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# Rationality and Theistic Belief - Full Text

Mark S. McLeod

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## Preface

Proponents of Reformed epistemology claim, in contrast to those standing in the long line of natural theology, that belief in God need not be rooted in argument but can be based, more or less directly, on experience. One of the results of their suggestion is that certain beliefs about God are just as rational as beliefs about perceived physical objects. I argue against this claim here.

Although I am critical of Reformed epistemology in this respect, there is much of value in its ideas. One central notion is that theistic beliefs are rational in ways similar to our nontheistic beliefs. I view this idea as important to our understanding of theistic belief and its rationality. But to which nontheistic beliefs are theistic beliefs similar? My thesis is that beliefs about God are just as rational as beliefs about human persons, rather than beliefs about non-human physical objects. The theory in which this epistemological parity can be made out, however, is not foundationalism, as two of the main Reformed epistemologists argue. Holism is a happier home for theistic belief. At least so this book suggests.

In certain ways, some of the writings of John Hick and George Mavrodes are the most recent ancestors of Reformed epistemology, for they take experience of the divine seriously as part of the epistemic map that epistemologists of religion need to sketch. The more recent set of arguments and discussions centers in the work of William P. Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

It is from Plantinga and Wolterstorff that the “Reformed” in “Reformed epistemology” comes, since both philosophers are intellectually rooted in the Reformed theological tradition (they stand in the theological line traceable to John Calvin). And so the name remains. Regardless of what one calls Reformed epistemology, or who its intellectual ancestors are, its central claims are important and intriguing.

As always with works of this kind, the author owes much to many people for a variety of activities. I can hardly separate my thinking from that of my teachers, J. William Forgie, Francis W. Dauer, and Burleigh T. Wilkins. They, along with Philip Clayton, Richard F. Galvin, V. James Mannoia, Shirley A. Mullen, Alvin Plantinga, and David E. Schrader, read all or parts of the manuscript at several stages too disparate to summarize easily. Each provided helpful comments and suggestions. William P. Alston, as the series editor, read the manuscript several times and offered valuable philosophical advice along the way. Although he disagrees with me on various important points, one could not ask for a more helpful and fair editor. Director John Ackermann, of Cornell University Press, enthusiastically supported the project since our first contact. Kay Scheuer, Joanne Hindman, and John Thomas improved the prose in many ways. As well as those who read the manuscript, there are those who encouraged its writing. Among them are Mark Bernstein, Steven D. Fratt, Arthur R. Miller, Stanley Obitts, Jeanne Reeseman, James F. Sennett, Saranindranath Tagore, and Robert Wennberg. They have, in a variety of ways, cheered the writing on.

I spent five years teaching at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, California. My friends and colleagues from that time deserve thanks, and the following people in particular deserve special mention for their contributions. The “Tea Group” was, during much of the time I was writing, a weekly source of intellectual stimulation and moral support that took me beyond my own narrow concerns to those of the broader intellectual community. The group was made up of historians, political scientists, biblical scholars, literary experts, and theologians. Its members were Steven Cook, A. R. “Pete” Diamond, Robert H. Gundry, Michael McClymond, Bruce McKeon, Shirley A. Mullen, William Nelson, John Rapson,

Thomas Schmidt, and Jonathan Wilson. Ned Divelbiss and John Murray provided carrel space for me to work in the Roger Voskuyl Library, along with unflagging good cheer. George Blankenbaker, vice president for academic affairs, arranged faculty development grants to provide me with summer research time. Lois Gundry, the secretary for the philosophy and religious studies departments, and her staff retyped portions of the manuscript into the computer from my handwritten changes. Since I moved to the University of Texas at San Antonio, Thomas Wood, of the Division of English, Classics, and Philosophy, likewise worked at the computer for me. Adrian A. Amaya helped me read the page proofs.

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My niece, Martha Anderson, spent the summer of 1991 in Santa Barbara with my family and took care of my son while I worked in the library. Now three years old, Ian Alexander Malone McLeod came along in the middle of my writing. He has grown into an unsurpassed delight, nothing less than the dance of God in our living room. Finally, my wife, Rebecca L. M. McLeod, not only read the manuscript and was a member of the "Tea Group" but listened to me talk—endlessly—about the ideas in this book. She has walked with me the path of truth, joy, and love—but especially love—for over sixteen years. How can I thank her? Words fail.

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# Abbreviations

CMP	Christian mystical practice
CP	Christian practice
J <sub>d</sub>	Deontological justification
J <sub>di</sub>	Involuntary deontological justification
J <sub>e</sub>	Evaluative justification
J <sub>eg</sub>	Grounds evaluative justification
J <sub>eg</sub> <sup>★</sup>	Grounds evaluative justification (applied to epistemic practices)
J <sub>n</sub>	Normative justification
J <sub>ns</sub>	Strong normative justification
J <sub>nw</sub>	Weak normative justification
PP	Perceptual practice
PT	Parity thesis. There are many versions of the parity thesis, the most general of which is this: Under appropriate conditions, (1) S's engaging in an epistemic practice <i>EP</i> , which generates theistic beliefs (of a specified kind), or (2) S's believing that <i>p</i> , where <i>p</i> 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 <i>EP</i> <sup>★</sup> , which generates nontheistic beliefs (of a specified kind), or (4) S's believing that <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> , where <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> is a non-theistic belief (of a specified kind).
PT <sub>A</sub>	Alston's parity thesis: Under appropriate conditions, both S's engaging in CP and S's engaging in PP are J <sub>nw</sub> .

PT <sub>AS</sub>	Alston's strong parity thesis: Under appropriate conditions, both S's engaging in CP and S's engaging in PP are J <sub>cg</sub> <sup>★</sup> .
PT <sub>A</sub> <sup>★</sup>	Alston's parity thesis <sup>★</sup> : Under appropriate conditions, both S's engaging in CP and S's engaging in PP are prima facie rational.
PT <sub>N</sub>	New parity thesis: Under appropriate conditions, engaging in CP and engaging in unique person practice have, for S, the same level and strength of overall rationality.
PT <sub>Pl</sub>	Plantinga's parity thesis: Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that <i>p</i> , where <i>p</i> is a belief about God, has the same nonclassical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as S's belief that <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> , where <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> is a paradigm belief.
PT <sub>Pl</sub> '	Plantinga's parity thesis': Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that <i>p</i> , where <i>p</i> is a belief about God, has at least the same nonclassical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as S's belief that <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> , where <i>p</i> <sup>★</sup> is a perceptual belief.
PT <sub>Pl</sub> <sup>★</sup>	Plantinga's parity thesis <sup>★</sup> : For person S, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.
PT <sub>Pl</sub> <sup>★'</sup>	Plantinga's parity thesis <sup>★'</sup> : For a person S, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, physical object beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.
SP	Sense perceptual (doxastic) practice
SPP	Sense perceptual (doxastic) practice

Rationality and  
Theistic Belief



## 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<sub>2</sub> 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<sub>3</sub>): 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.

## Alston's Parity Thesis

A version of the parity thesis is clearly seen in Alston's work. His strategy in some seminal essays is to embed the justification of beliefs in the rationality of what he calls "epistemic (or doxastic) practices."<sup>1</sup> He then argues that the kind of justification available for the practice that provides us with beliefs about the physical world is the same kind of justification available for the practice that generates beliefs about God. He further argues that the level or strength of justification is the same. My goal in the present chapter is twofold. First, I lay out the central tenets of Alston's argument in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," supplementing them with some claims made in two other essays and in *Perceiving God*. Second, I provide the outline of a challenge to Alston's position. Although a fuller and more developed account of this challenge is defended in Chapter 3, I suggest here that if the challenge is successful, it calls for some distinctions within Alston's account of epistemic justification. These distinctions raise some questions about Alston's version of the parity thesis.

1. See Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," and "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Nous* 16 (1982): 3-14. Of the two listed here, I concentrate mostly on the first.

## 1. Epistemic Practices and Beliefs

In "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" Alston introduces the notion of an epistemic practice. An epistemic practice, he says, is "a more-or-less regular and fixed procedure of forming beliefs under certain conditions, where the content of the belief is some more-or-less determinate function of the conditions."<sup>2</sup> The notion of a practice is more basic than the notion of a belief insofar as one considers epistemic status. If one can show that a practice is justified (or that one's engaging in a practice is justified), then (typically) by extension its deliverances are justified. So Alston's central concern is whether we are epistemically justified in engaging in certain epistemic practices.

He has two practices in mind. The first provides us with (many of our) beliefs about the physical world; Alston calls this "perceptual practice" (PP) or "sense perceptual practice" (SPP or SP).<sup>3</sup> The second provides (some of) us with beliefs about God; he calls it "Christian practice" (CP) and later introduces the notions of "mystical practice" (MP) and "Christian mystical practice" (CMP).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Epistemic Justification

Alston claims that CP and PP have the same kind of epistemic justification. What kind of epistemic justification do they have? He distinguishes two. There is an evaluative sense of justification, *J<sub>e</sub>*. Here the concern is that one's holding of a belief be legitimate vis-à-vis the concern for attaining truth and avoiding falsity; the concerns are those of what Alston calls the epistemic point of view. If

2. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 110. I use "epistemic practice" and "doxastic practice" interchangeably.

3. He uses PP, SPP, and SP to refer to this practice. I prefer the first, but I use the other abbreviations when they are more natural in quoting certain essays. The reason for Alston's shift from PP to SPP or SP is that he later develops arguments to the conclusion that one can perceive God, or at least that there is no reason to think one cannot. Once having broadened the category of perception to include access to God, Alston needed a more specific terminology by which to pick out the perception of physical objects. The fullest treatment of the possibility of the perception of God is in *Perceiving God*.

4. Again the shift in terminology is at least partly because of Alston's need for further specificity. The later two terms are introduced in *Perceiving God*. I use CP unless another term is needed for ease of exposition.

one is justified in holding a belief in this sense, then the circumstances in which the belief are held are such that the belief is at least likely to be true. Alston admits that there is much work to be done in discovering what the various conditions for  $J_e$  are. But when that work is done, he says, what  $J_e$  boils down to is a kind of reliabilist understanding of rationality: a belief is  $J_e$  when it was formed or is sustained by an epistemic practice that can be generally relied on to produce true rather than false beliefs.<sup>5</sup>

$J_e$  is to be contrasted with a normative understanding of justification,  $J_n$ , which is normative in that it deals with how well a person does in light of the norms required of us simply in virtue of being cognitive beings. We have, in short, some obligations and duties with respect to belief and belief formation because of the fact that we are seekers of truth.  $J_n$  and  $J_e$  can be contrasted in this way.

Consider a naive member of an isolated primitive tribe who, along with his fellows, unhesitatingly accepts the traditions of the tribe. That is, he believes that  $p$  wherever the traditions of the tribe, as recited by the elders, include the assertion that  $p$ . He is  $J_n$  in doing so, for he has no reason whatsoever to doubt these traditions. Everyone he knows accepts them without question, and they do not conflict with anything else he believes. And yet, let us suppose, this is not a reliable procedure of belief formation; and so he is not  $J_e$  in engaging in it. Conversely, a procedure may be in fact reliable, though I have strong reasons for regarding it as unreliable and so would not be  $J_n$  in engaging in it; to do so would be to ignore those reasons and so would be a violation of an intellectual obligation.<sup>6</sup>

There is, then, a clear difference between  $J_n$  and  $J_e$ .

A further distinction within the normative concept of justification runs roughly parallel to the two positions taken in the William James–W. K. Clifford debate on the ethics of belief. Since our goal as epistemic beings is to seek the truth, Clifford demands that one ought not hold a belief unless one has adequate reasons for so doing. James denies this claim, suggesting that one can hold a belief

5. A fuller account of evaluative justification is available in Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," and "An Internalist Externalism," in *Epistemic Justification* (the latter originally in *Synthese* 74 [1988]: 265–83). I return to these essays in Chapter 4.

6. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 115.

unless one has some reason not to hold it. In effect, Clifford demands that we avoid as much error as possible, whereas James affirms the search for as much truth as possible. These parallel a strong version ( $J_{ns}$ ) and a weak version ( $J_{nw}$ ) of normative justification. The strong version has it that one is justified in engaging in a practice if and only if one has reasons for thinking the practice reliable. On the weak version, one is justified in engaging in a practice when there are no reasons for regarding the practice as unreliable. Some important relationships hold among  $J_e$ ,  $J_{ns}$ , and  $J_{nw}$ . Perhaps the most important of these is that if one sets out to discover whether a belief or practice is  $J_e$  then one is setting out to discover whether one could be  $J_{ns}$  in holding that belief or engaging in that practice.

Alston makes two central claims. First, one is never  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in either PP or CP because one cannot have adequate reasons for supposing either practice to be  $J_e$ . (It does not follow that one or the other cannot be  $J_e$  but only that one has no adequate reasons to think it is.) Second, both PP and CP can be  $J_{nw}$  for a person. The answer to the question with which this section began—what kind of epistemic justification do PP and CP share?—is, then, that CP and PP share  $J_{nw}$ . Alston's version of the parity thesis might thus be described:

Parity Thesis<sub>Alston</sub> (PT<sub>A</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, both S's engaging in CP and S's engaging in PP are  $J_{nw}$ .

There is a natural extension to beliefs:

Under appropriate conditions, both S's belief that  $p$ , where  $p$  is a theistic belief, and S's belief that  $p^*$ , where  $p^*$  is a perceptual belief, are  $J_{nw}$ .<sup>7</sup>

7. This extension, although tacit in Alston's suggestions in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," is perhaps incautious. Alston argues elsewhere that one must be careful not to confuse levels when dealing with epistemological concerns; what applies at one level may not at another. Although he writes in his earlier essays that a belief is justified if and only if the practice that generates it is, as his ideas develop it becomes clear that, although it may be rational for someone to engage in a practice, that in itself does not entail that the beliefs generated by the practice are justified. Rationality entails neither justification nor reliability. Alston

Alston does not intend his claims to be weak-kneed. First, PP and CP have the same level (weak) and kind (normative) of justification, and although either CP or PP may be  $J_e$  one cannot have adequate reasons to think either is.<sup>8</sup> Second, he aims his sights higher than simple epistemic neutrality for PP and CP. His general goal is to consider the "possibility that one's experience can provide justification sufficient for rational acceptance."<sup>9</sup> Thus, although both PP and CP are epistemically *permissible* practices, this kind of justification is intended to be understood as sufficient for some sort of positive epistemic status. Epistemic permission to engage in a practice and, by extension, to hold beliefs thereby delivered is sufficient for epistemic acceptance of the delivered beliefs, even though one has no adequate reasons to take the practice to be  $J_e$ .

### 3. The Justification of Perceptual Practice

Alston describes the basic accounts philosophers have given in trying to show that PP is  $J_e$ . He does not discuss any of these in detail but notes their general failure to win the philosophical day.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the prospect of PP being  $J_{ns}$  is not good. Furthermore, he

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argues, in a later essay I discuss in Chapter 4, that if one practice can be shown to be reliable they all can. Justification is easily had for just about any practice and hence just about any belief. Alston therefore shifts the question he asks about practices away from the issue of justification to the issue of their rationality. This shift allows him to evaluate the relative strength of our doxastic practices. It turns out, then, that engaging in an epistemic practice should be evaluated in terms of rationality and not justification, and thus some important questions need to be raised about the "natural" extension suggested above or, perhaps better, about  $PT_A$  itself. To begin with, is it appropriate or worthwhile to speak of the justification of practices (as opposed to beliefs)? Should we not rather speak of the rationality of practices? And what does this mean for beliefs?

8. Perhaps  $PT_A$  should include a clause noting that CP and PP share *at least*  $J_{nw}$  in order to recognize that they both might be  $J_e$ . But Alston seems to suggest in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" that our knowledge that an epistemic practice is  $J_e$  is limited and therefore that the strongest *claim* we can legitimately make is that CP and PP are  $J_{nw}$ . See Chapter 4 for an explanation of Alston's apparent change of mind on this matter.

9. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 111.

10. There is a fuller discussion in *Perceiving God* and an even fuller discussion in Alston's forthcoming book on general epistemology (the latter of which is noted in *Perceiving God*).

suggests that as far as he knows no one has come up with any good reasons to think PP is unreliable. There being, apparently, no good reasons, PP is  $J_{nw}$ .

At this point Alston refers the reader to Thomas Reid's work. Reid suggests that the Creator endows human beings with a strong tendency to trust their belief-forming practices, noting that no practice can be provided *noncircular* reasons for accepting it as reliable. Thus, if we "are to have any chance of acquiring knowledge, we must simply go along with our natural reactions of trust with respect to at least some basic sources of belief, provided we lack sufficient reason for regarding them as unreliable."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, any appeal to one or another of those practices as more basic than the others, with the goal in mind of justifying the less basic by the more basic, is illegitimate. We have no reason to single out, for example, the practice delivering self-evident beliefs as providing more accurate access to truth than PP. Descartes's strategy of picking out one practice and using it to justify others is arbitrary.<sup>12</sup> PP is  $J_{nw}$  and this, Alston claims, gives us at least some chance at knowledge about the physical world.

#### 4. The Justification of Christian Practice

Does CP have the same kind of justification as PP? Is CP  $J_{nw}$ ? By the nature of the case, one need not produce some set of reasons to show that CP is  $J_{nw}$ . Nevertheless, CP is often not accepted as  $J_{nw}$ , so some kind of account can be helpful. The best that can be done is to present PP, which we accept as  $J_{nw}$ , alongside CP in order to compare the two. If there are no differences significant vis-à-vis epistemic justification, then if one accepts PP as  $J_{nw}$  one can accept CP as  $J_{nw}$ .<sup>13</sup> Alston argues that there are no such differences and in effect, therefore, argues for the truth of  $PT_A$ .

11. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 119.

12. Alston does not wish to suggest that one cannot check what might be called "subpractices" by a larger practice in which a subpractice is embedded. One might, for example, check the reliability of a thermometer by the larger perceptual practice.

13. One might think there is some sort of argument from analogy here, but I do not think this is the case. Alston's comparison is merely a comparison; it is not intended as an argument from the justification of one practice to the justification of another.



Epistemic situations are often analyzed in the following way. Instead of having empirical information plain and simple, it appears that what we have is, on the one hand, a datum such as "I am being appeared to in a computerish way" or "I seem to see a computer" or "A computerish sense datum is in my visual field" and, on the other hand, beliefs such as that there is a computer in front of me. How does one legitimately move from the content of one's mental life to a claim about the (independently) existing physical reality? Supposedly, the (independently existing) computer generates the datum via some psychophysical process. Thus the empirical claim, "There is a computer in front of me," is a hybrid resulting from the datum and an explanation (via the mysterious psychophysical process). But now we are in the difficult position with PP of having a bifurcation between experience and explanation. Similarly with CP, the suggestion goes. One has certain kinds of experience, such as it seeming to one that God cares for us, and theological explanations, such as that God does care for us. How is one to overcome either of these bifurcations?

Alston registers his skepticism about the two standard ways by which philosophers attempt to overcome the bifurcation for PP. Some try to show that the existence of the physical world is the best explanation of the data we have. But, says Alston, it is unlikely that one can "specify the purely subjective experiential data to be explained without relying on the 'independent physical world' scheme in doing so," and thus the explanation route seems closed.<sup>14</sup> Neither does the phenomenalist approach of taking physical object beliefs to be beliefs about actual and possible sense experience fare well, according to Alston. The best move is to reject the bifurcation altogether and seek to justify the claim that we are in direct contact with the objects of the physical world. He suggests a parallel strategy for CP:

The question concerns the justifiability of a certain *practice*—the practice of forming physical-object beliefs directly on the basis of perception rather than as an explanation of what is perceived or experienced. Another way of characterizing the practice in question is to say that it is a practice of using a certain conceptual scheme (the "independently existing physical object" conceptual scheme) to specify what it is we are experiencing in sense perception. If I may use

14. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 109.

the term "objectification" for "taking an experience to be an experience of something of a certain sort," then we may say that the practice in question is a certain kind of objectification of sense experience, an objectification in terms of independently existing physical objects. Let us use the term "perceptual practice" (PP) for our familiar way of objectifying sense experience. In parallel fashion I will . . . use the term "Christian practice" (CP) for the practice of objectifying certain ranges of experience in terms of Christian theology.<sup>15</sup>

In the case of PP, the experience is taken to be an experience of the object itself and not merely a psychological datum. Alston also says the believer *takes* himself to be directly aware of the object; he does not claim that the subject *is* directly aware. Further, Alston suggests that we should understand our formation of physical object beliefs simply by our "objectification" of a range of experience in terms of certain concepts. On his suggestion, the datum of the experience generating physical object beliefs is not explained by reference to objective entities but is simply understood as an experience of those entities.

A brief detour is necessary here. In "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" Alston uses the language of one's taking an experience to be an experience of a certain sort as opposed to the claim that one's experience is of a certain sort. In his more fully orbited theory of perception, however, he makes the following claims:

As I see the matter, at the heart of perception (sensory and otherwise) is a phenomenon variously termed *presentation*, *appearance*, or *givenness*. Something is presented to one's experience (awareness) *as* so-and-so, as blue, as acrid, as a house, as Susie's house, or whatever. I take this phenomenon of *presentation* to be essentially independent of conceptualisation, belief, judgment, "taking," or any other cognitive activity involving concepts and propositions. It is possible, in principle, for this book to visually present itself to me as blue even if I do not take it to be blue, think of it as blue, conceptualise it as blue, judge it to be blue, or anything else of the sort.

Thus Alston distances his theory of perception from those in which the object of the experience is said itself to be constituted in part or in whole by the conceptual framework and beliefs of the perceiver.

15. Ibid.

Nevertheless, Alston's claims about presentation do not really affect his claims about PP and CP. In fact, Alston goes on to say: "No doubt, in mature human perception this element of presentation is intimately intertwined with conceptualisation and belief, but presentation does not consist in anything like that." So, although Alston holds that the object of perception is a given, one's conceptual scheme can nevertheless influence how one takes the given:

It is essential not to confuse what appears with what it appears *as*. My conceptualised knowledge and belief can affect the latter but not the former. If to perceive X is simply for X to appear to one in a certain way, and if the concept of appearance is unanalyzable, then it would appear that we can enunciate no further conceptually necessary conditions for perception. But that does not follow. In declaring the concept of appearance (presentation) to be unanalyzable I was merely denying that we can give a conceptually equivalent formulation in other terms; I was not denying that conceptually necessary conditions can be formulated in other terms.

