any different with God and experiences of him? In Alston's case, if one does need background beliefs, these cannot be without (theistic) Christian content. If they were without such content, and given the constraint that no experience can be phenomenologically of the Christian God, then how could they give rise to the generation of a Christian belief, at least one with content that is specifically about the unique individual, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Assuming that they do need to have Christian content, then the beliefs need either inferential or noninferential justification. If, on the one hand, they are justified

5. Alston has suggested to me that I am not willing to be externalist enough about the circumstances. Here, I guess, is the proverbial parting of the ways, since I think he is all too willing to be externalist where he ought not to be.

via inference, Alston's position succumbs to the evidentialist, just as Plantinga's does. On the other hand, if they are justified noninferentially, we are back into the same kind of infinite regress laid at Plantinga's feet. There must be, somewhere, a nonexperiential justification of theistic Christian beliefs.⁶

Here perhaps Alston can suggest that one need only *be* justified in the background beliefs (and not need *to* justify them) and the regress does not get started. But the need for being justified is all my argument rests on. Unlike Alston's appeal to similar strategies in other contexts—for example, where one may be justified in a certain epistemic principle and that enables one to be justified in another belief—there is no distinction in epistemic level between the belief in question and the theistic background belief. The latter does not function at a different level epistemically; it is a first-order belief and not a second-order principle. Alston may appeal to his externalist account of justification for these background beliefs, but one still can raise the infinite regress problem as long as the externalist account is rooted in experience. How are these justified (as opposed to justifiable)? My suggestion is that they too must appeal to background beliefs that in turn appeal to background beliefs, and the regress is off and running.

Thus Alston's parity thesis appears to be in little better shape than Plantinga's. The deliverances of PP are conceptual-reading beliefs whereas those of CP are noninferential mediated beliefs. The latter are such that the background beliefs needed for their justification stand in need of justification themselves. As such, they cannot have the same strength of justification as conceptual-reading beliefs. I have more to say about CP in Chapters 10 and 11, but I believe the argument here shows that the observation about background beliefs made in Chapters 2 and 3 is epistemically important. Conceptual-reading beliefs differ from noninferential mediated beliefs in that the latter have an additional step needed for their epistemic justification. The evidentialist specter is present in Alston's epistemology of religion as well as Plantinga's.

6. We need to consider the theistic, nonlawlike kind of externalism mentioned in Chapter 7, Section 6, as a possibility. Alternatively, could we not be introduced to God much as we are introduced to a new human being? Is this nonexperiential? What about the credulity disposition? I consider these issues in Chapter 11.

2. Alston's Rejection of the Parity Thesis: Checking Procedures

In *Perceiving God*, Alston moves away from the parity thesis. He does so for two reasons. The second bears the burden of my concern in the next section, but the first deserves to be recognized as well.

In his chapter on the Christian mystical perceptual practice (CMP), Alston contends that CMP satisfies the conditions for rational acceptance. As with sense practice (SP) (what I have called PP), CMP is acquired and engaged in long before one is explicitly aware of the practice, it involves procedures for evaluating its outputs, it is set in a broader context of epistemic practices that involve interacting with perceived objects, it is socially transmitted and monitored, it depends on and is connected with other practices, it is subject to change, and it has its own set of distinctive presuppositions. There are differences, of course. CMP has a distinctive conceptual scheme, a distinctive subject matter, and its own overrider system of beliefs. Alston also gives an account of how CMP is to be distinguished from other epistemic practices, including other religious epistemic practices.

In defense of CMP's being rationally engaged in, Alston suggests that he has already made a prima facie case for its being so, since it is a socially established doxastic practice. But he does consider at length reasons for denying that it is a genuine, full-fledged practice. These reasons include, but are not limited to, the charges that CMP is only partially distributed among the population, that CMP is not a widely shared practice, and that it is not a source of new information. The important issue for us is the supposed lack of checks and tests of particular perceptual beliefs. Alston fills several pages dealing with this charge and, although he admits that CMP does lack the kind of checking system SP has, this does not show that CMP is unreliable. All that need concern us here is what Alston says toward the end of his discussion of the overrider system.

I am quite prepared to recognize that a checking system of the sort we have in SP is an epistemic desideratum. If we were shaping the world to our heart's desire, I dare say we would arrange for all our fallible doxastic practices to include such checks. It certainly puts us

in a better position to distinguish between correct and incorrect perceptual beliefs than what we have in CMP. But though this shows that CMP is epistemically inferior to SP in this respect, that is not the same as showing that CMP is unreliable or not rationally engaged in, or that its outputs are not prima facie justified.⁷

Here Alston links explicitly what he earlier referred to as "cognitively desirable features" to epistemic concerns. An epistemic practice's failing to have certain cognitively desirable features that another has does indeed indicate a difference in epistemic level. So if SP is epistemically superior to CMP because of the kind of checking procedures available to it, even though the latter is still rationally acceptable, one suspects that a strict parity thesis between SP and CMP is not forthcoming. Still, both are prima facie rationally engaged in, on Alston's account, and that is all he sets out to show in *Perceiving God*.