Alston's realism about the given should not be confused with the suggestion that the given itself is all that is necessary for perceptual experience.<sup>16</sup>

Let us return now to consider PP. Alston's point is that the data of the experiences generating physical object beliefs are not explained by reference to objective entities but rather such experiences are simply understood as experiences of those entities. So it goes with CP as well. Alston is careful to distinguish between "experiences in which the subject takes himself to be directly aware of God" and other interesting cases in which someone is "simply . . . disposed to believe . . . that what is happening in his experience is to be explained by God's activity."<sup>17</sup> How does the account of these experiences go? As we have learned, Alston uses the term "objectify" to stand for "taking a certain kind of experience as an experience of something of a certain sort." In the physical object case, we take sense experiences as experiences of physical objects (rather than psychological data). He suggests, then, that just as we form

16. Alston, "Experience of God: A Perceptual Model," paper delivered at the Wheaton Philosophy Conference, Wheaton, Illinois, October 1989, pp. 2-4. A fuller treatment of this topic is found in Alston, *Perceiving God*, chap. 1.

17. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 107.

physical object beliefs directly on the basis of perception so we form theistic beliefs directly on the basis of theistic experience. There is not to be, presumably, any inference from the one to the other; the formation of belief is immediate. Thus, whenever we have perceptual experiences, we take ourselves to be in contact with physical objects. Just so, whenever we have theistic experiences, we take ourselves to be in contact with God or at least his activities. But how are we to understand "theistic experience"?

Alston says that a certain range of experience is objectified in certain terms. What is this range of experience in the realm of theistic belief? He suggests that there are certain Christian or religious experiences that can be objectified. He delimits the experiences about which he is concerned by setting aside what are typically called mystical experiences—those experiences sometimes had by saints and ascetics. He is concerned more with experiences open to the typical, lay Christian.<sup>18</sup> He also sets aside experiences that might be described as visions. He does not wish to set aside all sensory mediation—for example, seeing the glory of God in the mountains. Nevertheless, he limits his final concern to what we might call direct experiences of God. These experiences need not be in the forefront of one's consciousness, but they are not experiences from which one *infers* the presence of God. God is somehow (to be taken as) directly present, just as the table to my left is (taken by me to be) directly present.

Given this range of experiences, and Alston's accounts of PP and CP, how does the argument for PT<sub>A</sub> go? Clearly, PP is J<sub>nw</sub>. It is often suggested, however, that CP is significantly different from PP, and these differences show that CP and PP do not have the same kind of epistemic justification. Alston writes:

I believe that many people are inclined to take CP to be discredited by certain ways in which it differs from PP, by the lack of certain salient features of PP. These include the following:

1. Within PP there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief. If, by looking at a cup, I form the

18. This remains true even in *Perceiving God*, where Alston uses the rubric "mystical practice" to name the subject of his concern, although at least some of his examples in this more recent work are from what is thought of more standardly as the mystical literature. Still, his concern is not experiences of unity with God but rather with experiences where God is taken to be present, in a sense Alston specifies, to the experiencer's consciousness.

belief that there is coffee in it, I can check this belief for accuracy by smelling or tasting the contents; I can get other observers to look at it, smell it, or taste it; I can run chemical tests on it and get other people to do so.

2. By engaging in PP we can discover regularities in the behavior of objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.

3. Capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.

4. All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience.<sup>19</sup>

Alston responds in both a negative and a positive way to these supposed disanalogies between PP and CP. Only the negative reply need concern us for the present.

The conclusion of the negative reply is that PP's possession of features 1-4 is best seen "as a rather special situation that pertains specifically to certain fundamental aspects of that particular practice in this particular historical-cultural situation rather than as an instance of what is to be expected of *any* reliable epistemic practice."<sup>20</sup> Alston's argument is roughly that although 1-4 are features that one might desire to have attached to an epistemic practice, it does not follow that a practice's failing to have them is a reason to reject the practice's claim to reliability. In fact, PP's possession of 1-4 does not give us a reason to take PP as reliable.

To simplify matters, let us consider features 1 and 2 together and then 3 and 4. Features 1 and 2 have the common focus of calling attention to predictability, whereas 3 and 4 have the common focus of calling attention to the universal human participation in the practice.<sup>21</sup> So first, 1 and 2. PP is what Alston calls a "basic practice." It is a practice that "constitutes our basic access to its subject matter. We can learn about our physical environment only by perceiving it, by receiving reports of the perceptions of others, and by carrying out inferences from what we learn in these first two ways. We can not know anything *a priori* about these matters, nor do we

19. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 121.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

21. This observation is made by Peter Van Inwagen in the abstract "Abnormal Experience and Abnormal Belief," *Nous* 15 (1981): 13-14.

have any other sort of experiential access to the physical world." Thus, if one tries to take features 1 and 2 as reasons for judging PP to be reliable, one is involved in a "vicious circularity."<sup>22</sup> So no adequate reason can be given.

As an alternative, Alston suggests that, although 1 and 2 do not provide us with reasons for the reliability of PP, perhaps they be-token or manifest reliability. Thus, the first part of the anti-CP charge reduces to the claim that 1 and 2 manifest reliability but that CP lacks 1 and 2. Their absence is supposed to be a reason to reject the reliability of CP. But surely it is not. If 1 and 2 are not necessary conditions for reliability, as Alston argues, then the only alternative left for the anti-CP challenge is that 1 and 2 are general features of reliability, features such that the absence thereof provides at least *prima facie* reason to reject a practice as not reliable. In response, Alston offers one central reason why we should not think 1 and 2 are general features of reliable practices. This reason is hinted at by the practice of pure mathematics. The practice of pure mathematics does not allow for predictability precisely because it does not deal with changing objects. This example indicates that "whether a practice could be expected to yield prediction, if reliable, depends on the kind of subject matter with which it deals."<sup>23</sup> He then suggests that it is only accidental and not necessary to PP that predictability is built into it.

As for features 3 and 4, not everyone engages in the practice of pure mathematics, so the claim that everyone engages in the same epistemic practices is not true; universal participation need not be a feature of a reliable practice. Also, it is not at all clear that all people of various cultures objectify experience in the way Western people do. Alston admits that this is a controversial area, but since the issue is unclear and, I might add, not even clearly decidable, perhaps it should not be pressed on either side.

Given these considerations, although the presence of features 1–4 may be cognitive desiderata, their absence does not give us a reason to reject the reliability of a practice failing to have them. PP and CP thus have, according to Alston, the same kind of epistemic

22. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," pp. 117, 124.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

justification,  $J_{nw}$ . Just as we have no reason to reject the reliability of PP, so we have no reason to reject the reliability of CP.

### 5. Alstonian Theistic Experience

In the next section I introduce a challenge to  $PT_A$  which I draw from some recent philosophical work on the epistemic value of mystical experiences. To develop the challenge, however, I need a clearer explanation of Alston's account of experience. Experience, whether in PP or CP, is such that the object of one's experience is taken to be directly present. Alston resists any bifurcation of one's belief formation into parts, claiming that one simply takes one's experience to be of a certain object; one objectifies one's experience immediately into the categories appropriate to that experience. Sense experiences are objectified into physical object beliefs via the independently existing physical object scheme. Theistic experiences are objectified into theistic beliefs via the (Christian) theological object scheme. How should one understand the experiences that the theist objectifies into theistic belief?

Since the belief formation is noninferential, one expects the content of the experience to be relevant to the content of the belief. But what is the content of the experience? Here there appears to be a certain looseness in Alston's presentation in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." Although he indicates early in his essay that he does not want to rule out experiences in which one might see the glory of God in majestic natural scenes or hear God speak in the words of a friend, he later specifies that he is restricting himself

to experiences in which the subject takes himself to be directly aware of God, rather than simply being disposed to believe, however firmly, that what is happening in his experience is to be explained by God's activity. Thus if after responding to the Gospel message, I find myself reacting to people in a different kind of way, I may firmly believe that this is due to the action of the Holy Spirit on my soul; but if I do not seem to myself to be directly experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit, if I am not disposed to answer the question "Just what did you experience?" or "Just what were you aware of?" with something that begins "The Holy Spirit . . . ,"

then this experience does not fall within our purview. . . . No doubt, this is often a difficult distinction to make.<sup>24</sup>

The first examples indicate a certain overlap in experience between theist and nontheist. For example, presumably both theist and nontheist (can) see the natural scene and both (can) hear the voice of the friend. In the remaining example, the nontheist presumably does not react to people in a way different than before hearing the gospel. This is an experience to which the nontheist has no access. The question is whether Alston can include both kinds of example—those in which there is an overlap of experience between theist and nontheist and those in which there is no overlap.

In the cases in which a theist and a nontheist appear to be having the same experience—viewing the beautiful mountains—but where only the theist forms the belief that God made them or that they reveal the glory of God, it may appear that there is an experiential overlap. But I think this is not the case. Insofar as Alston's suggestions go, it seems that there must be two separate experiential contents, for if the experiential contents were the same for both theist and nontheist then the difference in beliefs would need to be explained either by a difference in inference and explanation *added* to the experience or by the nontheist's failure to have a theistic conceptual or belief framework. An inferential addition is not allowed by Alston's own case; the objectification is to be immediate. And the failure of the nontheist to have the theistic conceptual or belief framework seems at best an unlikely explanation. Presumably both theist and nontheist take the mountains to be present in Alston's objectification sense. Furthermore, it is unlikely that the theist confuses the presence of mountains with the presence of God. Even if the theist has some theistic conceptual or belief framework the nontheist lacks, the theist needs some additional (and different) content in her experience to objectify it legitimately in theistic terms. It seems at least *prima facie* clear that the content of the experience should be related to the content of the belief generated. Just as I would deny, under normal circumstances, that there is a tree in front of me while I am in a room with no view of trees (i.e., while not having any experiences whose content in-

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.



cludes what I take to be a tree), so the theist should deny, under normal circumstances, that she is in direct contact with God while not having an experience the content of which she takes to be theistic. The mere presence of mountains and a theistic framework is not enough for the generation of a justified theistic belief.

Some comments from *Perceiving God* can help us here. Alston writes:

What distinguishes perception from abstract thought is that the object is *directly presented* or *immediately present* to the subject so that "indirect presentation" would be a contradiction in terms. To tease out a concept of directness that has an opposite within the category of presentation, let's go back to sense perception. . . . We can distinguish *directly* seeing someone from seeing her in a mirror or on television. We have *presentation* on both sides of this distinction. Even when I see someone in a mirror or on television, the person appears to me as such-and-such, as smiling, tall, or smartly dressed. That person can be identified with an item in my visual field. This contrasts with the case in which I take something as a sign or indication of X but do not see X itself (X does not appear anywhere within my visual field), as when I take a vapor trail across the sky as an indication that a jet plane has flown by. Here I don't see the plane at all; nothing in my visual field looks like a plane. Let's call this latter kind of case *indirect perceptual recognition*, and the former kind (seeing someone on television) *indirect perception*. We can then say that indirect is distinguished from direct perception of X by the fact that in the former, but not in the latter, we perceive X by virtue of perceiving something else, Y. In the indirect cases I see the person, T, by virtue of seeing a mirror or the television screen or whatever. On the other hand, when I see T face to face there is nothing else I perceive by virtue of perceiving which I see T.<sup>25</sup>

Here Alston distinguishes between direct and indirect perception. How do the two kinds of examples I noted from "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" fit into the scheme from *Perceiving God*? Alston says in *Perceiving God* that he once thought cases of indirect perception and indirect perceptual recognition could not be distinguished, as far as the object of the perception (or recognition) was God. This indicates that when he wrote "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" he meant to focus only on direct experiences.

25. Alston, *Perceiving God*, pp. 20–21.

But Alston also tells us in the later work that some seminar students convinced him that, if God could appear to him as loving or powerful or glorious when he is not sensorily aware of a field of oats (or whatever), then God could appear to him as loving or powerful or glorious when that comes through his sense perception of the field of oats. Alston continues by noting that he has nothing to say against this possibility.<sup>26</sup>

What is of importance here is that Alston now thinks that cases in which God appears through something else, rather than directly, can be classified as cases of indirect perception and need not be classified as cases of indirect perceptual recognition. Nevertheless, he makes it clear that his focus in *Perceiving God* is the possibility of direct perception of God rather than the more complicated indirect perception. His reason is that the former is a simpler phenomenon than the later. Given this historical information, I believe it is safe to suggest that Alston's examples of experiencing God when hearing a friend's voice or seeing a natural scene are best understood as cases of indirect perception and that we are therefore right here to understand Alston's main concern to be the direct type of experience of God. But we also learn that my way of passing over the more complex cases of indirect perception of God may be too easy. Perhaps there is something more going on in cases in which one experiences God through hearing a friend's voice or a beautiful scene than some kind of inference or explanation added to the experience.<sup>27</sup>

One way of spelling out Alston's notion of direct experience is the following.<sup>28</sup> Suppose Alston is right and we do objectify

26. Ibid., p. 28.

27. I have more to say on this in Chapters 6 and 7, for I take Plantinga's examples of experiencing God to be of this type, rather than the direct type. In short, I attempt later to do some of the work on the more complex cases of indirect perception which are not Alston's focus.

28. Alston goes into some detail in accounting for various levels of immediacy of perception in *Perceiving God*. He sums up his position by noting three grades of immediacy: "(A) Absolute immediacy. One is aware of X but not through anything else, even a state of consciousness. (B) Mediated immediacy (direct perception). One is aware of X through a state of consciousness that is distinguishable from X, and can be made an object of absolutely immediate awareness, but is not perceived. (C) Mediate perception. One is aware of X through the awareness of another object of perception" (pp. 21–22). (A) is exemplified by awareness of a

our experiences. He seems to have in mind a range of experience united by some commonality; for example, in the physical object case it is sensory experience that is common and, it seems, in the theistic case the commonality is a sort of "theistic sense." Although Alston does not explicitly take note of it in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," on analysis it appears that there is a kind of link between sense perceptual experiences and physical object beliefs, for example, between "I am appeared to treely" and "I see a tree."<sup>29</sup> This link need not and perhaps cannot be one of belief, at least insofar as beliefs generate inferential beliefs, but there is a link of the following sort. No one forming the belief "I see a tree" would deny that she is being appeared to treely. The link is a sort of linguistic or conceptual one.

Now, according to Alston's claims in "Experience of God: A Perceptual Model" and in *Perceiving God*, the given in an experience is not dependent on the perceiver's concepts or beliefs. Thus caution is called for here. This linguistic-conceptual link to which I am calling attention need not imply an antirealist theory of perception or, for that matter, an antirealist metaphysic. Alston may be right that in principle a tree may be present to me even if I do not take it to be a tree, think of it as a tree, conceptualize it as a tree, judge it to be a tree, or anything else of the sort. Nevertheless, it seems true enough that, if I form the belief that I see a tree, *I will not deny that I am appeared to treely*.<sup>30</sup> Thus, in distinguishing between direct experiences and experiences of other kinds it is helpful

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state of consciousness. (B) is exemplified by being aware of Reagan as he comes within one's perceptual range. (C) is exemplified by being aware of Reagan's image on the television screen. I believe that what I have to say in the main text provides one account of direct experience that could be spelled out in terms of mediated immediacy or direct perception.

29. He does note the difficulty in specifying purely subjective experiences without reference to "schemes" in doing so; see "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 109.

30. A brief explanation of the terminology used in this context may be in order. In this case, the "adverbial" construction is intended to call attention to the linguistic nature of the link without committing me to any existence claims. In its broader use in epistemology, the point is to emphasize how I am *appeared* to rather than how *things* appear to me; see Roderick Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), pp. 29–30, for a more detailed explanation of this terminology.

to note that one can appeal to the language used to describe the content of direct experiences.<sup>31</sup> It is a language relying on the physical object conceptual scheme itself. If I take myself to see a tree and go on to describe the experience underlying the formation of the corresponding belief ("I see a tree"), I use language such as "I am appeared to treely." The description of the experience makes covert reference to the tree or, to make the point more general, to the physical object. Let us give this link the name "lingo-conceptual link."

Now, one might suggest that there need not be a lingo-conceptual link. For example, the experience could be described in terms of patches of greenishness falling into certain patterns or having a certain shape. But this seems an unlikely account. Our experience is gestaltlike and does not seem reducible to the more basic components. At least, when asked why one thinks she sees a tree the reply is something like "I am appeared to treely" and the account is not typically given further analysis.

If there is a range of experiences picked out by the terms "theistic experience" or "Christian experience" (understood as direct experience), one might surmise that the existence of a similar link can be discovered in theistic belief formation. When the belief "God wants me to love people more fully" is formed, the description of the experience underlying it would, one might expect, make covert reference to theistic language—"being appeared to theistically." Thus the range of experiences to which Alston can point, given the objectification scheme he describes, seems not to overlap in content with the experiences of the nontheist.<sup>32</sup> Alston's suggestions seem to rule out understanding his examples as allowing both theists and nontheists to have the same experiential content in their

31. This seems true enough for beliefs expressed by perceptual verbs. But what of straight physical object beliefs that might, as Alston suggests, be based on experience, for example, "Suzie's house needs painting"? The link here is perhaps not as direct, but there still is one. If my belief that Suzie's house needs painting is based in experience, I must be looking at (or have looked at) Suzie's house. So "Suzie's house needs painting" is linked to "I see (saw) Suzie's house needing paint," which in turn is linked to "I am (was) appeared to in a Suzie's house-needing-paint-like manner."

32. Whether it is best to describe such experiences as one experience with two contents or as two experiences, one of which occurs at the same time as the other, is not important here.

experiences. So the experiences objectified by theists into theistic belief are experiences only the theist has—or, at least if had by a nontheist, they are ignored, explained away, or otherwise not objectified.

## 6. A Challenge to the Alstonian Parity Thesis

Two sorts of questions can be distinguished in a consideration of perception-like theistic experiences. The first is whether the experience is veridical as opposed to hallucinatory. The second is what the experience (whether veridical or hallucinatory) is an experience of, what the object of the experience is. The second question is relevant here.

In an essay on mysticism, J. William Forgie isolates the phenomenological content of the experience from other background beliefs and "items of knowledge" which he calls the "epistemic base." When seeking to identify a person one sees, he argues, one must make reference to the epistemic base. For example, to identify the young man next door when one knows that identical twins Tom and Tim Tibbetts both live there, one must rely on other background information such as the fact that Tom is out of town this week. Since experiences of both Tom and Tim Tibbetts are phenomenologically the same, knowing Tom is out of town allows one to identify this young man as Tim Tibbetts. Thus a purely phenomenological description of the experience could not take the form "It was an experience of Tim Tibbetts." Such a description must rely on the epistemic base. There is nothing in the phenomenological experience that guarantees that this is an experience of Tim rather than Tom, "or for that matter any of a number of other things—a third 'look-alike,' an appropriately made-up dummy, or even a cleverly devised hologram—an accurate perception of which could be phenomenologically indistinguishable from the experience in question."<sup>33</sup>

To show that no experience can be phenomenologically an experience of God—that is, to show that "it's of God" cannot be a true phenomenological description of any experience—Forgie employs

33. J. William Forgie, "Theistic Experience and the Doctrine of Unanimity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 15 (1984): 13–30, quotation p. 14.

a "divide and conquer" strategy. "God" can be understood to be either a (disguised) definite description or a proper name:

If it is a proper name, then if an experience is to be phenomenologically of God, the content of the experience must guarantee that its object is a certain unique individual, the one named by "God," and not any other. It must not be possible, that is, for the experience to constitute an accurate "perception" of some individual other than God. . . . On the other hand, if "God" is a description, meaning (let us suppose) "the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good creator of the heavens and the earth," then a theistic experience need only be phenomenologically of some individual or other—it doesn't matter which one—who satisfies that description. In this case it is required only that it not be possible that the experience constitute an accurate perception of something that fails to satisfy the description.<sup>34</sup>

The first option, taking "God" to be a proper name, does not provide an account of how one could have a phenomenological experience that guarantees that it is an experience of God. For such a guarantee to be possible, one would have to identify the object of the experience as having what Forgie calls a "uniquely instantiable property [UIP]." The only likely candidates for such properties are those such as "being Socrates" or, in the theistic case, "being God." But neither of these properties is given as part of a phenomenological experience itself, just as it is not given in the experience of the young man next door that he is Tim rather than Tom Tibbetts. Forgie says that the point about sense experience can be put in two ways:

(1) At best sense experiences are phenomenologically of things that appear in a certain way, but since properties of the form "being something that looks (sounds, feels, etc.)—or is capable of looking (etc.)—this way" are not UIPs, sense experiences are not phenomenologically of individuals.

(2) If a sense experience is to be phenomenologically of an individual, it is not enough that that individual have a UIP. It must have a UIP of the form "being something which appears—or which is capable of appearing—in a certain way." It is because no object of sense experience seems to have a UIP of that form that no sense experience is phenomenologically of an individual.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Forge admits that if mystical (theistic) experiences are radically unlike perceptual experiences then perhaps his argument is not relevant. Nevertheless, insofar as the analogy is accurate his point seems to stand. Forge also admits that he cannot provide an argument to conclude that there are no UIPs of the sort in question. Nevertheless, it seems at least unlikely that such UIPs are in the offing given the following intuition: for any allegedly phenomenological experience of God, there is a possible world in which "the causal laws pertaining to the relations between possible objects of 'perception' and the 'perceivers' of those objects are such that some individual, not identical to God, is capable of appearing in just the way displayed in the experience in question." In short, if "God" is a proper name, then experiences that phenomenologically guarantee that their object is God are not possible.<sup>35</sup>

The second possibility, taking "God" to be a disguised definite description, fares no better. What is needed here for a phenomenological experience to guarantee itself as an experience of God is not that it be an experience of an individual but only that it be of something having certain properties. In God's case the properties could be all-knowing, all-powerful, and so forth. Forge first makes the Humean observation that causation, whether of one event causing another or of some agent causing some event or some substance, is not phenomenologically *in* the experience. If this is true, then there are difficulties with the suggestion that anyone could recognize something as having certain properties having to do with powers or beliefs—all-powerful, all-knowing, and so forth. Whether the properties have to do with powers or belief, ultimately one's recognition of them depends on recognition of causal relations:

The best candidate for an experience which is phenomenologically of something having certain powers and beliefs is one which is phenomenologically of something manifesting those powers or expressing those beliefs. If there can be no experience which is phenomenologically of some power, or some belief, by itself, . . . perhaps an experience can be phenomenologically of something manifesting a power or expressing a belief. If so, then an experience itself could guarantee that its object is something manifesting, and hence pos-

35. Ibid., p. 18.

sessing, that power, and also something expressing, and so having, that belief. But here is where the earlier point about causation is important. If causation is not phenomenologically presentable then neither is agency. If some agent is manifesting a power or expressing a belief, that agent is causing something to happen, producing some state of affairs. But if no experience is phenomenologically of someone's causing or producing a state of affairs (as opposed to that state of affairs simply co-existing with the agent or coming into existence while the agent is present), then no experience will be phenomenologically of someone manifesting a power or expressing a belief. So the best candidate for an experience which is phenomenologically of something having certain powers or beliefs turns out not to be up to the job.<sup>36</sup>

The general point is that there is nothing in the phenomenological aspect of the experience alone that entitles the perceiver to claim that it is an experience of God, whether "God" is understood to be a disguised definite description or a proper name.

Based on the kinds of suggestions Forgie makes, I propose the following challenge to PT<sub>A</sub>. PP and CP do not have the same strength of epistemic justification, since CP, unlike PP, requires a role for background beliefs for the generation and justification of its deliverances. This special role for CP's background beliefs weakens the level of strength of justification for CP-generated beliefs. This is not to say that beliefs delivered by CP are not justified, nor even that they are not J<sub>n</sub>. Nevertheless, they are not as strongly justified as PP-delivered beliefs. Call this the "background belief challenge."

This challenge suggests that, insofar as Alston means for his account of belief formation to be an account of noninferential belief formation involving only an objectification of experience, then perhaps there is a need for more clarity about the notions of "non-inferential" and "objectification" to which Alston appeals. Theistic beliefs appear to depend in some way on a set of background *beliefs*. The background belief challenge suggests that any time one forms a (justified) belief about an individual qua epistemically identifiable individual (as well, I think, as about an individual's action qua uniquely attributable to that individual), the belief is inferential or interpretive; or at least, if noninferential, it relies in some epi-

36. Ibid., pp. 20–21.



stemically significant way on background beliefs as opposed to relying merely on the application of a conceptual scheme.<sup>37</sup> I argue below that some of our doxastic practices do indeed involve an epistemically significant place for background beliefs, but where the background beliefs do not form an inferential basis for the belief generated.

A second issue arises in connection with the background belief challenge. Let us grant that CP does involve background beliefs. Is the same not true for the generation of PP beliefs? And if so, are not the teeth of the challenge removed? Alston himself presents several ways in which background beliefs may enter into PP. I argue in Chapter 3 that there is a special position for background beliefs in CP that PP does not require, thus defending the challenge. But first there are distinctions and observations to be made.

In most of our waking hours, we find ourselves engaged in PP. The beliefs it generates touch much of what we believe in general and virtually all we believe about the physical world and its furniture. PP delivers beliefs about all kinds of physical objects: houses, rocks, trees, elephants, cars, onions, computers, and sweet potatoes, to name only a minuscule number. It also delivers beliefs about particular houses, rocks, trees, elephants, cars, onions, and sweet potatoes. In many cases, the beliefs generated by PP come and go, and the objects we form beliefs about are not important enough for us to name or otherwise identify so as to be able to reidentify them. For example, if I am in a new city, being driven through its streets, PP may lead me to believe all sorts of things about the new physical environment in which I find myself. For the most part, however, I do not pay enough attention so that later I might be able to sort out one house from another, as far as my beliefs about them are concerned. Unless, in short, there is something spectacular about a given physical scene or unless I have some specific reason or need to remember information about a given bit of the physical environment, I simply do not form beliefs about objects which are focused on allowing me to reidentify the object. Still, I may be forming many beliefs via PP as I drive

37. Alston himself allows for the possibility of mediate or indirect justification of beliefs by their relation to other beliefs. And not all these need be inferential. See "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," p. 101.

around the city, and these beliefs classify the objects of my experience into kinds of things with certain properties not shared with any others.

What I wish to emphasize is not the classificatory type of belief just noted but what I call "epistemically unique individual beliefs" (where it is the object of the belief that is individual, not the beliefs). I mean by the term "epistemically unique individual" not simply one of a kind but one of a kind with certain unshared properties and identifiable and reidentifiable as such. CP delivers beliefs about such an object. The focus of CP is only one kind of thing, a divine entity. And CP delivers beliefs about the only member of its kind, God.<sup>38</sup> (Note the prominent place of discussion of proper names and definite descriptions in Forge's argument.) The centrality in CP of a unique individual who is (taken to be) identifiable and reidentifiable is clear. But not only is he central, the entire epistemic practice is oriented toward forming beliefs about this single individual.<sup>39</sup>

This is quite different from PP, where beliefs are generated willy-nilly about countless things (and even countless kinds of things), many of which we do not bother to identify as the unique individuals they are but rather only classify as members of a certain kind. Contrast "I see the white rock next to the oak in my front yard" with "I see a rock." The latter can be understood merely to classify the object of my experience as being a member of a certain kind or, in so doing, to attribute certain properties to the object. The former picks out the object of my experience as the individual rock it is—the white one beside the oak in my front yard. Presumably, beliefs generated by CP are closer to the latter than to the former, that is, closer to epistemically unique individual beliefs than to classificatory beliefs. One reason for this may simply be that there is only one divine individual, God.<sup>40</sup>

38. God may not be the member of a kind; if he is not, then CP does not deliver beliefs about any *kind* of thing, but about a very special thing.

39. This is not to say that no other individual would ever play a role in CP. I might sense that God wants me to love my wife more, for example. The point is that God is the focal point of CP.

40. Even in classificatory beliefs one is classifying a unique individual as a rock, tree, or something else. But the point is the focus or emphasis of the belief's content, not simply the object of the belief.

There is much more to say about this difference between PP and CP, but for now we can merely introduce the issues that are the focus not only of the discussion of  $PT_A$  but of the challenge to Reformed epistemology's emphasis on parity in general. The difference between CP and PP is that the former is solely oriented toward beliefs about an epistemically unique individual, the latter is not so oriented. This difference requires, in turn, a special epistemic role (yet to be fully specified) for background beliefs in the generation of CP's deliverances. This special place for background beliefs is absent in the generation of a good many, if not all, of PP's deliverances. Do background beliefs have a special position in CP that they do not have in PP, and if so, is this position epistemically important? I tackle these questions in reverse order, postponing a full inquiry into the former question until the next chapter. For now, let me assume an affirmative answer to the first question and go on to discuss an answer to the second.

Let us assume that PP and CP differ on the place of background beliefs in the generation of (justified) beliefs. As a preliminary run toward getting at the suspicion that the differing roles of background beliefs are epistemically important, let us distinguish between three kinds of belief formation. The first is that of Alston's objectification; these beliefs are the result of a lingo-conceptual scheme alone being applied noninferentially to experience. Let us call these "conceptual-reading beliefs" and their corresponding practices "conceptual-reading practices." The second kind are those beliefs formed inferentially; these beliefs are the result of conscious, discursive (deductive, inductive, or interpretive) reasoning. Let us call these "inferential beliefs" and their corresponding practices "inferential practices." The third kind is noninferential but where something more than concepts are applied to experience; concepts *and* substantive beliefs are applied, albeit noninferentially, to experience. One's epistemic base includes background information (in the form of beliefs) that is used, along with concepts, to generate beliefs. Let us call these "noninferential mediated beliefs" and the corresponding practices "noninferential mediated practices."

Although we can allow that all these modes of belief generation can provide us with justified beliefs, it might still be the case that conceptual-reading beliefs have a privileged position. We are, in fact, attracted to these noninferential, merely conceptually read be-

liefs. We give them a special place in our epistemic hierarchies. The reason for this is a kind of Cartesian worry about inferences or interpretations. Conceptual-reading beliefs simply have the least chance of going astray. In cases of inference, the longer and more complicated the reasoning, the more likely one is led down the epistemic garden path. One thus suspects that, even where the reasoning is not inferential or even conscious, the more complicated the intellectual moves, the more likely one is to go astray. Furthermore, the beliefs required for the inferences and interpretations often, perhaps always, themselves need justification. Should we not suspect that any beliefs required for Alston's CP objectifications also need to be justified (or have justification), whereas our basic conceptual schemes, as used in PP, do not? What then of the non-inferential mediated beliefs? I suspect that these are in a sort of halfway house between conceptual-reading and inferential beliefs. The epistemic justification for noninferential mediated beliefs, although not as strong as the justification for conceptual-reading beliefs, is not as weak as the justification for inferential beliefs. None of this is to say that any of these three kinds of belief is not justified; it is only to note a ranking of strengths of justification.

According to Alston, the objectification of perceptual experience via a conceptual scheme does not involve discursive reasoning, explanation, interpretation, or any appeal to background beliefs, at least in a large number of cases. In contrast to this, as I argue later (see Chapter 3, Section 2), forming beliefs about Tom and Tim Tibbetts or God always involves at least a noninferential role for background beliefs. The latter seem to be, once again (see Chapter 8, Section 1), at least slightly less high on the epistemic ladder than the former, and beliefs about epistemically unique individuals (at least where these do not derive from PP)<sup>41</sup> therefore do not appear to have the same epistemic status as beliefs formed via Alston's objectification. According to PT<sub>A</sub> the two kinds of beliefs (perceptual and theistic), given appropriate circumstances, not only have the same kind of epistemic justification but also the same level or strength of that kind. It seems that the justification attached to conceptual-reading beliefs may be (slightly) stronger than that attached

41. PP can give us beliefs about epistemically unique individuals, but these do not require background beliefs. At least that is what I argue in Chapter 3.

to noninferential mediated beliefs. But then, if PP provides a non-inferential conceptual reading of experience whereas CP does not, then CP and PP do not share the same epistemic level. And this is true even if they share the same kind of justification, namely,  $J_n$ .

Even granting this initial description of the two kinds of case, is this argument not just a quibble over matters of little significance? Perhaps beliefs delivered via noninferential mediated belief generation are, for all intents and purposes,  $J_{nw}$ . Since  $J_{nw}$  merely demands that there not be reasons to reject the epistemic practice as unreliable, discovering that a practice appeals to background beliefs does not show that the practice is not  $J_{nw}$ . The definition of  $J_{nw}$  simply makes no reference to how the practices work. Perhaps by the letter of the law Alston is correct and  $PT_A$  is true. Nevertheless, the distinctions noted here seem to indicate some need for a more finely tuned notion of  $J_{nw}$  and the parity thesis in which it is embedded. Are there not further gradations of justification within the weak version of  $J_n$ ? And do these not rely on the internal workings of the practices? Alston himself hints at such a possibility when he admits that features 1-4 (those attached to PP but not to CP) are "desiderata for an epistemic practice. 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. . . . Things go more smoothly, more satisfyingly, from a cognitive point of view where these features are exhibited. Since PP possesses these virtues and CP does not, the former is, to that extent and in that way, superior from a cognitive point of view."<sup>42</sup>

This cognitive superiority does not push PP beyond  $J_{nw}$ . Neither does CP's lack of it keep CP from being  $J_{nw}$ . In fact, after this suggestion Alston goes on to argue that the features that generate or allow for this cognitive superiority are not necessary for reliability. But surely Alston's comment indicates the possibility of some ranking within  $J_{nw}$ . Within this possibility it is natural to suggest that noninferential mediated practices do not share the same strength as conceptual-reading practices, at least, one can say, from a cognitive point of view. Thus, although  $PT_A$  is true as a general claim, further refinement indicates a ranking within  $J_{nw}$  by which CP turns out to be less attractive than PP. Is this lack of

42. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," pp. 123-24.

attractiveness more than a cognitive issue? Is it an epistemic one? I have suggested an intuitive case for its being epistemic but have not developed the idea fully. Let me simply state here that I believe the issue is an epistemic one because the background beliefs need justification.

The issue of whether background beliefs need justification is an important one, but I postpone a discussion of it, and some further refinements of the notions of conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices and beliefs, until Chapters 6 and 7. For now, assuming that that promissory note is successfully paid, and that PP and CP do in fact differ on the role of background beliefs, we can suggest that  $PT_A$  is, strictly speaking, false, for there are cognitive and epistemic rankings within  $J_{nw}$  that  $PT_A$  does not recognize. In the next chapter I argue that PP and CP do differ on the role of background beliefs.

## The Role of Background Beliefs

The background belief challenge to  $PT_A$  is that, whereas CP involves an epistemically important position for background beliefs, PP does not, and therefore  $PT_A$  is false. I have two goals for this chapter. The first is to explore the role of background beliefs in PP and CP and, by doing so, to defend the background belief challenge. Second, I consider two possible rejoinders Alston might make to the challenge and argue that neither is successful.

### 1. Alston on Background Beliefs in Perceptual Practice

Is the working assumption of the last section in Chapter 2 correct; do PP and CP differ on whether background beliefs enter into the generation and justification of beliefs? It would be neat and tidy if one could simply say that CP does involve background beliefs whereas PP does not. But philosophy is rarely neat and tidy.

In *Perceiving God*, Alston's central thesis is that "putative direct awareness of God can provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God."<sup>1</sup> One might thus surmise that Alston defends a parity thesis in this work. He does not, however, but not for the

1. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 9.

kinds of reasons I have been suggesting. Alston argues there that background beliefs sometimes enter into sense perceptual belief formation, and that they do in several different ways. The same is true, he says, for CP (or, as he names it there, mystical perception). He suggests that one belief can be partly mediately based and partly immediately based. He raises the question whether any belief is ever strictly immediately based, that is, justified on the basis of experience alone. His reply is affirmative, but he does recognize that sometimes, at least, background beliefs also have a function. He considers three different kinds of beliefs that might play a role and suggests several ways their functions differ from one another. Overall, however, he wants to suggest that, although background beliefs may play a role, it happens far less frequently than is sometimes thought and, most important for the thesis that one can perceive God, background beliefs need not have a place at all. If Alston is right, then as far as  $PT_A$  is concerned the background belief challenge fails. But I believe the challenge does not fail, so I also believe that Alston is not right about the significance of background beliefs in CP and PP.

I noted above that Alston does not defend a parity thesis in *Perceiving God*. He does not do so, for he now thinks that PP and CP differ because CP runs into problems with religious plurality (as well as a lesser problem with checking procedures). I return to Alston's discussion of these in Chapter 8. Our immediate concern is background beliefs. Nevertheless, if it turns out that Alston is wrong about the function of background beliefs in CP, that is, if it turns out that there is a special role for background beliefs in CP which is absent in PP, then he has one more reason to reject a parity thesis between PP and CP.

Is there, then, a special role for background beliefs in CP? To answer this question, we need to consider Alston's position on background beliefs in PP. He quickly deals first with what he calls "perceptual cues." Psychology teaches us that several factors are involved in the way things appear to us. It is not implausible to suppose that our psyches take certain cues into account in the formation of perceptual beliefs. But it is equally obvious that most of us are completely, or almost completely, unaware of taking such factors into account. Still, it is sometimes suggested that, for



example, "perceptual beliefs (judgments) of distance are based on cognitions of factors of the sort just mentioned."<sup>2</sup>

How do beliefs about these cues function in the formation and justification of perceptual beliefs? There are three positions taken on this. One is that an inference (albeit unconscious) takes place. A second suggests that the workings are completely causal and not doxastic. The third falls in between, with the suggestion that there is a kind of "subdoxastic" taking account of the cues. Alston simply notes, and rightly so I think, that if there are beliefs involved in such cases they are involved in "a maximally hidden way." It is, therefore, difficult to find sufficient reasons to suppose that such background information is epistemically important.

Alston's second suggestion deals with what he calls "adequacy assumptions." His concern is the attribution of nonsimple sensory predicates to external objects. We make such attributions on the basis of sense experience, and when we do we are assuming that a certain pattern of sensory qualities (difficult to describe in detail) is a reliable indicator of the predicate's applicability. Alston calls such assumptions "adequacy assumptions (or beliefs)." He writes:

When I take it that X is a house, or your house, or a chair, or the chair we just bought, or a copy of *Process and Reality*, or a wave, or Coit Tower, or my wife, or a primrose, I am, in effect, supposing that the particular pattern of sensory qualia X is presenting to me at that moment is, at least in those circumstances, a reliable indication of X's being a house, or your house, or a chair. That being the case, am I not basing my belief not just on the sensory appearance of X but also on my belief that a sensory appearance of that sort is a reliable indication that what is appearing is a house. . . ? Isn't every case of nonsimple sensory-predicate attribution subject to evaluation, at least in part, in terms of mediate justification?<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, although our paradigm case of a belief being based on another is the conscious inference, we must, says Alston, recognize other cases in which no conscious inference is involved. For example, one's belief that Frank is out of town might be based on one's being told that he is, even though one never infers the former

2. Ibid., p. 83.

3. Ibid., p. 84.

from the latter. Given this broader understanding of the “based on” relationship, could it be that all our attributions of nonsimple sensory predicates rely, although not consciously so, on adequacy assumptions? Even if there are unconscious bases for beliefs, says Alston, the following two observations still carry a strong negative presumption against adequacy assumptions being part of the basis. The first is that perceivers are typically not aware of adequacy assumptions being part of the basis for perceptual beliefs. The second is that in many cases they are not the sorts of things to which one has access.

The stronger case against adequacy assumptions being part of the basis is that there is a level confusion lurking in the neighborhood. To be justified in an attribution of nonsimple sensory predicates one need not be justified in believing the adequacy assumptions that support the predication. The assumption need only be true.<sup>4</sup> It is simply not true that “what it takes for a condition, C, to be sufficient for P (call this ‘what it takes’ ‘A’) must itself be part of any sufficient condition for P. The fallacy is immediately evident once we see that if A is satisfied, then, by the very terms of the example, C is sufficient for P by itself, and A need not be added to it to get sufficiency.”<sup>5</sup> Alston’s point is not that adequacy beliefs never play a role in the justification of perceptual beliefs but simply that they need not do so.

The third kind of belief that can be relevant in perceptual belief formation Alston calls “contextual beliefs.” There are three types of contextual beliefs: beliefs about the setting, beliefs about position, and beliefs about normality. The first of these deals with spatiotemporal issues. Many houses look alike, and my knowing I am on Elm Street, rather than some other, may be a factor in my identifying the house that is the object of my experience. Beliefs about position are concerned with angle of view, distance from the observer, and state of the medium. Finally, Alston explains beliefs about normality by example. Suppose that I thought people, trees, dogs, and tables were constantly annihilated but replaced with exact replicas. This would lead me to form somewhat different be-

4. There is much to be said about and for Alston’s concern with level confusions. I return to this theme in the next chapter.

5. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 86.

liefs on the basis of the sensory array that meets me each day. Do I thus have, contrary to the supposition, an assumption about the relative constancy and permanence of physical substances as part of the basis for my normal perceptual beliefs? Such an assumption Alston calls a “normality assumption.”

In the position and normality cases, says Alston, we are not aware of background beliefs, if we have them, at least in the majority of cases. And if such beliefs do play a role it is not required that they be part of the basis but only that they be true, just as with adequacy assumptions. But Alston admits that the case for situational beliefs being part of the basis for perceptual beliefs is stronger. In many cases one's location does seem important. For example, in identifying the large body of water to the west as the Pacific Ocean, one's being in California seems to be significant. But Alston thinks this is not the normal case. “Even if just after forming the belief [“Those buildings are the World Trade Center”], I reflect that if I hadn't known I was in New York City I wouldn't have judged those buildings to be the World Trade Center, it doesn't follow that being in New York City was part of my basis for the belief.”<sup>6</sup> Other options are possible, including that the reflection in question calls attention to what would be required for the adequacy of the basis, rather than its being part of the basis itself. So, although situational beliefs may sometimes have a part in the justification of other beliefs, they need not do so in every case.

But the situation is different with contextual beliefs than with adequacy beliefs:

Here the adequacy assumption is not that the sensory pattern, A, is *generally* indicative of the presence of a  $\emptyset$ . It is rather that, given an underlying supposition that A is an adequate basis for an attribution of  $\emptyset$  only in certain circumstances rather than others, the belief in question is that the present circumstances are of the former sort. That gives the belief a greater claim to be considered part of the basis, for it does indicate something distinctive about this situation rather than just amounting to a blanket approval of the phenomenal-objective connection. But, by the same token, it offers us a different kind of alternative to holding that it must form part of the basis. Remember the point that the justification of perceptual beliefs is al-

6. Ibid., p. 90.

ways *prima facie*, subject to being overridden by sufficient indications to the contrary. This gives us another way in which a belief can be relevant to the justification of another belief. It can be *negatively* relevant by constituting an (actual or possible) overrider or by ruling out such.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the suspicion that such background beliefs are relevant to the justification of other beliefs is explicable not in terms of their being required as part of the basis itself but as actually or possibly overriding the basis or by ruling out overrides.