3. Alston's Rejection of the Parity Thesis: Religious Plurality

The problem of religious diversity for the rationality of engaging in CMP, says Alston, cannot be handled in the same way as others he discusses, that is, by calling attention to "epistemic imperialism" or the "double standard." The intuition behind the problem with plurality is that "if the general enterprise of forming perceptual religious beliefs is carried on in different religions in such a way as to yield incompatible results, no such practice can be considered to be reliable, so none is rationally engaged in."⁸ But Alston uses considerable space spelling out exactly what the issue is. There are two questions. In what way are religious practices incompatible, and why or how does this incompatibility cast doubt on CMP's rationality? I take these in order.

The incompatibility, says Alston, is not an internal one because there is more than one practice for forming perceptual religious beliefs. Any incompatibility is an interpractice problem, not an intrapactice problem. Thus, if there is incompatibility it is between the deliverances of two separate practices. If one takes it that these

7. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 220.

8. Ibid., p. 255.

deliverances are of the singular subject-predicate form and that they attribute to the subject some putatively perceivable attribute or activity, then there are two questions to ask. First, is the subject the same? Second, are the predicates incompatible?

Again, we can take these in order. Although there are cases in which the subjects of the beliefs delivered by various religious epistemic practices are (taken to be) the same (such as in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam), this is not always the case. The beliefs the Christian has about God are quite different than those held by the Hindu, and although different beliefs about an object do not entail that the objects are truly different, there seems to be good reason to think they are. So in these cases, even if the predicates attributable to perceived religious objects are incompatible, that does not show that the beliefs are incompatible unless it can be shown that the objects are the same.

On the predicate side, much of the apparent contradiction is not due to the positive content of the beliefs but rather to what Alston calls "implicit denials." Attributing to God the message that Jesus is his Son is not incompatible with Mohammed being God's prophet unless the former message also contains a rider claiming that Jesus' work is the only way to salvation. Even Thomas Aquinas thought that mystical claims of God's being an undifferentiated unity (such as we find in Vedanta or Yoga mystical literature) are not incompatible with claims that God is personal. There must be a denial of the identity between God-as-undifferentiated-unity and God-as-personal assumed by the one who holds the former. At the very least, says Alston, caution is called for here. Seeming contradictions are not always what they appear.

To identify contradictions, Alston raises the issue of how doxastic practices in other religions are to be separated from CMP. Most of his discussion in *Perceiving God* is cast in terms of "God." But nontheistic religions do not, obviously, describe the object of their epistemic experiences in that language. So Alston broadens his conception of religious (what he calls "mystical") practice by stating that "it is what is taken by the subject to be a direct experiential awareness of the Ultimate," where by Ultimate he means "the ultimate determiner of one's existence, condition, salvation, destiny, or whatever."⁹ This broader conception of religious practice pro-

9. Ibid., p. 258.

vides the basis for showing the incompatibility of the output of the competing practices. It is helpful to quote Alston here at some length:

One's conception of the Ultimate will differ in different religions. Even where the broad outlines of the conception is the same, as it is among the various theistic religions, the details will differ. After all, a religiously very important feature of the Christian, Jewish, and Moslem conceptions of the Ultimate has to do with God's purposes for mankind and His work in history; and the account of this varies drastically from one of these traditions to another. And all these will diverge sharply from the conception of the Ultimate in Buddhism and certain forms of Hinduism, where the Ultimate is not thought of as a personal agent. Let's further note that one's conception of God (the Ultimate) enters, to a greater or lesser degree, into a particular subject's identification of the perceived object as God (Brahman . . .). When I take God to be present to me I will, if I am a Christian, but not if I am Moslem or a Hindu, most likely take it that *He who became man in the person of Jesus Christ to save us from our sins* is present to me. Indeed, it is generally true that we make use of what we believe about perceived objects when we perceptually identify them. When I take the person I see across the room to be Joe Walker, I thereby take him to be the person with whom I went to college, who lives two blocks from me, and so on. Because of this leakage of the background belief system into perceptual beliefs, the latter will be incompatible with each other across religious traditions, *even if the predicates attributed in these perceptual beliefs are as compatible with each other as you like.*¹⁰

The upshot of his discussion is that, even if the perceptual beliefs we have about God do not conflict themselves, the practices of forming such beliefs are still subject to serious conflict by virtue of the associated belief systems.