Alston takes himself to have dealt with both the subject and predicate components of perceptual beliefs: "In both cases we have argued that the justification might be either purely immediate or partly mediate. As for the former, we have suggested that I might both be able to justifiably take the perceived object to be your house and be able to justifiably believe of it that it is shingled, just on the basis of the way it looks. In both cases background beliefs would normally be playing some role, even if they are not part of the basis." Alston goes on to suggest that there may be concern that object identification poses greater difficulty for immediate justification than does property attribution. He believes, however, that this concern is unfounded. Object identifications do not pose greater difficulty, since one can think of object identification in terms of identifying the subject as one that bears certain properties. Furthermore, any property that can figure in subject identification can also figure as a predicate. "Instead of forming the belief that your house needs painting, I could form the belief that *that* is your house, or that that building that needs painting is your house."<sup>8</sup>

There may, however, be a difference in degree in the possibility of purely immediate justification for subject and predicate attribution. "An indefinitely large plurality of unique individuals is out there to be recognized, whereas there are comparatively few properties we have any real need to distinguish. Hence it is more feasible for us to store relatively fixed ways of recognizing properties by their appearance than to build up comparably direct ways of recognizing individuals."<sup>9</sup> This, Alston claims, suggests that in rec-

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., pp. 91–92.

9. Ibid., p. 92.

ognizing individuals we usually store up ways of perceptually recognizing distinguishing properties of them and then use what we have stored to recognize the individuals. We typically do not do this in cases of property recognition. He says, however, that this is only a difference of degree. We can and do, he continues, identify individuals directly from their sensory appearance and sometimes do recognize properties on the basis of others.

Finally, there is a way in which beliefs attributing certain properties to a perceived object can play a role in the generation and justification of an identificatory belief but not be part of the basis of it. The belief that so-and-so is round-faced and slightly bent over may have as its basis a certain look, and that look may be sufficient not only for the property attribution but also for the subject identification. In fact, the look by which one identifies so-and-so may be sufficient for the subject identification only because it is also sufficient for the attribution of the property. But one need not have made the attribution in order to have made the identification.

Thus, concludes Alston, although background beliefs can and sometimes do function in the justification of PP-delivered beliefs, they need not do so. Furthermore, it happens less frequently than is sometimes thought. When it does happen, background beliefs typically function not as part of the basis itself but in such a way that their truth is either required for the adequacy of the justification or is negatively relevant, that is, as potential or actual overriders.

## 2. Christian Practice and Background Beliefs

Alston goes on to suggest that many of the roles background beliefs play in PP are alive in CP as well. Still, says Alston, it is important to be clear that, even though background beliefs are sometimes relevant in the justification of perceptually generated theistic beliefs, it remains possible that God appears to one as being  $\emptyset$  and, if he does, and that is the whole story, one is immediately justified in the belief that God is  $\emptyset$ . This point is essential for his thesis in *Perceiving God*—that direct awareness of God can provide justification for beliefs about God.

Beyond this, however, beliefs generated by CP may be partly immediately justified. Just as with PP, adequacy beliefs may be oper-

ating. In fact, in many accounts of mystical belief formation (that Alston cites), the predicates applied to God in perceptually generated beliefs go beyond what is explicitly given in the experience.<sup>10</sup> Although positional and situational considerations have limited significance in CP, since God is not spatially located, normality assumptions can come in. One might suspect that one's supposed experience of God is being artificially induced, or the work of the devil, or caused by a nervous imbalance. But, on the other hand, there are some consequences of theistic experience that can indicate that the belief formation is a normal one. Spiritual and moral fruits, for example, might show the justificatory efficacy of theistic experience. Alston also admits that theological or metaphysical background beliefs can have parts in belief formation and justification. In none of these cases, however, as with PP and its background beliefs, do these background beliefs have to be part of the basis, even though they may play epistemically related roles of the kinds noted.

So, to answer the question with which this chapter began—do CP and PP differ on the role of background beliefs?—Alston gives a definite negative reply. Both PP and CP may sometimes have background beliefs as part of their bases, but they need not do so. If Alston is correct, then, as far as the argument of the previous chapter goes, even if there are background beliefs involved in CP, they are not epistemically important as far as distinguishing the deliverances of CP and PP are concerned. Since in neither case do background beliefs *need* to form part of the epistemic basis of the beliefs generated, it seems one cannot suggest that the deliverances of CP differ from those of PP in terms of the strength of their justification because of their background beliefs.

I find myself in disagreement with Alston on this point. Although I think a great deal of what he says about the function of background beliefs is correct, I believe he overlooks some important features of belief formations dealing with epistemically unique individuals.

To deal with the suggestion that it is not possible to recognize directly something one experiences as God, Alston writes:

10. Ibid., pp. 12–20.

We should not suppose that in order to succeed in perceptually recognizing an object of perception as X (i.e., become perceptually justified in believing, or perceptually know, that the object is X), it is necessary that the object appears to one as  $\emptyset$ , where  $\emptyset$  is a property uniquely possessed by X. To perceptually recognize your house, it is not necessary that the object even display features that are *in fact* only possessed by your house, much less features that only your house *could* possess. It is enough that the object present to my experience features that, in this situation or in situations in which I generally find myself, are sufficiently indicative of (are a reliable guide to) the object's being your house. And so it is here. For me to recognize what I am aware of (X) as God, all that is necessary is that X present to me features that are in fact a reliable indication of their possessor's being God, at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself. It is, again, not required that these features attach only to God, still less that they be such that they can attach only to God. And it is a matter for detailed investigation what sorts of appearances satisfy that condition, just as in the case of sensorily perceived objects.<sup>11</sup>

Alston takes these suggestions to reply to questions such as how could anything of which I am directly aware uniquely identify the creator of heaven and earth, an absolutely perfect being of infinite power and goodness. Such is the kind of question behind the background belief challenge to PT<sub>A</sub>. The challenge's reply is that one cannot directly experience X as being God, since there are no properties that are both unique to God and capable of being experienced by us. The challenge's position explicitly denies the point Alston makes. Which is right?

I believe the challenge is closer to the truth. We can get at the issue here by considering a phrase in Alston's own denial, just quoted. "It is enough," says Alston, "that the object present to my experience features that, *in this situation or in situations in which I generally find myself*, are sufficiently indicative of . . . the object's being your house." Or, in the case of God, "all that is necessary is that X present to me features that are in fact a reliable indication of their possessor's being God, *at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself*." What are these situations? What are the features that can be sufficiently indicative of the object in question?

11. Ibid., pp. 96–97.

And, furthermore, what connection is there between the situations and the features?

Let us take PP first. Earlier I suggested that PP gives us both epistemically unique individual beliefs and classificatory beliefs. But the two are not unrelated. The very means by which we classify or categorize things—their properties—are also the means by which we identify them. Alston suggests that there need not be a unique feature attached to an object by which the object can be identified. But he does not, I believe, distinguish carefully enough between what we can call kind features and unique features. Sure, Suzie's house may share kind features with other houses; they might have the same floor plan, be the same color, and have the windows placed in the same locations. But the use of the word "same" here is not, obviously, intended to pick out features at the numerically same position. The houses share the features "having such-and-such floor plan," "being pink," and "having windows in the living room, kitchen, and bedrooms." But the houses themselves occupy different spatial locations. What distinguishes the houses in fact are not the kind features—features many houses might share—but the unique features which, I suggest, turn out to be made up of a group of features best understood as a collection of kind features located at a specific spatiotemporal point. Suzie's house does have a unique property: the property of "being a pink, shuttered, . . . bungalow at Fourth and Main." Thus, not only do kind features distinguish houses from trees, rocks, and elephants, as well as one kind of house from another, but those very same features, located at a spatiotemporal point, are what make this house the unique one it is.

But Alston does not deny this. He only denies that it is necessary that the house *display* such a unique feature. Let us call the collection of kind features located at a spatiotemporal point the "collective feature." Now the question is, does one *experience* the collective feature that distinguishes Suzie's house from all others? Alston separates the situation or location information from what is experienced when perceiving Suzie's house. Perhaps this is right. Perhaps it is right because one cannot typically experience, on the basis of phenomena alone, being in New York or California.<sup>12</sup> But that

12. It may be possible to get this kind of belief out of experience alone. Perhaps



suggests that this information at best functions in the form of background beliefs; it is information brought to the experience and not given in it. But then Alston can admit this and say the role this information plays is that of the potential or actual overrider rather than part of the basis for the belief.

I believe, however, that it is a mistake to separate the situational information from the other features of the experience. It seems to me that the location information is not part of the belief system I have when I form the belief (on perception alone) that this is Suzie's house. Rather, it is part of the conceptual scheme I bring to the experience. I objectify the experience as Suzie's house—the pink, shuttered bungalow at Fourth and Main. At least this is true for what we might call “local situation information,” that is, spatial information that picks out where I am vis-à-vis the local geography (this neighborhood or that street) rather than the larger geography (such as New York City or California). That I am located in New York or California does seem to be part of my belief system, and when the generation of one of my beliefs requires that sort of information then clearly the belief generated is at least partly mediate. But that I am in one neighborhood rather than another, on one street rather than another, is given directly in experience and thus the identification of Suzie's house is read off the experience rather than into it via background beliefs. In the local cases no belief about neighborhoods is required, since that information is built into the conceptual scheme I bring to the experience.

Thus, as far as object identification within PP is concerned, PP can be a conceptual reading practice and Alston is correct. Although background beliefs do sometimes play a role in the generation of physical object beliefs, they need not do so. He is incorrect, however, in his claim that for one perceptually to recognize an epistemically unique object the object need not display a unique feature. It is not enough for the object to display features that, in the perceptually given situation in which I find myself, are suffi-

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one sees a building or set of buildings, or certain geographic features that are unique to a certain city. But this would be the exception to the rule. You have to be in special, well-known geographic locations for this to happen—in Anaheim outside Disneyland, by the Hollywood sign, or at the Statue of Liberty, and the like. Being somewhere in a small California town or on a street in Brooklyn will not do it.

ciently indicative of the object's being the unique one I take it to be. The "perceptually given situation in which I find myself" is always a spatiotemporally unique one, and the features I perceive are sufficiently indicative of the object's being the unique one I take it to be only because I am in that spatiotemporally unique situation. But *being* in the location is not enough; that location must also be part of what is given in experience. The feature the object needs to display and, in fact, that only it can display, is the collective feature made up of certain kind features at a certain (local) spatiotemporal location. We objectify our experience in exactly these terms. PP is a conceptual-reading practice.

CP, in contrast, is arguably not a conceptual-reading practice. There is no spatiotemporally unique situation in which the believer finds herself as she experiences God. Nor, as has been argued, is there any feature of God that one can experience which could not also appear attached to other beings. Alston says that all that is necessary for one to recognize X as God is that X present to one features that are in fact a reliable indication of X's being God, at least in situations of the sort in which I typically find myself. But what might such features be that could not be duplicated by other supernatural beings? With PP, the spatiotemporal information allows for the possibility of a check against duplicability. With God, no such check exists, so the mere appearance of godlike features always leaves one with doubts, or at least with possible grounds for doubt, as to the identity of the object of the experience. PP takes care of those doubts with spatiotemporal information given in the experience.

Here we return to the difference between CP and PP noted earlier. With PP one can generate both classificatory beliefs (beliefs that result from sorting among kinds of things; see Chapter 2, Section 6) and epistemically unique individual beliefs. With CP no classificatory beliefs are generated within the practice. One need not sort out the focus of the practice from other things, since there is only one kind of thing with which the practice is concerned and only one member of the kind, God. One need not sort out God from among other things or kinds of things, since the practice has no other focus than God. And it is built into the practice itself that any features attributable to the objects of belief generated by the practice are features only that object can have. But this raises the

issue of religious plurality and the host of other practices parallel to CP, such as Jewish practice, Muslim practice, and the like. What is to keep one of these other gods from appearing to me with the same properties of the Christian god? There is no spatiotemporal grid that can help, and the background belief challenge seems to stand. There need to be unique properties that can be experienced, and there are none as far as God is concerned.

To generate the belief that the object of my experience is God, that is, the god of Christianity rather than one of the others, I must bring background information to the experience. But this, unlike local situation information, is not something that is read off the experience; it is not part of my conceptual scheme. It is, instead, substantive information I use to read the experience. Is it part of the basis of my belief? This is a difficult question. Let us answer an easier question first. Need the information be part of a conscious inference? No, and this is where noninferential mediated practices come in. We might have an experience to which we bring both our conceptual scheme and our substantive beliefs and yet objectify our experience directly into language contained in the combination of the two. A noninferential mediated practice is just what its name suggest, noninferential even though the justification is mediated through beliefs and not just conceptual schemes. Are beliefs delivered by CP, therefore, partly immediately based and partly mediated based? No, not if what is meant by the latter is that a conscious inference is involved. Are the beliefs part of the basis? No, not if what is meant is conscious inference; but yes, if what is meant is that, unless I hold the beliefs, the justification does not go through. And it will not do simply for the beliefs to be true. They must be part of my noetic framework. The reason is that the information in the beliefs is needed for the objectification to go through, and this is not just a matter of justification but of getting the belief itself generated.

There is more to be said about the position of background beliefs in CP and their epistemic importance. Nevertheless, enough has been said to begin to evaluate my tentative suggestion that CP has a special place for background beliefs that PP fails to have and thus that  $PT_A$  is not true. If I am right in the argument of this section, then CP and PP do differ on the function of background beliefs. And if this role is epistemically important, as I suggested in

Chapter 2, then  $PT_A$  is not true. But there are some potential responses and rejoinders to the account as presented thus far, and we can consider them now.

### 3. A Potential Response and Rejoinder

Perhaps Alston could attempt to circumvent this challenge by suggesting that in fact one need not use background *beliefs* in the formation and justification of theistic beliefs. Instead he might suggest an understanding of experience in which the needed interpretive structures and concepts are part of the experience itself. Such an approach to mystical experiences is uncovered and discussed by J. William Forgie.

After discussing several "hyper-Kantian" interpreters of mystical experience, Forgie writes:

The picture these writers present seems so far a familiar one. For Kant, experience is a compound, a product of sensory intuitions filtered, as it were, through *a priori* concepts. . . . But as we will see, this "rival" view is really [not just Kantian but] hyper-Kantian in at least two respects:

(1) First, for Kant the *a priori* concepts, the categories, are twelve in number and are shared by all mankind. And they are inescapable. Human beings must experience the world in terms of cause and effect, and substance and attribute, if they are to experience it at all. . . . But the rival view extends an experience-shaping role to concepts and beliefs which vary from one culture—more pertinently, one religious tradition—to another. Mystical or religious experiences are partially determined or shaped by concepts and beliefs that are peculiar to the particular religious tradition of the one having the experience. Let us call these elements which shape experience, but are not categories, "category-analogues."

(2) Second, experience for Kant is, very roughly speaking, essentially judgemental; having experience is inseparable from making judgements about it. The categories "shape" experience by determining that those judgements will take certain forms. They do not contribute to the phenomenological content of the experiences they shape. . . . [However,] category-analogues shape experience by partially determining its phenomenological content.<sup>13</sup>

13. J. William Forgie, "Hyper-Kantianism in Recent Discussions of Mystical Experience," *Religious Studies* 21 (1985): 205–18, quotation p. 208.

According to the hyper-Kantians, mystical experiences are a result of “category-analogues” and “experiential input” working together so that one cannot, legitimately, separate the two. The phenomenological content of an experience is a hybrid of category-analogues and other sensory (or sensory like) input. Further, unlike Kant’s understanding of experience, according to which all humans share the same categorical structure and hence have the same experience, mystical experiences are different from one another because our category-analogue structures are different.

Forgie goes on to argue that, if the hyper-Kantian understanding of mystical experience is plausible, it carries with it “sceptical implications about one sort of evidential value mystical experiences are sometimes thought to have.”<sup>14</sup> He has in mind here the presumption of veridicality typically given to sensory experience and often extended to mystical experience, namely, that barring special circumstances, what one *seems* to experience is what one experiences—that one’s experiences are, barring special circumstances, accurate.

Although this presumption of veridicality seems to be true for ordinary sensory experiences, it is not true for hyper-Kantian experiences, whether sensory or mystical. Forgie suggests that the presumption of veridicality is not upset by the Kantian categories, but it is by the category-analogues. “Suppose I am in the presence of a supernatural being who acts on some appropriate ‘faculty’ of mine. During this encounter certain sensory or super-sensory input gets mixed with input from the category-analogues, with the result that I have an experience in which it appears that I am confronting a personal and loving being.”<sup>15</sup> Now, further suppose that the sufficient cause of my experience of those characteristics is the category-analogues. After ruling out certain potential confusions about what this picture entails, Forgie goes on to argue that the hyper-Kantian explanation rules out the presumption of veridicality.

At least that is what we would say in a sense perceptual case. Suppose one sees the arches in a cathedral as Gothic because of a category-analogue, when the arches are actually Romanesque. Before discovering the existence of the category-analogue, one would follow our usual rule suggested by the presumption of veridicality:

14. Ibid., p. 205.

15. Ibid., p. 216.

what one sees is what is there to see. But once discovering the causal role of the category-analogues, the presumption of veridicality is no longer granted epistemic weight. In like manner, if we have an experience of a personal and loving being and the experience of the characteristics is caused by category-analogues and we know this, then the experience loses its presumption of veridicality—unless the category-analogues are epistemically justified. But how could they be? Our categories need no justification, at least not in a straightforwardly epistemic sense, since they are what make experience possible. Furthermore, the categories seem not to be the kind of thing that could be justified. Likewise, it seems, with category-analogues. With the latter, however, we do not need them for experience to be possible. So why trust them to give us veridical beliefs—unless the content of the category-analogues could be understood in some other way, perhaps as beliefs? But this is what Alston needs to avoid.

If this argument is correct, the hyper-Kantian understanding of theistic experience removes any presumption in favor of the experience's veridicality. We can therefore conclude that, insofar as Alston might attempt to use a hyper-Kantian approach to defend his objectification account of theistic experience, there is little if any presumption in favor of the veridicality of the resulting experience. Barring other special circumstances or conditions that make it reasonable to take the experience as veridical, theistic beliefs formed via hyper-Kantian experience do not have the same epistemic status as the deliverances of PP.<sup>16</sup> Thus this potential rejoinder is not successful.

#### 4. A Second Response and Rejoinder

A second rejoinder to the background belief challenge can be found in Alston's own work. Alston argues that

16. One might suggest that this is merely another version of what Alston already rules out, namely, that challenge that calls attention to the lack of universal objectification of experience. Although nearly everyone uses PP, not everyone uses CP. But a moment's thought shows that the hyper-Kantian challenge rests on different grounds, grounds accepted by all in the case of PP. If we reject *instances* of the employment of PP because of hyper-Kantianism, we should surely reject *instances* of CP because of hyper-Kantianism—unless there are special reasons not to. But it is difficult to see what those reasons might be in this case.

even if an individual's account of the phenomenology of his/her own experience is not infallible, it must certainly be taken seriously. Who is in a better position to determine whether S [the person purporting to have theistic experiences] is having an experience as of something's presenting itself to S as  $\emptyset$  than S? Thus we would need strong reasons to override the subject's confident report of the character of her experience. And where could we find such reasons? I suspect that most people who put forward . . . alternative diagnoses do so because they have general philosophical reasons for supposing either that God does not exist or that no human being could perceive Him, and they fail to recognize the difference between a *phenomenological* account of object presentation, and the occurrence of veridical perception. In any event, once we get straight about all this, I can not see any reason for doubting the subjects' accounts of the character of their experiences, whatever reasons there may be for doubting that God Himself does in fact appear to them.<sup>17</sup>

I have been careful to distinguish between the question of veridicality and the question about the object of the experience. Furthermore, the point of my argument is to deny Alston's claim that there is no reason for doubting the subjects' accounts. On the phenomenological level, I have suggested, one does have at least some reason to be suspicious of the subjects' characterization of their experiences as being of God.

My argument is based on an analysis of what can be given phenomenologically in the experience. There is never a direct, conceptual-reading experience that is phenomenologically of God or any other epistemically unique person. Belief formations involving epistemically unique individuals always involve a role for background beliefs or for spatiotemporal information given in the experience. This is true whether the belief formation is inferential or not. But the only things we can experience as having the requisite kind of spatiotemporal location are physical objects, and those, for the most part, only of a certain class—those without intentionality and free will that gives them the ability to move around (i.e., any physical thing that is neither a human nor a nonhuman animal). Thus one cannot experience phenomenologically a uniquely instantiable property or any property that is guaranteed phenomenologically to identify an epistemically unique individual where

17. Alston, "Experience of God," p. 7.

that individual does not have what we can call "spatiotemporal rootedness."

Alston claims that the subjects' accounts do exactly what I have argued they cannot do legitimately:

If our cases are to conform to our account of perceptual consciousness, they must (phenomenologically) involve God's appearing to their awareness as being and/or doing so-and-so. And so our subjects do tell us. God is experienced as good, powerful, loving, compassionate, and as exhibiting "plentitude." He is experienced as speaking, forgiving, comforting, and strengthening. And yet how can these be ways in which God presents Himself to experience? Power and goodness are complex dispositional properties or bases thereof, dispositions to act in various ways in various situations. And to forgive or to strengthen someone is to carry out a certain intention. None of this can be read off the phenomenal surface of experience. This is quite different from something's presenting itself to one's sensory consciousness as red, round, sweet, loud, or pungent. Isn't it rather that the subject is *interpreting*, or *taking*, what she is aware of as being good or powerful, as forgiving or strengthening? But then what is God *experienced* as being or doing?<sup>18</sup>

Alston considers this issue in his "Perception of God,"<sup>19</sup> but he summarizes his argument briefly in the essay just quoted:

The basic point is that we have different sorts of concepts for specifying how something looks, sounds, tastes, or otherwise perceptually appears. There are *phenomenal* concepts that specify the phenomenal qualia that objects present themselves as bearing—round, red, acrid, etc. But there are also *comparative* concepts that specify a mode of appearance in terms of the sort of objective thing, event, property or whatever, that typically (normally . . .) appears in that way. In reporting sensory appearances we typically use comparative concepts whenever the appearance involves something more complex than one or two basic phenomenal qualities. Thus we say, "She looks like Susie," "It tastes like a pineapple," "It sounds like Bach." There undoubtedly is in these cases some complex pattern of simple phenomenal qualia, but it is usually beyond our powers to analyze the appearance into its simple components. And so we are typically thrown back on the use of comparative concepts to report how

18. Ibid.

19. Alston, "The Perception of God," *Philosophical Topics* 16 (1988): 23–52.



something looks, tastes. . . . And so it is in our religious cases. Our subjects were telling us God presented Himself to their experience as a good, powerful, compassionate, forgiving being could be expected to appear. And so in reporting modes of appearance in the way they do they are proceeding just as we do in reporting modes of sensory appearance.<sup>20</sup>

One might attempt to use these claims in reply to the background belief challenge to PT<sub>A</sub>. One might say, for example, that one has a complex concept of God, and that phenomenologically describing what one perceives when engaging in CP does not involve appeal to background information or beliefs but only to the concept. I believe, however, that Alston's suggestions cannot be used in response to the points of my analysis. Suppose that we grant Alston his distinction between phenomenal and comparative concepts and we further grant him the point that we use phenomenal concepts in cases of simple identifications and comparative concepts in cases of complex identifications—those cases in which there is a need for specifying a “mode of appearance in terms of the *sort* of objective thing.” But identifying a sort of thing—a house, car, person—is not the same as identifying an individual thing. In identifying Suzie's house, Tom versus Tim Tibbitts, and God, we are identifying what I have called epistemically unique individuals, not sorts. So, although we do make claims such as “It looks like Suzie's house” or “It looks like Tom,” these kinds of appeals are not, I suggest, comparing one's present experience to concepts of other houses or people but to one's memory of an earlier (or imagined) experience of the epistemically unique individual person or thing.

But there are two kinds of case with which we need to concern ourselves: cases where the object involved is spatiotemporally rooted and cases where the object is not. In both cases memory is important, since we must be “introduced” to the object. In the case of spatiotemporally rooted objects, the introduction can be done simply by our experiencing, for the first time, the object *qua* the object-at-this-location (or by “experiencing” the object in our mind's eye as someone describes the object-at-such-and-such-location). We then use the local situation information, now “locked

20. Alston, “Experience of God,” pp. 7–8.

into" our conceptual scheme, to form beliefs about the epistemically unique object when we reidentify it. Here memory functions only in the sense that the spatiotemporal information becomes part of our conceptual scheme.

In the other case, there is no information we can "lock in" that uniquely picks out, when taken together with the nonspatiotemporal features, the object in question. Thus there is always an appeal, conscious or not, back to our initial introduction, whether the introduction is a literal one—say, by the human person we are meeting or by a mutual acquaintance—or some other kind of introduction, such as when we meet an animal and give it a name or otherwise identify it.<sup>21</sup> But, in these cases, when we reidentify the person or animal we must appeal to background beliefs, since there is not sufficient information in our conceptual schemes. And the phenomenological information given in our reidentificatory experiences is never enough to identify them, even when we do remember "what they look like." The possibility of mistaken identity is a live one, since any feature this person has is a feature she may share with someone else, at least as far as experience alone goes.

Thus, in this second class of cases, to identify an epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individual, we must have background information of a substantial sort such as "Tim is out of town." Unlike the concept of house or person—(comparative) sortal concepts—which can be applied successfully in totally new situations, concepts of epistemically unique individuals cannot be. The phenomena themselves, even when the perceiver has a fully developed conceptual framework, cannot do it. To identify an epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individual, in short, we must appeal to information other than mere concepts, even if they are comparative concepts. So there are three kinds of complex

21. There is, perhaps, a kind of continuum involved with spatiotemporal rootedness. A tree is more or less permanently fixed, a house likewise. But animals are not. Some of them, however, are caged, corraled, or otherwise fixed and thus have a somewhat stationary location. Other animals are not and are free to go where they please, barring physical obstacles. Humans, along with certain birds and sea creatures, are perhaps at the high end of this scale with the least fixed location, unless jailed, kept in zoos, or otherwise constrained. God, being nonspatial altogether, is the paradigm case of an object that is not spatiotemporally rooted.

identifications, one in which comparative concepts are used to identify a sort of thing, one in which local spatiotemporal concepts (initially created in the perceiver in his or her first real or imagined experience of the object) are used to identify an epistemically unique but spatiotemporally rooted individual, and one in which beliefs are used to identify and reidentify an epistemically unique but spatiotemporally nonrooted individual. Alston does not distinguish among these three.

Alston is right in calling attention to the distinction between simple and complex cases of perceptual identification, but this does nothing to explain how, in the cases of complex individual identification, we identify the object of the perception. Everything in my argument could be true even if Alston's basic distinction is a good one: totaling all the experienced qualia does not give us conclusive grounds for the individual identification, except in cases of spatiotemporally rooted individuals.

If the arguments of this and the preceding chapter are correct, some questions about PP and CP still need to be answered, along with questions about  $J_{nw}$ . Is Alston's notion of  $J_{nw}$  finely tuned enough? Is there not a difference between a practice that supplies us with conceptual-reading beliefs and one that provides us with non-inferential mediated beliefs? And does this difference not give us some cause for concern about whether CP, since it does appear to rely on background beliefs, is as epistemically secure as PP? Now, if this difference is a reason to question CP's epistemic strength as compared to PP's, then  $PT_A$  fails. But at this stage all that is safe to conclude is that  $J_{nw}$  is too broad a category and therefore stands in need of further refinement.

## Alstonian Justification Revisited

In Chapters 2 and 3 I presented an Alstonian version of the parity thesis as well as a challenge to it. I turn now to consider the arguments of several of Alston's more recent essays. In particular I concentrate on those aspects of his thought in which he delineates his more considered account of epistemic justification as well as the claim that one can be justified in believing that an epistemic practice is reliable. My argument is that the claims of these later essays on epistemic justification challenge those of the earlier, raising again the question of the parity thesis: do sense perceptual beliefs and the practice that generates them have the same epistemic status as theistic beliefs and the practice that generates them?<sup>1</sup>

1. A warning is needed here. Alston's essays with which I deal in this chapter make several terminological and substantive shifts from "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." Although I believe the development of Alston's thought to be quite consistent, with a clear and fundamentally unchanging understanding of epistemic justification and rationality, his use of terms and emphasis do change occasionally. I attempt to keep the shifts straight and to do so I introduce, by way of suggestion, where I believe his terms and their references overlap. When it is not clearly possible to do so, I note that and let Alston's usage stand while attempting to work around any unclarity to which so doing gives rise.

## 1. Epistemic Justification Again

In "Concepts of Epistemic Justification" Alston delineates two different kinds, and several subkinds, of epistemic justification. The broad categories for that discussion are what he calls "deontological epistemic justification" and "evaluative epistemic justification":

Deontological Epistemic Justification ( $J_d$ ):  $S$  is  $J_d$  in believing that  $p$  if and only if in believing that  $p$   $S$  is not violating any epistemic obligations.

Evaluative Epistemic Justification ( $J_e$ ):  $S$  is  $J_e$  in believing that  $p$  if and only if  $S$ 's believing that  $p$ , as  $S$  does, is a good thing from the epistemic point of view.

The "as  $S$  does" in the second account is intended to call attention to the particularity of *this* believing rather than believings of  $p$  under any conditions.

In a note, Alston points out that he was convinced by Alvin Plantinga that "deontological," rather than "normative," is a more accurate term for what Alston strives to describe in the first account above. This suggests that his account of deontological justification is an extension of the accounts of normative justification provided in his earlier essay. To avoid bogging down in exegetical arguments about shifts in terminology, I simply present Alston's arguments in the new terminology. Thus, in the remainder of this section I spell out in further detail Alston's accounts of  $J_d$  and  $J_e$ , and related issues, returning later to consider his explanation of how a person can be justified in believing that an epistemic practice is reliable.

Alston rejects the claim that  $J_d$ , or any version of it, is the best understanding of justification *from the epistemic point of view*. To understand the central point of Alston's argument against  $J_d$ , it is best if we get before us what he takes to be the strongest candidate from among the deontological competitors for epistemic justification. After rejecting a voluntarist account of  $J_d$  (because most of our beliefs are not under our direct voluntary control), he suggests

two possible accounts of an involuntarist  $J_d$ .<sup>2</sup> The first, where the subscript "i" stands for "involuntary":

Involuntary  $J_d$  ( $J_{di}$ ):  $S$  is  $J_{di}$  in believing that  $p$  at  $t$  if and only if there are no intellectual obligations that (1) have to do with the kind of belief-forming or sustaining habit the activation of which resulted in  $S$ 's believing that  $p$  at  $t$ , or with the particular process of belief formation or sustenance that was involved in  $S$ 's believing that  $p$  at  $t$ , and (2) which are such that (a)  $S$  had those obligations prior to  $t$ ; (b)  $S$  did not fulfill those obligations; and (c) if  $S$  had fulfilled those obligations,  $S$  would not have believed that  $p$  at  $t$ .

The second is the same as the first, but (c) is replaced, for reasons I leave up to the reader to fill in, by

(c') if  $S$  had fulfilled those obligations, then  $S$ 's belief-forming habits would have changed, or  $S$ 's access to relevant adverse considerations would have changed, in such a way that  $S$  would not have believed that  $p$  at  $t$ .

Alston rejects the deontological understanding of epistemic justification, for " $J_{di}$  does not give us what we expect. . . . The most serious defect is that it does not hook up in the right way with an adequate, truth-conducive ground." In other words, "I may have done what could reasonably be expected of me in the management and cultivation of my doxastic life, and still hold a belief on outrageously inadequate grounds." There are several possible sources of this discrepancy. One might have grown up in "cultural isolation," following the noetic leadership of the authorities of one's tribe and not having any reasons to reject their authority as reliable. Yet the tradition of the tribe might be very poor reason for believing that  $p$ . Or one might be deficient in cognitive powers or have poor training one lacks the time or resources to overcome. Alston writes:

What this spread of cases brings out is that  $J_{di}$  is not sufficient for epistemic justification; we may have done the best we can, or at least the best that could reasonably be expected of us, and still be in

2. Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," pp. 89, 94, 95, 99.

a very poor epistemic position in believing that  $p$ ; we could, blamelessly, be believing  $p$  for outrageously bad reasons. Even though  $J_{di}$  is the closest we can come to a deontological concept of epistemic justification if belief is not under direct voluntary control, it still does not give us what we are looking for.

So Alston rejects deontological justification as the best understanding of epistemic justification; it falls short of what is wanted from the epistemic point of view.<sup>3</sup>

What account of  $J_e$  does Alston give in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification"? Here  $J_e$  is an internalist notion with an externalist constraint. Consider the internalist aspect first. There are, says Alston, two popular ideas about what internalism is. The first takes justification to be internal in that "it depends on what support is available for the belief from 'within the subject's perspective,' in the sense of what the subject knows or justifiably believes about the world." The second "takes the 'subject's perspective' to include whatever is 'directly accessible' to the subject, accessible just on the basis of reflection." To these readings Alston adds a third that contrasts with both as well as with reliabilist understandings of justification: "What I take to be internal about justification is that whether a belief is justified depends on what it is based on (grounds); and grounds must be other psychological state(s) of the same subject." He continues: "So in taking it to be conceptually true that one is justified in believing that  $p$  iff one's belief that  $p$  is based on an adequate ground, I take justification to be 'internal' in that it depends on the way in which the belief stems from the believer's psychological states, which are 'internal' to the subject in an obvious sense." So  $J_e$  is an internalist notion.<sup>4</sup>

In "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology" Alston further develops these notions, labeling the first "perspectival internal-

3. Ibid., pp. 95–96. See Alston, "The Deontological Concept of Epistemic Justification," in *Epistemic Justification* (originally in *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 [1988]: 257–99), for an extended discussion of his rejection of deontological concepts of epistemic justification as the central notion of justification given the epistemic point of view.

4. Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," p. 107. This is in contrast to  $J_e$  as Alston describes it elsewhere. In "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 115, he claims that  $J_e$  might, when all the hard work is done, boil down to a kind of reliabilist understanding of rationality. His more considered judgment does not, however, ignore reliability, as the next few paragraphs delineate. See note 7 for more detail.

ism" (PI) and the second "access internalism" (AI).<sup>5</sup> The relationship between the two, Alston says, is that "we can think of AI as a broadening of PI. Whereas PI restricts justifiers to what the subject already justifiably believes . . . AI enlarges that to include what the subject *can* come to know just on reflection. . . . AI, we might say, enlarges the conception of the subject's perspective to include not only what does in fact occur in that perspective . . . but also what *could* be there if the subject were to turn his attention to it." Alston has serious reservations about both PI and AI. He writes that

the only arguments of any substance that have been advanced [in support of PI] proceed from a deontological conception of justification and inherit any disabilities that attach to that conception. Indeed, PI gains significant support only from the most restrictive form of a direct voluntary control version of that conception, one that is, at best, of limited application to our beliefs. As for AI, the arguments in the literature that are designed to establish a direct recognizability version [the strongest version where the justifier is said to be directly recognizable iff S needs only to reflect clear-headedly on the question of whether or not the (justifying) fact obtains in order to know that it does] markedly fail to do so.<sup>6</sup>

Reservations notwithstanding, Alston believes that a moderate version of AI can be supported, although along lines very different from those he considers and rejects in "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology." This moderate version of AI is, I take it,

5. In "An Internalist Externalism," p. 233, Alston adds another type of internalism, which he calls "consciousness internalism" (CI). CI, Alston argues, has "the crushing disability that one can never complete the formulation of a sufficient condition for justification." But we need not concern ourselves with this version of internalism here. Although Alston distances his own position in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification" from both PI and AI, in "An Internalist Externalism" and in "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology" (also in *Epistemic Justification*; originally in *Philosophical Topics* 14 [1986]: 179–221) he identifies his position with a "moderate AI."

6. Alston, "Internalism and Externalism in Epistemology," pp. 214, 224.

7. In note 4 I called attention to a shift in Alston's description of  $J_e$  from "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" to "Concepts of Epistemic Justification." In the former essay, p. 115, he writes that "S is justified in the evaluative sense in holding a certain belief provided that the relevant circumstances in which that belief is held are such that the belief is at least likely to be true. In other terms, being  $J_e$  requires that in the class of actual and possible cases in which beliefs like



a recast understanding of the third account of internalism Alston notes in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification"—the account making reference to grounds and psychological states. In the moderate version of AI, the accessibility of the states that justify beliefs must not be so demanding as to be unrealistic or so weak as to include too much:

What is needed here is a concept of something like "fairly direct accessibility." In order that justifiers be generally available for presentation as the legitimizers of the belief, they must be fairly readily available to the subject through some mode of access much quicker than lengthy research, observation, or experimentation. It seems reasonable to follow [Carl] Ginet's lead and suggest that to be a justifier an item must be the sort of thing that, in general, a subject can explicitly note the presence of just by sufficient reflection on his situation.

Alston goes on to note that he does not know how to make this notion more precise. He summarizes by saying that "to be a justifier of a belief, its ground must be the sort of thing whose instances are fairly directly accessible to their subject on reflection."<sup>8</sup>

Alston's defense of this internalist requirement comes as an attempt not to prove its necessity but rather to explain the presence of the requirement. He says that the reason we have the concept of "being justified" in holding a belief flows from the "practice of critical reflection on our beliefs, of challenging their credentials and responding to such challenges—in short the practice of attempting

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that are or would be held in circumstances like that, the belief is usually true. Much needs to be done to work out what kinds of circumstances are relevant, how to generalize over beliefs, and so on. Pretending that all that has been done, I would like to suggest that what this boils down to is that the way the belief was formed and/or is sustained is a generally reliable one, one that can generally be relied on to produce true rather than false beliefs." He continues in a note, p. 133, n. 4: "And not just that the practice has a good track record up to now; rather it is a lawlike truth that beliefs formed in accordance with that practice, in those kinds of circumstances, are at least likely to be true." Although his more recent work does not totally ignore reliabilist considerations, there is an addition to Alston's reliabilist demands. Another way of reading these claims, of course, is that the second account of  $J_c$  is not intended to be a development of the first. Perhaps, however, there are too many similarities to make this interpretation likely.

8. Alston, "An Internalist Externalism," p. 238.

to *justify* our beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> Alston is clear that being justified and justifying are not the same thing and argues that the former concept was developed in the context of a demand for the latter. Thus the AI requirement we all have intuitively is a natural result of the social practices in which we engage. Thus epistemic justification is internalist.

But it carries an externalist constraint. In “Concepts of Epistemic Justification” Alston’s concern is to tie the notion of justification to the notion of a truth-conducive ground. He writes that “what a belief is based on we may term the ground of the belief. A ground, in a more dispositional sense of the term, is the sort of item on which a belief can be based.” Furthermore, “we want to leave open at least the *conceptual* possibility of *direct* or *immediate* justification by experience (and perhaps in other ways also), as well as *indirect* or *mediate* justification by relation to other beliefs (inferentially in the most explicit cases). Finally, to say that a subject *has adequate* grounds for her belief that *p* is to say that she has other justified beliefs, or experiences, on which the belief could be based and which are strongly indicative of the truth of the belief.”<sup>10</sup> So the goodness of a belief from the epistemic point of view is its possession of grounds of this type. Thus his final account of  $J_e$ , where the subscript “g” stands for “grounds”:<sup>11</sup>

Grounds  $J_e$  ( $J_{eg}$ ):  $S$  is  $J_{eg}$  in believing that  $p$  if and only if  $S$ ’s believing that  $p$ , as  $S$  did, was a good thing from the epistemic point of view, in that  $S$ ’s belief that  $p$  was based on adequate grounds and  $S$  lacked sufficient overriding reasons to the contrary.

How is this position externalist? Alston distances  $J_{eg}$  from a straightforwardly reliabilist account of justification. He says that “it may be supposed that  $J_{eg}$  as we have explained it, is just reliability of belief formation with an evaluative frosting. For where a belief is based on adequate grounds that belief has been formed in a reliable fashion.” But to take reliability as a criterion of justifica-

9. Ibid., p. 236.

10. Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” pp. 100–101.

11. Ibid., p. 106. In this context, a belief’s being “based on” another does not imply inference; see Alston’s discussion on pp. 99–100.

tion, or simply to identify justification with reliability, would be mistaken. The internalist character of justification blocks any such move. Reliable belief formation may occur where the belief is formed on some basis outside the believer's psychological states. In fact, "I might be so constituted that beliefs about the weather tomorrow which apparently just 'pop into my mind' out of nowhere are in fact reliably produced by a mechanism of which we know nothing, and which does not involve the belief being based on anything. Here we would have reliably formed beliefs that are not based on adequate grounds."<sup>12</sup> Since a belief could be reliably formed but not be internal in the requisite sense, justification and reliability are not the same thing. Nevertheless, there is a close relationship between reliability and justification. Alston claims "that the most adequate concept of epistemic justification is one that will put a reliability *constraint* on principles of epistemic justification." He continues: "By a 'reliability constraint' I mean something like this. Take a principle of justification of the form: 'If a belief of type B is based on a ground of type G, then the belief is justified.' This principle is acceptable only if forming a B on the basis of a G is a reliable mode of belief formation. On this view, a reliability claim is imbedded in every claim to justification." Thus, although reliability and justification are not the same thing, they remain intimately connected.<sup>13</sup>

This claim is further explicated and defended in "An Internalist Externalism." Although there are internalist considerations in what the grounds for a belief are, Alston rejects the notion that there is an internalist restriction on the adequacy (as opposed to the existence) of grounds for believing. That the adequacy of the grounds be internal is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for justification. Taking necessity first, PI restrictions on adequacy run into the difficulty of requiring an infinite hierarchy of justified beliefs, for a PI necessary condition would claim something like "one is justified in believing that *p* only if one knows or is justified in believing that the ground of that belief is an adequate one." Since no one can fulfill this requirement without having to be justified on

12. Ibid., pp. 108–9.

13. Alston, "Epistemic Circularity" (in *Epistemic Justification*; originally in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 47 [1986]: 1–30), pp. 321–22.

every new level, a PI restriction cannot be a necessary one. On the other hand, an AI restriction may be construed in this way: "S is justified in believing that  $p$  only if S is capable, fairly readily on the basis of reflection, to acquire a justified belief that the ground of S's belief that  $p$  is an adequate one." This fails to be necessary in that, although it might be within human capacity to have such justification, "it is by no means always the case that the subject of a justified belief is capable of determining the adequacy of his ground, just by careful reflection on the matter, or, indeed, in any other way." A weaker AI version falls prey to similar difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

What about sufficiency? Since the AI requirement is weaker than the PI requirement, it is only necessary, says Alston, to show that the PI requirement is not sufficient. The PI version of sufficiency for adequacy states: "S's belief that  $p$  is based on an accessible ground that S is justified in supposing to be adequate."<sup>15</sup> Does this version ensure truth conducivity; what notion of justification is to be used here? If it is not truth-conducive, the internalist moves away from the goals of the epistemic point of view. But it is hard to see that one can appeal to a truth-conducive notion without its involving an externalist appeal. Perhaps one can shift the question to a higher level, but that only weakens the demand momentarily; at some level one must return to externalist requirements or lose the epistemic point of view by appealing to non-truth-conducive grounds. Thus, "in order for my belief that  $p$ , which is based on ground  $G$ , to be justified, it is quite sufficient, as well as necessary, that  $G$  be sufficiently indicative of the truth of  $p$ . It is in no way required that I know anything, or be justified in believing anything, about this relationship. No doubt, we sometimes do have justified beliefs about the adequacy of our grounds, and that is certainly a good thing. But that is icing on the cake." There is, then, an externalist constraint on epistemic justification.<sup>16</sup>

$J_{eg}$  is an evaluative concept, it does not require that beliefs be within our direct control, it connects belief with the likelihood of truth, it permits the grounds for belief to be within the subject's cognitive states, and finally it allows for some "disagreement over

14. Alston, "An Internalist Externalism," pp. 239–40.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 243–44.

the precise conditions [of justification] for one or another type of belief.”<sup>17</sup> Alston concludes that, since  $J_{eg}$  is the only candidate to exhibit all these desiderata, it is clearly the winner for best candidate for the notion of epistemic justification.

## 2. The Justification of Reliability Claims

My concerns are the nature of epistemic justification and its connection to the reliability of epistemic practices and beliefs about the reliability of epistemic practices. In the previous section I sketched Alston’s account of the former. Since Alston discusses the latter issue in two different, albeit overlapping ways, it is best if the two approaches are separated. In the remainder of this chapter I deal with what I call Alston’s “direct approach,” leaving the “doxastic practice approach” for Chapter 5.