After considering two ways one might strive to show that the associated belief systems are not incompatible (one is by trimming the exclusivistic claims from the various religions and the other is Hick's Kantian strategy), Alston says that most practitioners of religion are pre-Kantian in their beliefs, that is, they are realists about them. So, in fact, from the point of view of the actual practice of believers, the various religions are incompatible in just the way Alston suggests.

10. Ibid., pp. 258-59.

A second important question Alston discusses is why or how religious plurality influences the rationality of engaging in CMP. He considers two versions of an argument in which it is suggested that religiously diverse results of mystical practices lead to the discrediting of CMP. The stronger version is developed from "a naturalist line." It suggests that the best explanation for the radical incommensurability of mystical practice output is that each result is nothing more than an internally generated practice, with no referent beyond the practitioners. But, says Alston, there is no reason to assume that this is the best explanation. There could very well be aspects of reality so difficult for us to discern that we end up with quite different results when we try to discern them. A more modest version of the charge against the rationality of engaging in any religious epistemic practice, and hence the practice of CMP, is "to suggest that the diversity is best explained by supposing that none of the competing practices is a reliable way of determining what that reality is like."¹¹ The argument behind this suggestion is that if one of the practices were reliable it would show itself to be. But why, says Alston, should we assume that?

There is another possibility, however. Given the rich diversity among religious doxastic practices, only one, if any, of the practices can be reliable. Why suppose it is CMP? There are many reasons internal to CMP, but do we not need reasons external to the practice, since all the practices presumably have internal reasons? The critic will suggest that no such external reasons are forthcoming, so there is no reason to engage in CMP or, for that matter, in any other religious doxastic practice. Alston responds that perhaps there are external reasons, but he passes over them and takes the worst-case scenario by assuming that there is no external evidence. He concludes that the justificatory efficacy of CMP is not dissipated but may be significantly weakened by the fact of religious diversity.

It is not dissipated because there is a significant difference between cases of religious diversity and nonreligious diversity. Consider the different observation reports of an accident or competing means of predicting the weather. In both kinds of case there are accepted means by which to resolve the dispute, even when one cannot in fact use those means. Hence, when the reports or

11. Ibid., p. 268.

methods appear to conflict, there is at least the possibility of resolution. It is this very possibility of resolution that dissipates the rationality of engaging in all these diverse means of predicting the weather or trusting everyone's report about an accident. But with the case of religious diversity there is no possible means of resolution. So why then take the absence of such means to count against the reliability of the practice? Alston suggests that there is no good reason to do so and hence that religious diversity does not dissipate the rationality of engaging in CMP.

It does reduce the strength of the justification, however. The basic reason is that, although it is possible to imagine ways we might differ in our viewing the world with competing SPs (say, by a "Cartesian" practice of seeing what is visually perceived as an indefinitely extended medium that is more or less concentrated at various points or a "Whiteheadian" practice of seeing the world as a series of momentary events growing out of one another vs. our "Aristotelian" practice of seeing the world as made up of more or less discrete objects scattered through space), such a possibility is just a possibility. With mystical practice, the possibility is actualized. The various practitioners of mystical practices do indeed view ultimate reality differently. If this problem did not exist, presumably CMP would be taken to be more strongly trustworthy. Engaging in CMP remains *prima facie* rational, even if one cannot see how to solve the problem of religious diversity. But the strength of its overall rational status is less than that of other practices, such as SP, where there is no problem of diversity, as a matter of fact. And so Alston does not see himself as committed to parity between CMP and SP (CP and PP).

If Alston is correct about this last point, then CP and PP do not share the same strength (or level) of epistemic status, although they are both *prima facie* rational. But in addition to the reason put forth in his discussion of religious diversity, there is Alston's point about checking procedures and epistemic desiderata, as well as the position argued throughout this book that there is a distinction between conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices, with CP being the latter and PP and unique physical object practice the former. So there is a triple reason to reject PT_X as anything close to a complete description of the relationship between the rational status of CP and PP.

I have argued that PT_A fails as a complete account because engaging in CP does not have the same strength of overall rationality as engaging in PP, even though it remains *prima facie* rational to engage in both. What remains to be done is to consider some of Plantinga's suggestions about epistemic warrant as those suggestions apply to the parity thesis, as well as to defend Plantinga's suggestion that beliefs about God can be properly basic against a challenge resting on confirmation. The discussion of confirmation serves as a springboard to the final goal of this book, which is to suggest and defend a new parity thesis.