The direct approach is found in “Epistemic Circularity.” There Alston claims both that one can *be justified* in reliability claims about the procedures and mechanisms by which beliefs are generated and that one can *justify* such reliability claims. In fact, he says, since reliability claims are imbedded in every claim to justification, “what it takes to justify a reliability claim will be at least part of what it takes to justify a justification claim.”<sup>18</sup> How does Alston account for the justification of reliability claims? Relying on the distinction between being justified in a belief  $p$  and justifying one’s belief that  $p$ , as well as on the notion that some epistemic practices are basic epistemic practices, he argues that one can be justified in reliability claims about practices by appeal to beliefs generated by those practices. This argument involves a kind of circularity in reasoning—what he calls “epistemic circularity”—but this is not a logical circularity and the justification is not thereby vitiated.

Taking sense perception as an example of a source of belief, Alston suggests that its reliability cannot be established in a noncircular fashion. As he did in “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” he continues in “Epistemic Circularity” to call sense perception, as well as other epistemic practices (e.g., memory, introspection, and deductive and inductive reasoning), “basic practices”;

17. Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” p. 111.

18. Alston, “Epistemic Circularity,” p. 322.

these are basic sources of belief. He defines basic sources: "O is an (epistemologically) basic source of belief = df. Any (otherwise) cogent argument for the reliability of O will use premises drawn from O."<sup>19</sup> If sense perception is a basic source or practice, then one should expect to find the only means of justifying reliability claims about the practice to be arguments containing premises generated, at some point, by the practice itself.

Such arguments are not logically circular, on Alston's account of logical circularity as he narrows down that notion. Logical circularity involves the conclusion of an argument figuring among the premises. In epistemic circularity, however, what is at stake is not the conclusion (such and such a source of belief is reliable) figuring in the premises. Rather, it is that certain propositions which are true and which are derived from the source shown reliable by the argument are, *in fact*, from the source in question. The conclusion itself does not appear in the premises. The issue is the epistemic status of the premises. Alston's discussion hinges on the distinction between being justified and the activity of justifying. The premises *are* justified, but the conclusion still needs *to be* justified. Alston gives the following example:<sup>20</sup>

- (1) 1. At  $t_1$ ,  $S_1$  formed the perceptual belief that  $p_1$ , and  $p_1$ .
2. At  $t_2$ ,  $S_2$  formed the perceptual belief that  $p_2$ , and  $p_2$ .

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Therefore, sense experience is a reliable source of belief.

Here a large number of perceptual beliefs are laid out, and each belief is reported to be true. Supposing that 97 percent of the beliefs were true, this inductive argument, says Alston, would allow its user to become justified in the belief that sense experience is a reliable source of belief. Of course, that sense experience is a reliable source of belief nowhere shows up in the premises, for they are only reports of the formation of sense beliefs and their truth. But the reliability of sense perception is "practically assumed" by

19. Ibid., p. 326.

20. Ibid., p. 327.

the premises. In using argument (1) to establish that sense perception is reliable, one is already, implicitly or explicitly, taking sense perception to be reliable. The need for this presupposition does not result from syntactic or semantic considerations: it is a result of neither the logical form of the argument nor the meaning of the premises. It is, rather, the result of our epistemic situation as humans.<sup>21</sup> It is an “epistemic presupposition,” and the circularity to which it is tied is an “epistemic circularity.”

Arguments such as (1) can be used to justify the belief that sense perception is reliable only if some principle of justification such as (2) is true:<sup>22</sup>

- (2) If one believes that *p* on the basis of its sensorily appearing to one that *p*, and one has no overriding reasons to the contrary, one is justified in believing that *p*.

All it takes to be justified in a perceptual belief, if (2) is true, is that the belief come from one's experience in a certain way, given the absence of overriding conditions militating against the truth of the belief. One need not also be justified in accepting (2) or any related or similar reliability principle. One does not have to be justified in believing the conclusion of (1) in order for (1) to provide justification for one's belief in that conclusion. Thus (1) can be used to justify one's belief that sense perception is reliable, if some principle such as (2) is true. Furthermore, (1) continues to provide justification even if one moves from implicitly assuming that sense perception is reliable to being explicitly aware that one is assuming it. The force of the argument is not lost by one becoming more clear about where the force lies, says Alston.

Such epistemically circular arguments cannot be used rationally to produce conviction that sense perception (or any other belief source) is reliable. One already has that conviction by practical assumption. Nor, says Alston, can one provide what he calls “full reflective justification,” where he means that not only is a given belief *p* shown to be justified but all other beliefs used in the justification of *p* are shown to be justified. When a belief is fully reflec-

21. Ibid., p. 328.

22. Ibid., p. 331.

tively justified, "no questions are left over as to whether the subject is justified in accepting some premise that is used at some stage of the justification."<sup>23</sup> There are limits on justification; one cannot justify everything at once. To do so, or at least to attempt to do so, does involve one in logical circularity. To demand full reflective justification is to demand too much. To recognize the limitations on our reasoning power is simply to recognize the humble state of our epistemic situation. It does not commit one to the more radical forms of skepticism.

Thus, according to Alston, not only can one justify one's belief that a source is reliable but one can be justified in it. By way of summary, it is worth quoting Alston at length:

We are interested not only in the prospects of an argument like [(1)] being used to *justify* belief in [the reliability of sense perception], but also in the prospects of one's *being justified* in believing [that sense perception is reliable] by virtue of the reasons embodied in the premises of [(1)]. The distinction being invoked here is that between the *activity* of *justifying* a belief that *p* by producing some argument for *p*, and the *state* of *being justified* in believing that *p*. Of course one way to get into that state is to *justify* one's belief by an argument. We have already seen that this is possible with [(1)]. However, it is a truism in epistemology that one may be justified in believing that *p*, even on the basis of reasons, without having argued from those reasons to *p*, and thus without having engaged in the activity of justifying the belief. Since we do not often engage in such activities we would have precious few justified beliefs if this were not the case. Indeed, we have exploited this possibility in claiming that one may *be justified* in accepting the premises of [(1)] without having justified them by argument. If the latter were required one would have to appeal to [the claim that sense perception is reliable] as a premise, and the enterprise of justifying [that sense perception is reliable] would run into logical circularity. It even seems possible to be justified, on the basis of reasons, in believing that *p* without so much as being able to produce an argument from those reasons to *p*. It may be that the reasons are too complex, too subtle, or otherwise too deeply hidden (or the subject too inarticulate), for the subject to recover and wield those reasons.<sup>24</sup>

23. Ibid., p. 342.

24. Ibid., pp. 334–35.



## 3. Alstonian Justification Old and New

What relationships hold between the older accounts of  $J_e$ ,  $J_{nw}$ , and  $J_{ns}$ , on the one hand, and  $J_{di}$  and  $J_{eg}$  on the other? And what results can we expect for the claims of "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" and, in particular, the parity thesis, given the arguments of "Epistemic Circularity" and "Concepts of Epistemic Justification"?

I do not think a detailed correlation between the older notions—from "Christian Experience and Christian Belief"—and the newer—from the other essays I have considered—is easy to provide. There are, however, some more or less general correlations. For example,  $J_n$  is clearly the ancestor of  $J_d$ , since both are explained in exactly the same terms. We can thus take Alston's concern in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" to be the same as that in "Epistemic Circularity" and "Concepts of Epistemic Justification"; that is, we can work on the premise that the former essay takes  $J_{ns}$  and  $J_{nw}$  as accounts of justification which are in competition with  $J_{eg}$ . All are possible accounts of the justification of beliefs from the epistemic point of view.

What follows from this alignment? First, the arguments showing that  $J_{di}$  is not the best candidate for justification from the epistemic point of view seem to apply equally well to  $J_{nw}$ . This point does not, however, refute the argument of "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." One might still be  $J_{nw}$  in holding a belief  $p$  even though one does not have the *best* kind of epistemic justification. And  $J_e$  may remain out of the believer's reach.

In the earlier work, however, Alston claims that one could never have sufficient reasons for taking a practice or its deliverances to be  $J_e$  (even though they might be  $J_e$ ). He concludes there that, although PP and CP *could* both be  $J_e$ , the best we can have is  $J_{nw}$  for engaging in either of them. Thus Alston writes that, "if we are to have any chance of acquiring knowledge, we must simply go along with our natural reactions of trust with respect to at least some basic sources of belief, provided we lack sufficient reason for regarding them as unreliable."<sup>25</sup> We must, that is, take  $J_{nw}$  as the best we can do and trust that it will lead us to the right practices—

25. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 119.

practices that are in fact  $J_e$ . But why should we take  $J_{nw}$  beliefs and practices to move us toward  $J_e$ ? Other than that we have nowhere else to turn, Alston gives no reason in the earlier essay. He seems to have shifted his position on this matter in "Epistemic Circularity," however, for he argues that one can both justify a belief that a practice is reliable and be justified in such a belief (even if one has not attempted to justify it). And this is done, importantly, on the basis of *reasons*.

If Alston is right in the claims of "Epistemic Circularity" and "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," then perhaps his claim in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" that one cannot be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in a basic practice is incorrect. One can, according to his later argument, have good reasons to engage in a basic practice, even though those reasons are circular. And Alston himself says that, "if I set out to discover whether a practice is  $J_e$ , that is, whether it is reliable, then I will also be investigating the question of whether one *could* be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in that practice."<sup>26</sup> Once one discovers that there are reasons to think the practice reliable and that those reasons are one's own, then surely one finds not just that one could be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in the practice but that one is  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in it, that is, unless  $J_{ns}$  requires that the reasons for supposing a practice reliable be somehow outside the practice itself. It is possible that Alston did think, at the writing of the earlier essay, that the reasons must not be circular, that they must be outside the practice. The whole notion of a practice being basic relies on the presence of circularity in attempts at justification. But even if Alston did think that at an earlier time, he apparently became convinced that some kinds of circularity—such as epistemic circularity—are acceptable means to epistemic justification.

So it appears that one can be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in a basic practice—that is, that one has some reasons for taking a basic practice to be reliable. And it is a clear inference from "Epistemic Circularity" and "Concepts of Epistemic Justification" that one can be  $J_{ns}$  in a practice, at least as far as having reasons is concerned. What is not clear is whether one has met the normative demands of  $J_{ns}$  simply by having reasons or whether some further conditions need to be met. I suspect there are further conditions, but Alston does not

26. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

specify what they are. But even if he did, would it be worth finding out about those conditions if, in fact, normative or deontological accounts of justification do not give us what we desire in terms of the epistemic point of view? If one could provide reasons for the claim that a practice is reliable, would one not want to understand those reasons as providing evaluative justification for the practice rather than normative or deontological justification? I believe so. The really important question, from the epistemic point of view, is whether one can be  $J_{eg}$  in a belief that a practice is reliable. I believe Alston provides the structure that permits an affirmative reply to this question.

How would the basic structure of arguments for a belief that some practice is reliable look? Generalizing from Alston's example, such an argument would rely on some principle such as this:

- (3) If  $S$  believes that  $p$  on the basis of  $p$ 's being delivered to  $S$  by epistemic practice  $EP$ , and  $S$  has no overriding reasons to the contrary,  $S$  is justified in believing that  $p$ .

Given the truth of (3),  $S$  can justifiably hold propositions such as this:

- (4) At  $t$ ,  $S$  formed the  $EP$  belief that  $p$ , and  $p$ .

Now,  $S$  need not be justified in holding the epistemic principle (3). Such a requirement would lead to logical circularity. But because of that principle,  $S$  can be justified in holding propositions having the same form as (4). But then  $S$  can string together propositions in the form of (4) to produce an inductive argument to the conclusion that  $EP$  is reliable.

But what happens if the justification being demanded is of the  $J_{eg}$  type? Let us call the belief that some practice is reliable  $R$ . For  $S$  to be  $J_{eg}$  in believing  $R$ , it would have to be the case that  $S$ 's believing that  $R$ , as  $S$  does, is a good thing from the epistemic point of view, in that  $S$ 's belief that  $R$  is based on adequate grounds and  $S$  lacks sufficient overriding reasons to the contrary. This is simply an application of Alston's general account of  $J_{eg}$ . Let us assume that there are no overriding conditions. Thus what is important is that  $S$  have adequate grounds for believing  $R$ . According to Alston's account, to have adequate grounds for a belief such as  $R$ , one need

only have adequate (although epistemically circular) reasons. So let us say that at  $t_1$  the practice in question generates belief  $p_1$ , at  $t_2$  it generates  $p_2$ , and so on. Suppose further that 97 percent of these beliefs are true.  $S$  can thus conclude that the practice is reliable, and hence  $S$  is justified in believing  $R$ .

Now, what we are after is whether this justification is the kind specified by the account of  $J_{eg}$ . It is *as long as inductive reasoning as a source of belief is in fact reliable*. Is it? One way to answer that question is to explore whether the belief that it is reliable is  $J_{eg}$ . But one's *initial* justification of  $R$  does not rely on whether one has justified the further belief that induction is reliable. One need only *be* justified in that belief. So it appears that one can be  $J_{eg}$  in a belief that a practice is reliable.

Not only can one be  $J_{eg}$  in the belief that the practice is reliable, but by extension it seems that one can be  $J_{eg}$  in engaging in the practice itself. Here is an account of  $J_{eg}$  applied to practices rather than beliefs:

Grounds\*  $J_e$  ( $J_{eg}^*$ )  $S$  is  $J_{eg}^*$  in engaging in an epistemic practice  $EP$  iff  $S$ 's engaging in  $EP$ , as  $S$  does, is a good thing from the epistemic point of view, in that  $S$ 's engaging in  $EP$  is based on adequate grounds and  $S$  lacks sufficient overriding reasons to the contrary.

Here something needs to be said about the notion of adequate grounds for engaging in an epistemic practice. Alston says that a ground for a belief is "the sort of item on which a belief can be based." But basing a belief on a ground is not obviously the same as basing one's engaging in a practice on a ground. Nevertheless, perhaps it is enough if we piggyback the notion of grounds for engaging in a practice on the grounds for a belief that that practice is reliable. (Here we have a sufficient but perhaps not a necessary condition for grounds for engaging in a practice. There may be other ways of having grounds for engaging in a practice besides a [justified] belief that the practice is reliable.) So, the sort of thing that one can base one's engaging in a practice on is a belief that in turn has grounds. Add to all this that these latter grounds are adequate and by extension that the grounds for engaging in a practice are adequate. In the case under consideration, what would the ade-

quate grounds be? Surely by Alston's own account, if one is justified via an argument that rests on reliably formed beliefs (even if it is epistemically circular) in the *belief* that the practice is reliable, then one is justified in engaging in the practice. This all seems consonant with Alston's claim that "a particular belief is justified if and only if we are justified in engaging in a certain epistemic practice."<sup>27</sup> Although this claim does not demand that one is justified in a belief  $p$  if and only if one is justified in the second-order *belief* that the practice that generates  $p$  is justified, my argument shows that one can both justify and be justified in holding the second-order belief and thus that engaging in the practice believed to be justified is justified and hence that beliefs generated by the practice, such as  $p$ , are justified. Although not required by his claim, the justification of the second-order belief (in the reliability of the practice) seems to show that one is justified in engaging in the practice and thus, to borrow Alston's metaphor, is icing on the epistemological cake.

So it appears on this interpretation that one can be  $J_{eg}$  in the belief that a practice is reliable. By extension, one can be  $J_{eg}^*$  in engaging in that practice. I noted above that the question of  $J_{ns}$  may be less important than "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" suggests, given that we could have  $J_{eg}$  for a practice. Nevertheless, it seems that one could also be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in a basic practice. One already has the reasons needed. All that is required beyond those reasons is whatever it takes to meet the normative demands. Given that those are met, one could have  $J_{ns}$  for the belief that a practice is reliable. Thus one could be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in a practice and thus, according to Alston's own argument, one could be  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in PP. This is quite a different result from that suggested in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief." So, by Alston's later arguments, one could be both  $J_{eg}^*$  and  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in PP, not only  $J_{nw}$  in so doing.

This conclusion raises several questions about  $PT_A$ . Although the original version may be true—both CP and PP may be  $J_{nw}$  (here I am ignoring the background belief challenge)—much of our interest in  $PT_A$  derives from the supposition that neither PP nor CP can do any better than  $J_{nw}$ . It appears that PP can do better, by Alston's own argument. Now the question is whether CP can

27. Ibid., p. 110.

do as well. Can a person be  $J_{eg}^*$  or  $J_{ns}$  in engaging in CP? Could Alston suggest a new, and stronger, version of the parity thesis? Let us consider  $J_{eg}^*$ , since Alston claims that its near relative,  $J_{eg}$ , is the understanding of epistemic justification that has the most going for it from the epistemic point of view. Might Alston suggest, for example, the following:

Parity Thesis<sub>Alston Strong</sub> (PT<sub>AS</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, both  $S$ 's engaging in CP and  $S$ 's engaging in PP are  $J_{eg}^*$ .

Might he then continue by claiming that PT<sub>AS</sub> is true? PP, it has been argued, can be  $J_{eg}^*$ . CP's having the same status rests on the provision of reasons for the reliability of CP. Can such reasons be given?

#### 4. A Challenge to Alston's Strong Parity Thesis

One challenge to PT<sub>AS</sub> can be seen if we return to the argument presented above for the claim that one can be  $J_{eg}$  in believing that a practice is reliable and apply it to the question of CP's reliability. The resulting argument looks like this: for  $S$  to be  $J_{eg}$  in believing that CP is reliable, it would have to be the case that  $S$ 's believing that CP is reliable is a good thing from the epistemic point of view, in that  $S$ 's believing that CP is reliable is based on adequate grounds and  $S$  lacks sufficient overriding reasons to the contrary. Assuming that there are no overriding conditions, what would the adequate grounds have to be for  $S$ 's belief that CP is reliable to be  $J_{eg}$ ? One needs adequate (albeit epistemically circular) reasons. So let us say that CP produces beliefs  $p_1$ ,  $p_2$ ,  $p_3$ , and so forth, and that these beliefs (or a large percentage of them) are true. At this point the argument appeals to induction to move from these beliefs to the general belief that CP is reliable.

But here the argument runs afoul. With PP a large number of beliefs are generated, literally tens of thousands, so that the inductive base for the general conclusion that PP is reliable is sufficiently strong to support the conclusion. But one must wonder, just when does an inductive argument become a strong one? How many beliefs does one need in the inductive base? Is there a sufficiently large base of beliefs generated by CP? In some cases perhaps there are,

but one suspects that often the inductive base is not strong enough. How often does the Christian believer employ CP (or how often does CP work in her)? And does the believer trust her ability to use CP well enough to trust its deliverances? These are important issues, but there are more pressing questions to ask.

First, it appears that any attempt to produce an overall justificatory argument for the reliability of a practice appeals to an inductive subargument; that is, the inductive subargument is essential to the overall argument. No substitution is available. Second, the appeal to induction assumes that the belief-forming practice is something we can test by applying it more than once. Third, the use of induction rests on the assumption that the things about which the induction is made are regular and predictive. Since the last two points are intimately connected, I deal with them more or less together.

Of the first point, let me say that Alston's subargument is an inductive track-record argument. Is the inductive track-record subargument essential? The first point to make is that, even if it is not, Alston's argument uses one. As far as the argument I have constructed (and now criticize) follows Alston's reasoning, if my argument is successful, I have at least shown that  $PT_{AS}$  cannot be defended by that kind of argument. But then how could it be defended? There needs to be some positive argument. Perhaps there are other kinds of inductive arguments to which one might appeal—an inference to the best explanation, for example. But the points I make here about God's unpredictability seem to infect all inductive subarguments, of the track-record variety or not. And so I cast the following comments in general terms about induction.

What of noninductive arguments? It is hard to see what they might be, in this case. To avoid logical (but allow epistemic) circularity, it is hard to see that any premise that allows a deductive move to the needed conclusion is forthcoming. Alston begins with a practical assumption of reliability, and this gets the argument off the ground. But if one begins with practicality alone, one ends with practicality alone if the logical moves are deductive. So it looks as if an inductive subargument of some type is needed.

Induction is an epistemic practice in which we appeal to past states of affairs and infer that these will continue into the future or we appeal to the presence of certain qualities or properties in ob-

jects and infer that these will be present in the future, and the like. In other words, induction assumes that the objects with which it deals do not change, at least radically, from one moment to the next, or that the changes themselves are regularly repeating changes, and that a good case can be made from the past into the future. PP likewise deals with objects (or changes) that are regular and predictive. It is natural, in fact, to link our practice of induction to the practice of perception, understanding the two as rising together in our cognitive past. Although not the same thing, induction and PP make similar assumptions about their subject matters. The key assumption for our purposes is that the objects with which they deal are predictable. Thus, since both PP and induction work well in their dealings with the physical world, the appeal to inductive principles to show the reliability of PP is both natural and, it seems, legitimate. It is, as Alston admits, built into PP that the objects that are its central concern are the kind of objects about which predictions can be made. Predictions are likewise the heart-beat of induction. With these predictions we can anticipate and control, to some extent, physical objects.

With CP, however, the connections with induction are much less clear. If, for example, the applicability of induction to a set of objects assumes that those objects do not change (in important ways) over time, or that any changes are predictable, and yet God does change (at least in unpredictable ways in his actions toward us), of what use is an inductive argument to show that the practice through which we have access to God—CP—is reliable? The issue here is really one of the nature of the practice as well as of the objects the practice supposedly accesses. With PP, the practice's ostensible predictive nature cannot be separated from the ostensible nature of the objects with which it deals. Of course one can safely infer from the past activity of this or that physical object to its future; that is part and parcel of the conceptual scheme of PP. On the other hand, if the nature of the practice is so intimately tied to the nature of its objects, and God is not predictable, then why would CP be predictable? It is not, as Alston admits. But then in what way can one appeal to an inductive argument to show that CP is reliable? Unlike stones and trees, God is not predictable; we cannot assume he will be or act in the future as he was or did in the



past or that CP will give us access to him in the future as it has in the past. God and his activities are not capable of being anticipated or controlled.<sup>28</sup>

Does this mean simply that one does not have, or at least that one cannot count on, a large number of generated beliefs from which to infer inductively a claim of reliability, as I suggested earlier? No, my suggestion here is stronger than that. I mean to say that no induction from the past engagements of CP can be used legitimately as an inductive base. It is part of the understanding of the world that is embedded in CP (or in which CP is embedded) that God does not have to give us any information. In fact, Alston argues that, given the assumptions that God is somewhat mysterious and that he has made us such that we cannot discern regularities in his nature and activities, then "if an epistemic practice were to lead us to suppose that we had discovered regular patterns in the divine behavior or that divine activity is equally discernible by all, that would be a reason for regarding the practice as *unreliable*."<sup>29</sup> If the assumption about the indiscernibility of regularity in God's nature and activities is correct, then how could one safely infer from the past deliverances of CP that it is reliable? And if the inductive subargument is irreplaceable in the overall justificatory argument, then a belief that CP is reliable cannot be justified by that larger argument.

Alston has suggested in correspondence that my discussion does not take into account that, whereas "induction concerns the relations between beliefs and facts that make the beliefs true (where they are true), what is unpredictable is the object the beliefs are about. So that it is one thing that is unpredictable (God) and another thing that is the topic of the induction (truth about beliefs

28. There is a potential problem with this suggestion, since it is a mainstream belief of Christians that God is constant and dependable. How is one to square the (apparent) nonpredictability of God with his purported dependability and constancy? I do not know how to resolve this problem except to suggest that, even if God is ultimately or finally dependable, nothing we know about him gives us insight into how he will carry out this dependability. It does not, in short, seem obviously contradictory to say that God is dependable but nonpredictable or that he is faithful but full of surprises. My challenge deals only with the apparent element of surprise in God's ways of dealing with humanity.

29. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 129.

about God when formed in a certain way)."<sup>30</sup> This distinction is a good one. Let us see how it affects my argument.

An inductive subargument for the reliability of CP, following Alston's pattern, looks something like this:

- (5) 1. At  $t_1$ ,  $S_1$  formed the CP belief that  $p_1$ , and  $p_1$ .
- 2. At  $t_2$ ,  $S_2$  formed the CP belief that  $p_2$ , and  $p_2$ .

.

.

.

Therefore, CP is a reliable source of belief.

Alston's note calls attention to the fact that the basis for the induction is the relationship between the conjuncts of the premises, and the issue is not, therefore, one of predictability or nonpredictability. The move to the generalization is not based directly on the facts about the object of the belief (in this case God) but on the fact that the beliefs generated by CP are true. So it does not matter, for the efficacy of the induction, whether the objects of the beliefs are predictable or not.

Although I agree with Alston's basic point that the induction itself is based on the relationship between the conjuncts of the premises, there remains something curious about CP. This feature of CP calls special attention to the object of the beliefs generated by CP in an inductive argument supporting CP's reliability. PP is a practice over which we have some control. If we do not wish to form visual beliefs, we can close our eyes. If we do not wish to form auditory beliefs, we can plug our ears. And so forth. Even though we are constantly bombarded, during our waking hours, with sensory information, there are certain measures we can take to control how PP works with that information. The corollary to this point is that generally the objects about which PP generates beliefs are always present to us. They are constant and predictably so. Thus we know what to do to engage in PP. We also know perfectly well what it would be to use PP to generate beliefs and then to reuse PP to validate those same beliefs. But it is less than clear that we know the same about CP. Even if we do have beliefs

30. Personal letter dated November 26, 1990.

delivered to us by CP, it, unlike PP, is not the kind of practice we can call up on demand. We cannot simply turn our head in the right direction and use or apply CP. Having received some information by sight, I can return again to that spot and use sight to validate the original belief. But what do I do having received the information that God wants me to spend most of my time on philosophical theology rather than other philosophical concerns? How do I reuse CP to test that belief?

Perhaps there are certain things the Christian can do. For example, one subpractice of CP may be reading Scripture. Insofar as it is, the Christian can pick up the Bible and read it, just as with PP one can open one's eyes and look again. When we open our eyes and turn our head in the right direction we can, more or less, trust that our sight gives us the information needed to validate our earlier belief. But God need not reveal himself to us today when we read the Scriptures, and thus the testability of CP lacks the kind of repeatability of PP. And this brings us to my main reply to Alston's criticism. The objects of beliefs generated by PP do not *do* anything to lead us to engage in PP. There is no conscious decision or motivation on their part to initiate PP for us. This is not true with CP. Presumably God must initiate CP. The unpredictability of God, therefore, indicates that no inductive move from CP-generated beliefs and their corresponding truth-making facts can provide sufficient grounds for concluding that CP is reliable (or will be reliable in the future). CP may work in entirely different ways each times it operates. A lack of predictability on God's part does lead to the failure of the inductive argument needed to show CP reliable.

Furthermore, the predictability of the objects of PP beliefs is precisely what makes the repeatability of our engaging in PP possible. This repeatability allows for a kind of commitment to PP's reliability that in turn gets the inductive argument going. Here I shift to discuss the premises of Alston's argument, and hence it is Alston's "practical assumption" that is at stake. The move from the generation of true perceptual beliefs (from experience and PP) to the claim that PP is reliable depends on the practical assumption that PP is reliable. This assumption must only be practical, of course; otherwise one is involved in a logical rather than epistemic circle. But how can one make even the practical assumption? We

make it, I believe, because the deliverances of PP are so well confirmed by the past predictive power of induction and PP. It is this (predictive kind of) confirmation that “indicates” (“betokens,” “manifests”) PP’s reliability in the first place.<sup>31</sup> But this confirmation is internal to the practice itself: induction seems either part and parcel of PP or so intimately connected that one cannot engage in induction without relying on PP (or other practices dealing with predictable objects) and its internal assumptions. Thus one should not view the (predictive) confirmation of the practice’s deliverances as independent grounds or reasons for taking the practice to be reliable. Nevertheless, confirmation may generate an initial trust in the practice and hence the practical assumption is not irrational. I am sure Alston would not take just any practice—let us say my taking the pain in my knee to indicate that a Canadian hockey team will take the Stanley Cup—as a practice one can practically assume to be reliable. The presence of a reliability indicator is what suggests the practical assumption in the first place.

So, in addition to the move from the premises to the conclusion relying on the predictive nature of the objects, the internal (predictive) confirmation of beliefs also depends on the regularity of the objects over which the practice generating those beliefs ranges. With CP such (predictive) confirmation appears not to be present. The objects of the practice (God and his activities) are not regular or predictable. Insofar as they are not, the practical assumption does not seem plausible. There is no indicator of reliability to suggest that one make a practical assumption. So, although one need not go on to show that induction itself is a reliable source of belief, one must have an argument with a strong enough set of beliefs to make a sound inductive move. CP appears to lack such a base, for the practical assumption of CP’s reliability does not have the network of confirmation that the related PP assumption has. Thus, although PP is  $J_{eg}^*$ —one can generate an inductive, albeit epistemically circular, argument for the reliability of PP—CP appears not to be, since the requisite argument slips in some assumptions about the nature of CP and its objects which are not true of that practice.

31. See Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” p. 125, for a full explanation of these terms. See Chapter 10, and Mark S. McLeod, “Can Belief in God Be Confirmed?” *Religious Studies* 24 (1988): 311–23, for further development of this and a nonpredictive kind of confirmation.

I am suggesting, then, that although there may be an argument justifying the belief that PP is reliable, insofar as that argument rests on induction there can be no parallel argument for CP. There are two points to my argument. First, because of the unpredictable nature of the object of CP, one cannot go from the premises (which contain truth claims about CP's deliverances) to the conclusion about CP's reliability. Second, not even the initial practical assumption about CP's reliability is well founded, since, once again, the nature of the object of CP does not allow for the internal confirmatory platform that would lead one to make the practical assumption in the first place. These two issues are connected, because both rely on the unpredictability of God. So what suggests a lack of force behind the practical assumption for CP turns out ultimately to challenge the move from the premises, even if true, to the conclusion.

Does Alston have a response? He admits (and, in fact, makes "epistemological hay out of") the fact that PP has confirmation and predictive power whereas CP does not. On the basis of this kind of observation, says Alston, some have rejected the reliability of CP. He goes on to argue, however, that although confirmation and predictive power are indicative of reliability, they are not necessary for reliability. Can Alston use a related response against my suggestions, claiming, for example, that CP need not have confirmation and yet can still be legitimately practically assumed to be reliable? I think not. It is true that a practice could be reliable and its deliverances not be confirmed. Still, the argument under consideration, taken as a whole, relies on induction. Inductive arguments can have success only where the base allows a predictive move from the past to the future. With a well-confirmed base such moves are plausible. As we have seen, this issue arises at two stages, with the practical assumption and with the move from premises to conclusion. With CP, however, the predictive application to future cases appears risky both with regard to the main argument and with regard to the initial confirmation that might suggest the practical assumption in the first place. The predictive repeatability simply seems absent. What other reliability indicator is available? None, and thus, insofar as Alston's argument requires induction, we cannot make an appeal to the argument to show that CP is  $J_{eg}^*$ . Alston's move earlier to ignore CP's lack of confirma-

tion, and his subsequent claim that CP can be  $J_{nw}$ , does not rely on an inductive argument. In fact,  $J_{nw}$  does not rely on argument at all. In the case of  $J_{nw}$ , Alston's concern is with reasons against the reliability of CP, and lacking confirmation and predictability does not constitute a reason against reliability. But with  $J_{eg}^*$  the case is different, for now we are dealing with a lack of reasons *for* reliability.  $J_{eg}^*$  demands positive reasons and those simply are not, and perhaps cannot be, provided by CP. So  $PT_{AS}$  appears not to be true.

Alston does say that CP has its own internal self-support. Does this help him with  $PT_{AS}$ ? CP's self-support comes in terms of spiritual development which, Alston suggests, is internal to the practice. What is spiritual development?

CMP [CP], including the associated Christian scheme that has been built up over the centuries, generates, among much else, the belief that God has made certain promises of the destiny that awaits us if we follow the way of life enjoined on us by Christ. We are told that if we will turn from our sinful ways, reorder our priorities, take a break from preoccupation with our self-centered aims long enough to open ourselves to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, then we will experience a transformation into the kind of nonpossessive, nondefensive, loving, caring, and sincere persons God has destined us to become.

This brief account does not do full justice to the notion of spiritual development. Nevertheless, some Christians do develop in these ways, and this provides some type of self-support for CP. Even so, if we pay attention to the ways Christians treat their spiritual development, we note that there is no predictive guarantee that someone will mature as a Christian believer. Alston himself writes that this development happens "not immediately and not without many ups and downs."<sup>32</sup> This is no surprise, for we are dealing with humans and their foibles, as well as with a God about whom even believers are hesitant to predict things. And there is, of course, much more to be said here.

But the main point is that spiritual development is also unpredictable and that this indicates the unlikelihood that even an

32. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 252.

inductive argument bolstered with spiritual development as internal support can be used to move one to a justified belief in reliability.

Since the inductive argument is so prominent in the overall justificatory argument, its absence effectively kills the justificatory argument and hence the claim that one can be  $J_{eg}$  in a belief that CP is reliable. Can one use the self-support of spiritual formation as an *indicator* of reliability, that is, as enough for a practical assumption of reliability? Perhaps, for spiritual development does occur among those involved in CP, and there is a kind of confirmation that attaches to CP because of the spiritual development of its practitioners. This is not a predictive kind of confirmation, however, and an inductive argument based on it would be shaky at best. I have more to say about the notion of a nonpredictive confirmation in Chapters 10 and 11, and I postpone detailed discussion until then.

I believe it is safe to conclude that  $PT_{AS}$  is false. What about the  $J_{ns}$  of CP? For the reasons presented against the  $J_{eg}$  of CP, its  $J_{ns}$  must be rejected as well. Thus although PP may be, according to some of Alston's work,  $J_{ns}$ , CP cannot be. And in the case of CP, one cannot know that it is  $J_{eg}$ .

I have argued that some of Alston's more recent work militates against the conclusions of his earlier work. A stronger parity thesis emerges from this more recent work. But  $PT_{AS}$  fails because of a lack of inductive support for CP's reliability. There is one final consideration that raises serious questions about  $PT_{AS}$ . I turn to explore Alston's doxastic practice approach to epistemology in the next chapter.

## 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."<sup>1</sup> 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*?"<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

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."<sup>4</sup>

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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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."<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

## 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<sub>Alston</sub> ( $PT_A$ ): 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."<sup>11</sup>

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<sub>A</sub> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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*.<sup>13</sup> 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  $PT_{\lambda}$ ? 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  $PT_{\lambda}$  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  $PT_{\lambda}$  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.<sup>14</sup> 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<sub>AS</sub>) 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  $PT_A^*$  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,  $PT_A^*$  is the strongest parity thesis we can have. Stronger versions turn out to be false. In short,  $PT_A^*$ , 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.



## Plantinga's Parity Thesis

Alvin Plantinga's epistemology of religion is no less complex than Alston's. It can be divided into two parts. The first, both historically and in the order I consider it here (this and the next chapter), is Plantinga's development of the notion of the proper basicity of beliefs; this is his clearest defense of the parity thesis. In this context, Plantinga's chosen language is that of "epistemic justification" and "rationality." This is to be contrasted with the second part of his epistemology, in which Plantinga develops and defends his account of "epistemic warrant" or "positive epistemic status." There his concern is the quality, property, or thing, enough of which converts mere true belief into knowledge. In the essays and books in which he considers these issues, he does not explicitly consider a parity thesis. Nevertheless, I discuss this aspect of his epistemology in Chapter 9.

In defending his version of the parity thesis, Plantinga encourages us to reconsider epistemic foundationalism and its relationship to theistic belief. He further urges us to reject evidentialism, which, he claims, is rooted in a certain version of foundationalism. In this chapter my initial concern is to introduce Plantinga's earlier work on rationality, noting the major tenets of his understanding of foundationalism as well as his arguments against evidentialism and the particular foundationalist understanding of justification he claims undergirds it. From this discussion emerges a description of

Plantinga's version of the parity thesis. I then suggest a challenge to it.

### 1. Foundationalism

Plantinga's general concern is whether belief in God, that is, the belief "God exists," *can* be (as opposed to *is*) rational.<sup>1</sup> To show how it can be rational, he tries to show how it can be "properly basic" in a foundational system of justification. On Plantinga's account, epistemological foundationalism is a normative view.<sup>2</sup> One of its goals is to lay down conditions for rational belief. He writes: "According to the foundationalist, there is a right way and a wrong way with respect to belief. People have responsibilities, duties and obligations with respect to their believings just as with respect to their (other) actions." To be rational, then, "is to exercise one's epistemic powers properly—to exercise them in such a way as to go contrary to none of the norms for such exercise."<sup>3</sup> To be rational, on this account, is something a person does; it has to do with one's responsibility or, more broadly, one's following the norms in epistemic matters. Having stated what it is to be rational, of course, does not obviously clarify the related issue of epistemic *justification* of belief. Here Plantinga is sometimes unclear. He apparently uses the terms "rational" and "irrational" interchangeably with "justified" and "unjustified." And his claims are, on the one hand, about *beliefs*: beliefs are rational (or justified). On the other hand, he talks about rational *noetic structures* (or even simply of "being rational," as in the above quotation). In the main, his concern seems to be justified belief. We can, then, pass over the notion of

1. Normally, Plantinga speaks not of the belief that God exists but of belief in God. The latter is to be understood as the former. I follow Plantinga in this convenient shorthand. Also, as it turns out, the general concern for Plantinga is beliefs about God and his activity (e.g., God's creation of the flowers), from which there is an immediate inference to "God exists." Again, for convenience, I sometimes do not distinguish between the belief that God exists and other theistic beliefs.

2. At least he thinks this in the account given in the Reformed epistemology essays published between 1979 and 1985, the essays and ideas around which this chapter is written.

3. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 49–62, quotation pp. 53–54.

rationality *überhaupt* and concern ourselves with the justification or *propriety* of beliefs. We can do this safely because Plantinga's comments about rationality are tied closely to his comments about justification, both being normative notions and, presumably, the justification of (most of) one's believings being at least necessary for the rationality of one's noetic structure or more generally for one's being (epistemically) rational.

First, then, some comments about Plantinga's notion of noetic structure. He says: "A person's noetic structure is the set of propositions he believes together with certain epistemic relations that hold among him and these propositions."<sup>4</sup> These relations include the basis relation (that I believe *p* on the basis of *q*), the supports relations (that one belief or set of beliefs provides evidential backing for another belief), and the propriety of beliefs (those that are inferential are "properly nonbasic" only if appropriately based on others, and those that are noninferential are "properly basic" only if certain hard-to-specify conditions are met). Plantinga also mentions strength of belief, depth of ingression, epistemic history, and relations between belief and acceptance as candidates for important aspects of noetic structures. Of all these aspects of noetic structures, I concentrate on the notion of properly basic beliefs.

Plantinga notes various types of foundationalism and isolates two in particular: classical (or strong) and weak. He writes: "Suppose we say that *weak* foundationalism is the view that (1) every rational noetic structure has a foundation [i.e., a set of properly basic beliefs], and (2) in a rational noetic structure, non-basic belief is proportional in strength to support from the foundations." Classical foundationalism, in contrast, consists of weak foundationalism plus certain specified criteria for proper basicity. What are those criteria? "Ancient and medieval foundationalists tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for a person only if it is either self-evident or evident to the senses; modern foundationalists—Descartes, Locke, Leibniz and the like—tended to hold that a proposition is properly basic for *S* only if either self-evident or incorrigible for *S*."<sup>5</sup> Plantinga sometimes identifies classical foundationalism as the disjunction of ancient and medieval with mod-

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., pp. 56–57.

ern foundationalism, but he does not always do so. In places he treats classical foundationalism simply as modern foundationalism. Unless otherwise indicated, I use the term "classical foundationalism" in the broader, disjunctive sense.

The belief that God exists is, of course, neither self-evident, nor incorrigible, nor evident to the senses. If Plantinga is to show how belief in God can be properly basic, he must show that classical foundationalism is false. One of his goals is to accomplish that task.

## 2. Evidentialism

By showing classical foundationalism to be false and arguing that belief in God can be properly basic in some other foundational system of justification, Plantinga may be able to show how belief in God can be epistemically justified. But the so-called irrationality (nonjustified status) of belief in God should not be seen simply as a problem arising out of classical foundationalism. In a significant way, says Plantinga, the charge of irrationality—that belief in God is not justified—is rooted in "evidentialism" and can be generally stated as the "evidentialist objection to theistic belief."<sup>6</sup>

Evidentialism is the view represented by the following:

- (1) There are obligations or standards of excellence with respect to belief.

Additionally, Plantinga cites a claim of W. K. Clifford:<sup>7</sup>

- (2) "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

How are the obligations or standards of (1) to be understood? Plantinga's earliest Reformed epistemology essays suggest several dif-

6. Just as foundationalism is a normative thesis, so is evidentialism. Some of Plantinga's claims about evidentialism are virtually identical to his claims about foundationalism. See Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 53, and "Reason and Belief in God," p. 30.

7. As quoted in Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 25; from W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays*, vol. 2, *Essays and Reviews* (London: Macmillan Press, 1879), originally in *Contemporary Review*, 1877.

ferent forms the obligations might assume, but he moves in a later essay to a model employing the notion of standards rather than obligations. The motivation for this shift need not concern us here.<sup>8</sup> But perhaps the following captures more of Plantinga's spirit in characterizing evidentialism:

- (2') It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.

We can understand (2') to be a more explicit expression of (2).

Plantinga gives a list of evidentialists that includes Aquinas, Descartes, Locke, Blanshard, Russell, Scriven, Clifford, and Flew. What common philosophical view is shared by this otherwise varied collection of philosophers? In part it is a view about the epistemic status that belief in God must have if it is justified. Following (1) and (2'), they all agree that

- (3) It is irrational or unreasonable to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

Some evidentialists also hold a further claim:

- (4) We have no evidence or at any rate not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists.<sup>9</sup>

Others do not. Here the evidentialist objection comes to the fore. The objection is rooted in the alleged truth of claims (1), (2'), (3), and (4) and concludes that belief in God is not justified. Thus, all evidentialist objectors are evidentialists, but the converse is not true. Evidentialism, then, is the view that minimally (1), (2'), and (3) are true. The evidentialist objection is that evidentialism is true, as is (4). Thus, the belief that God exists ought not to be held or is noetically unfortunate, untidy, or substandard.

Plantinga disagrees with the evidentialist objector on at least two

8. For obligations, see, for example, Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," pp. 31–34. For standards, see Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 111.

9. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 27.

accounts. First, he thinks there is evidence for the belief that God exists.<sup>10</sup> Although this disagreement is important, I do not explore it here. Second, he thinks evidence is not needed for justified belief in God. The evidentialist responds that nothing is more reasonable than (3); if there is no evidence or reason to believe in God, one should not do so on pain of irrationality. But Plantinga does not mean by his claim that no evidence whatsoever is needed for justified belief in God. What he means by "reason" or "evidence" is not simply justification in all its varied forms. Rather, he has in mind discursive justification. We can say that a belief  $p$  is discursively justified for some person  $S$  when  $S$  holds  $p$  because of some other belief or beliefs she holds. Presumably, the truth of these other beliefs is taken by  $S$  to make  $p$ 's truth more likely than if they were not true. Plantinga does not give a complete account of the relationship between the justifying belief(s) and the justified belief, but we can surmise that it must be some sort of inferential relationship. Discursive justification does not include, then, noninferential justification. It does not include justification where  $p$  is justified by some sort of experience (e.g., my being appeared to in a certain way) or by some feature of the proposition itself (e.g., self-evidence). Thus, in the typical case, the belief that  $2 + 1 = 3$  is not discursively justified but held on the grounds of self-evidence. When Plantinga speaks of evidentialists holding (3), he attributes to them the view that belief in God must be discursively justified.

A problem with Plantinga's claims arises here. Claim (2') is that evidence is needed for *any* belief to be intellectually nondefective or intellectually permissible. If Plantinga understands evidence as discursive justification and (2') is true, then every belief must be justified by some other belief. Foundational models of justification seem to be excluded. But I think this is simply a slip of the pen. Plantinga need not attribute the stronger view to the evidentialist; the evidentialist need not claim that *all* beliefs must be discursively justified. She need only claim that beliefs that cannot be (or are not) properly nondiscursive, as far as their justification is concerned, must be discursively justified. In fact, Plantinga claims, evidentialism is rooted in classical foundationalism. Thus, the beliefs

10. See, for example, the ontological argument in Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 85-112.

that are properly basic—those beliefs that are either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses—need not be provided evidence in the way (2') demands. Claim (2') should be replaced by

- (2★) It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.

Naturally, if the evidentialist objector's challenge is to make sense, the belief "God exists" must require discursive justification. Thus, (3) should be replaced by

- (3★) Since belief in God requires discursive justification, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

Our corrected picture of evidentialism is that minimally (1), (2★), and (3★) are true. The evidentialist objector believes not only that evidentialism is true but that (4) is also true. Thus, belief in God is irrational. Plantinga can now be seen as rejecting (3★) and (4).

Despite Plantinga's disagreements with (3★) and (4), he does think (1) is true. He writes that "it seems plausible to hold that there are obligations and norms with respect to belief, and I do not intend to contest this assumption."<sup>11</sup> Extrapolating from his later work, I assume he would no longer put forth this claim alone but instead make appropriate modifications in light of the demands of noetic excellence or nondefectiveness.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he would affirm

- (1★) There are obligations, standards of excellence, or (other) normative patterns to follow with respect to belief which, when followed, provide permissive justification for a belief.

The evidentialist thus would hold (1★), (2★), and (3★), and the evidentialist objector would add (4).

11. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 31.

12. Whether (2★) is something Plantinga believes is not clear. I presume he would not obviously disagree, but I suspect he would be hesitant to say that there is a class of beliefs whose members noetically demand discursive justification.

Two aspects of Plantinga's thought deserve special attention. First, his account of epistemic justification is an account of a normative notion of epistemic justification.<sup>13</sup> Although he does not spell out the details of the position, the notion of justification with which he is concerned is in the neighborhood of permissive justification, that is, what one is permitted to believe given that one has done as much as can be expected vis-à-vis the normative requirements for belief, whether those requirements are deontologically based or otherwise. Second, he disagrees not only with the evidentialist objector but also with some of the claims of the evidentialist. Not only is there discursive evidence for belief in God, but even were there not, belief in God could nonetheless be justified. Although Plantinga holds that discursive justification for belief in God can be given, it is not required for justification, at least in the sense of permissive, normative justification. The evidentialist is wrong; belief in God does not require discursive justification.

We are not yet in a position to state Plantinga's version of the parity thesis. We do know that it involves a permissive, normative notion of justification (not unlike Alston's  $J_{nw}$ , in some respects). It also includes some reference to the fact that theistic beliefs need not be nonbasic but can be properly basic.

### 3. The Failure of Classical Foundationalism

Plantinga argues in two ways against classical foundationalism. Let us call these the "incoherence argument" and the "widespread belief argument." First, the incoherence argument. Plantinga captures classical foundationalism's criteria for proper basicality in this way:<sup>14</sup>

- (5) A proposition  $p$  is properly basic for a person  $S$  if and only if  $p$  is either self-evident to  $S$ , incorrigible for  $S$ , or evident to the senses for  $S$ .

On the classical foundationalist's view, not only is the disjunction of the criteria sufficient for proper basicality, but it is necessary as well. Plantinga's concern is with the necessity of the criteria.

13. He may hold other understandings of justification to be plausible as well. And he certainly holds that normative justification and epistemic warrant are not the same thing; see Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," pp. 2-3.

14. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 59.



According to classical foundationalism, says Plantinga, beliefs are either properly basic, properly nonbasic, or not justified. Plantinga asks, of these alternatives, which is (5)? To be justified, (5) must be either properly basic or properly nonbasic. If it is properly basic it must be either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. It is none of these. It must, then, be properly nonbasic. To be properly nonbasic, (5) must be supported by a belief from the foundation. Is it thus supported? It is not easy to see how. In summary the challenge is this. If the statement of the criteria, that is, (5), cannot be anchored, as it were, by its own expressed criteria, how is it to be anchored? If it cannot be anchored on classical foundationalism's own grounds, it is either noetically substandard or we ought not believe it. Classical foundationalism is self-referentially incoherent.

The widespread belief argument simply has it that, even were it coherent to believe (5), such an account of epistemic justification would make many of our beliefs unjustified. Plantinga has in mind beliefs about the past and other minds. These follow neither deductively, inductively, nor on a probabilistic basis from the basic beliefs allowed by (5). This shows that (5) is false or at least unjustified, for surely many beliefs about other minds and the past are justified. Here Plantinga's parity thesis begins to emerge, for the development of a theory that allows us to hold that these widespread beliefs are justified leads to a theory that allows belief in God to be justified on similar grounds. He concludes that, given these two arguments, classical foundationalism is in poor shape. It is not, according to Plantinga, a viable epistemic model for normative, permissive justification.<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. Plantinga's Nonclassical, Normative Foundationalism

The death of classical foundationalism does not signal the end of all foundational models of justification; Plantinga remains a foundationalist. Two further points are relevant in this regard. First, a belief's being neither self-evident, incorrigible, nor evident to the

15. I believe he would add that classical foundationalism is not a viable epistemic model for many other kinds of justification as well, including that justification ("warrant") needed for knowledge.

senses does not rule out its being properly basic. The rejection of the classical criteria does not leave the foundationalist with nowhere to turn. Having shown that the classical criteria do not provide necessary conditions for proper basicity does not entail the nonexistence of all criteria. Just as the critic of the verification principle of meaningfulness does not, on showing the principle false, have to admit that there are no criteria for meaningfulness, Plantinga does not have to admit that there are no criteria for proper basicity after rejecting the classical criteria.

Second, on rejecting a particular set of criteria for proper basicity one need not have a replacement in order to recognize beliefs as properly basic. One need not know what the criteria are in order to recognize that some beliefs are properly basic. Also, one need not know the criteria to recognize that something is not properly basic. Again, just as the critic of the verification principle of meaningfulness can know that "T'was brillig and the slithy toves did gyre and gymbel in the wabe" is not meaningful, the critic of the classical criteria can know that some belief is not properly basic, even though neither critic is able to replace the rejected criteria. One can remain a foundationalist without an explicit account of the criteria for foundational beliefs.

What of the criteria, then? Are there criteria necessary and sufficient for proper basicity? It is less than clear that there are, for Plantinga's suggested method for discovering the criteria leads to a much more open understanding of the role of criteria for proper basicity than that provided by classical models of foundationalism. He writes in this now oft-quoted passage that

the proper way to arrive at such a criterion is, broadly speaking, *inductive*. We must assemble examples of beliefs and conditions such that the former are obviously properly basic in the latter. . . . We must then frame hypotheses as to the necessary and sufficient conditions of proper basicity and test these hypotheses by references to those examples. Under the right conditions, for example, it is clearly rational to believe that you see a human person before you: a being who has thoughts and feelings, who knows and believes things, who makes decisions and acts. It is clear, furthermore, that you are under no obligation to reason to this belief from others you hold; under those conditions that belief is properly basic for you. But then (s) . . . must be mistaken; the belief in question, under

those circumstances, is properly basic, though neither self-evident nor incorrigible [nor evident to the senses] for you. Similarly, you may seem to remember that you had breakfast this morning, and perhaps you know of no reason to suppose your memory is playing you tricks. If so, you are entirely justified in taking that belief as basic. Of course it isn't properly basic on the criteria offered by classical . . . foundationalists; but that fact counts not against you but against those criteria.

Accordingly, criteria for proper basicity must be reached from below rather than above; they should not be presented as *ex Cathedra*, but argued to and tested by a relevant set of examples. But there is no reason to assume, in advance, that everyone will agree on the examples. The Christian will of course suppose that belief in God is entirely proper and rational; if he doesn't accept this belief on the basis of other propositions, he will conclude that it is basic for him and quite properly so. Followers of Bertrand Russell and Madelyn Murray O'Hare may disagree, but how is that relevant? Must my criteria, or those of the Christian community, conform to their examples? Surely not. The Christian community is responsible to *its* set of examples, not to theirs.<sup>16</sup>

Rather than arbitrarily legislate the criteria for proper basicity, we must inductively examine our noetic structures. On the basis of what we take to be properly basic, we must come to agreement on the criteria. If we disagree on which beliefs ought to be accepted as properly basic, our criteria are different. This suggests that proper basicity and its criteria are relative, in some way, person to person or community to community.

Plantinga continues by noting that criteria arrived at in the particularistic way he suggests may not be polemically useful. If we arrive at different criteria when using the inductive procedure, we may not be able to use those criteria to reject another's examples of properly basic beliefs. He wants to deny, however, that just any belief can be properly basic. He says that in fact properly basic beliefs stand in relation to the conditions in which they are formed, and this relationship provides justification for properly basic beliefs. Properly basic beliefs are not, says Plantinga, *groundless*.

16. Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981): 41-51, quotation p. 50.

It is tempting to raise the following sort of question. If belief in God is properly basic, why cannot *just any* belief be properly basic? Could we not say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic? . . . If we say that belief in God is properly basic, will we not be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?

Certainly not.<sup>17</sup>

One thing is clear: Plantinga wishes to reject a certain kind of arbitrariness; he wants to reject an arbitrariness in which just any belief can be properly basic, an arbitrariness in which a Great Pumpkin belief is epistemically justified.<sup>18</sup> So, not just any belief can be taken as properly basic. A belief is properly basic only in certain circumstances—only when it is grounded. But which circumstances provide grounding?

Plantinga does not provide a formal account of the relationship between beliefs and the conditions in which they are formed. He instead provides some hints. I focus on two points. First, if one has no reason to suspect that a belief is not justified, it is justified (or perhaps, if one has no reason to doubt one's epistemic practice, e.g., one's memory, the beliefs it generates are justified). Second, if one has done all that can be expected epistemically with regard to a belief, it is justified. Plantinga also provides the following examples.<sup>19</sup> He notes that the conditions in which the beliefs are formed may be much more complex than the examples suggest, but nonetheless "I see a tree" is properly basic if I am being appeared to treely, "that person is in pain" is properly basic when I am aware of that person displaying pain behavior, and "I had breakfast this morning" is properly basic if I seem to remember having breakfast this morning. Since these beliefs are not based on other beliefs, they are basic. They are not, however, arbitrary or groundless.

17. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 74.

18. One is tempted to call this arbitrariness "relativism," but that term is surely a loaded one. To avoid much potential confusion, I continue in my use of the term "arbitrary" (and its cognates).

19. I refer to these as the "paradigms" of justified belief or as the "paradigms" of properly basic beliefs; see Chapter 1, Section 2.

The circumstances vary the conditions in which a belief is properly basic, but if a belief is properly basic there is a true proposition of the sort:<sup>20</sup>

- (6) In conditions *C*, *S* is justified in taking *p* as basic.

Certain kinds of conditions thus ground certain kinds of belief as basic. The beliefs are justified by those conditions, although one does not hold the beliefs on the basis of some other belief. Such beliefs are nondiscursively justified or properly basic.

Some clarifications are possible here. First, surely some features can be noted and agreed on which are necessarily shared by all properly basic beliefs. For example, *p* is a properly basic belief only if *p* is basic (not based on other beliefs) and proper (meets the conditions for the proper basicity of *p*). These purely formal criteria—call them “formal” or “universal” criteria—are not, apparently, of concern to Plantinga.

A second level of criteria—call them “material” or “general” criteria—can be distinguished. Self-evidence, being evident to the senses, and incorrigibility are examples. As Plantinga argues, these examples are neither severally nor jointly necessary for proper basicity. Any belief meeting one of these criteria, however, is properly basic. It may well be possible to complete the set so that a disjunction of these three criteria and some other criterion (or criteria) forms a set necessary for proper basicity. Meeting any member of the set (or combination of members of the set) would be sufficient for proper basicity, but at least one of the set must be met for a belief to be properly basic. This set, one might say, is the instantiation of the formal criterion of propriety. To be properly basic, a belief must meet at least one of the general criteria.

Finally, a third level of criteria can be distinguished—call them “particular” criteria. My having the experience of what I take to be a blue patch is an example of a particular criterion. This may be a necessary condition of the proper basicity of the belief “I see a blue patch,” although not for beliefs in general. Plantinga suggests that my being appeared to redly is necessary and sufficient for the proper basicity of the belief “I am appeared to redly.”<sup>21</sup> These are

20. Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God,” p. 79.

21. See *ibid.*, p. 77.

the *conditions* in which "I am appeared to redly" is basic and properly so. The conditions do vary from belief to belief, and perhaps from moment to moment or person to person, but there nonetheless are conditions for each properly basic belief which confer on the belief the status of epistemic propriety. When one goes through the inductive procedure to discover the conditions in which one's basic beliefs are properly basic, it seems that the general criteria are discovered only by considering the particular criteria. The general criteria may then be inferred from whatever is shared in common by sets of particular criteria for proper basicity. Plantinga uses the term "criteria" to cover both what I have called material or general criteria and particular criteria.<sup>22</sup>

Thus Plantinga provides us with the outline of a nonclassical, normative foundationalism. There are beliefs, both basic and non-basic. The former may be properly basic under certain conditions. The discovery of those conditions is up to the community (or individual, as the case may be). The latter are, presumably, properly nonbasic when appropriately based on other properly basic beliefs or based on beliefs that are in turn based appropriately on properly basic beliefs and so forth. In all cases, the propriety or appropriateness of the beliefs is a normative one.

## 5. Proper Basicity, Theistic Beliefs, and the Parity Thesis

Plantinga claims that with the collapse of classical foundationalism the door is open to the possibility of belief in God being properly basic. At least there is no reason to think that belief in God cannot be. In fact, Plantinga's own version of foundationalism is specifically designed to allow belief in God to be properly basic. But is belief in God truly properly basic? Those in the tradition of Reformed Christian theology answer affirmatively, says Plantinga, and he enthusiastically concurs.<sup>23</sup> He says little, however, about the conditions that ground or justify belief in God as basic. He argues that classical foundationalism is false but does not replace the criteria he rejects with his own. He claims instead that even without

22. I thank Bill Forgie for helpful discussion on these distinctions.

23. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 73.

knowing the criteria for proper basicity one can know (in many cases) which beliefs are and are not properly basic. The conditions in which properly basic beliefs are provided grounding can thus be discovered inductively. From these conditions one can discover the criteria. Even though one does not know the conditions in which belief in God is properly basic, it may nevertheless be properly basic. The issue should not be decided without a close look at the beliefs of religious believers.

Plantinga does suggest that belief in God is not groundless. He compares it to grounded perceptual beliefs ("I see a tree"), memory beliefs ("I remember eating breakfast this morning"), and beliefs that ascribe mental states to other humans ("That person is in pain"). These are the paradigm beliefs, as I suggested in Chapter 1 that we call them. Plantinga argues that, in a manner analogous to the grounding of these beliefs, "God exists" may be grounded. Following Calvin, Plantinga holds that we have a disposition to believe such things as "This flower was created by God" or "This vast and intricate universe was created by God."<sup>24</sup> On doing something wicked I may form the belief "God disapproves of what I have done." On reading the Bible one may feel compelled to believe "God is speaking to me." These conditions ground the beliefs mentioned. Plantinga notes that none of these beliefs are, strictly speaking, the belief that God exists. But again, strictly speaking, what we are justified in believing is that "That person is in pain" rather than that "That person exists." We see no harm in ignoring the one step, immediate inference from the former to the latter, so it too is taken as properly basic. By analogy, there is no harm in saying that the belief that God exists is properly basic, even though there is a one step, immediate inference from the theistic claims mentioned above to the belief that God exists. This immediate inference does not, presumably, provide anything more than a minimally complex sort of discursive evidence.

It is in this general context that Plantinga's parity thesis is most clearly seen. The thesis emerges when he compares theistic beliefs to paradigm beliefs, even though the comparison's role is not well spelled out. Clearly enough, however, the comparison of (or analogy between) the paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs is no mere

24. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

convenience. It is a major tenet of Plantinga's position. As a first account of Plantinga's parity thesis, let us say that, under appropriate conditions, *S*'s belief that *p*, where *p* is a belief about God, has the same nonclassical, normative justification as *S*'s belief that *p*\*, where *p*\* is a paradigm belief. Of course, the paradigm beliefs should not be understood to be just the three examples mentioned, but any beliefs of like kind. So theistic beliefs have, according to Plantinga, at least the same kind of epistemic standing as many of our commonly accepted nontheistic beliefs, insofar as permissive, normative justification is concerned.<sup>25</sup>

But, as with Alston's parity thesis, one must distinguish between having the same kind of epistemic justification and having the same level or strength of that kind. With Alston, it is clear that  $J_{nw}$  is a weaker level of  $J_n$  than is  $J_{ns}$ , and so it is evident that his concern is with level *and* kind. Alston also tells us that he is aiming at the level of epistemic justification sufficient for "rational acceptance." But with Plantinga the issue is not so clear. Perhaps, however, he means us to work with the notion of proper basicity understood as a kind of justification, namely, noninferential normative justification. It is natural then to suggest various levels within that kind. Thus we can say that the level of justification within the range of proper basicity is to be understood as the same for both theistic and paradigm beliefs. But we need to consider potential overriding conditions. For example, although there might be levels of strength of noninferential justification, they generally have to do with special circumstances, such as that the night is foggy rather than clear. The belief that there is a car ahead is properly basic when held on a clear night. The belief that there is a car ahead is also properly basic on a foggy night. But the former is more strongly justified than is the latter even though both are properly basic. (It might be two motorcycles, rather than a car. In either case, it is time to get off the road.) In this way, then, there may be a range of strengths of justification within the category of proper basicity; as well, some overrides may remove justification completely. To be clear about parity, we must allow for potential overriding conditions. Thus, given no special circum-

25. Plantinga also writes, at some length, about the defeasibility of properly basic beliefs, noting that the justification that accrues to them is *prima facie* only. This view meshes well with his normative account, as far as he has a developed account, of justification; see *ibid.*, pp. 83–85.



stances, theistic beliefs and paradigm belief can have the same level of justification—the strongest level—of the same kind of justification—noninferential normative proper basicity. Thus, a more accurate account of Plantinga's parity thesis is

Parity Thesis<sub>Plantinga</sub> (PT<sub>PI</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that *p*, where *p* is a belief about God, has the same nonclassical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as S's belief that *p*<sup>\*</sup>, where *p*<sup>\*</sup> is a paradigm belief.

Thus PT<sub>PI</sub> is a broader claim than PT<sub>A</sub>, for it includes not only perceptual beliefs, but memory beliefs and beliefs about other minds as well. But both PT<sub>PI</sub> and PT<sub>A</sub> make claims not only about the kind but also about the level of epistemic justification. They differ, however, in that Alston's is a practice-based claim rather than a belief-based claim.<sup>26</sup>

Although Plantinga's discussion is broader than Alston's in that Plantinga's parity thesis makes reference to memory beliefs and to beliefs about other minds as well as to perceptual beliefs, it is easier in some contexts to discuss Plantinga's thesis if we narrow its scope. So consider a narrower version of PT<sub>PI</sub>:

Parity Thesis'<sub>Plantinga</sub> (PT'<sub>PI</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, where no overrides are present, S's belief that *p*, where *p* is a belief about God, has at least the same non-

26. Plantinga's more recent claims, in "Justification and Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 403–26, and "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," point toward understanding positive epistemic status as the proper functioning of one's epistemic equipment. In *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*, he indicates his preference for the term "warrant" over "justification" for that thing, enough of which, together with true belief, is sufficient for knowledge. On that account, warrant is again a matter of proper functioning. The relationship between positive epistemic status as a necessary condition of knowledge and positive epistemic status as a condition of justification (in the normative sense being considered here) is not clear or, perhaps, even important. Plantinga indicated, in conversation, that his earlier work on Reformed epistemology asked the wrong questions, if one is interested in knowledge, but that perhaps there are some as yet uncovered relationships among knowledge, justification, and positive epistemic status. He does reject various accounts of normative notions of justification as necessary conditions of knowledge. It is thus difficult to know what to say about the relationship of normative, permissive justification and positive epistemic status. But then it is not clear that we need to have a position on the matter for the purposes here. I make some further comments on this topic in Chapter 9.

classical normative proper basicity (the strongest level) as  $S$ 's belief that  $p^*$ , where  $p^*$  is a perceptual belief.

Since showing that the narrower thesis is false is sufficient for showing the broader thesis false, I concentrate mostly on the narrower thesis. Hence, the majority of my discussion focuses on perceptual beliefs in comparison with theistic beliefs. I return later to comment on memory beliefs and beliefs about other minds.

We now have Plantinga's parity thesis before us. In the remainder of this chapter I present a challenge to it.

## 6. The Universality Challenge Explained

Plantinga's central goal is the defense of  $PT_{PI}$ . Since paradigm beliefs can be properly basic, so can theistic beliefs. (For convenience, I speak simply of proper basicity rather than the strongest level of proper basicity.) I argue that  $PT_{PI}$  or, more specifically,  $PT'_{PI}$  is incompatible with Plantinga's foundationalism, or at least with foundationalism as far as it relies on its traditional roots. Foundationalism's traditional roots are, I believe, largely evidentialist concerns. Contrary to Plantinga's suggestion that evidentialism grows out of foundationalism, foundationalism seems more naturally understood to grow out of evidentialism, that is, to grow out of the desire of the evidentialist to avoid arbitrariness, where "arbitrariness" means, roughly, the claim that just any belief can be properly basic (or, more broadly, normatively, epistemically justified). If one is to avoid this arbitrariness, if one is to follow the spirit of the evidentialist, then one approach is to be a foundationalist about justification. But I argue that  $PT'_{PI}$ , and hence  $PT_{PI}$ , is incompatible with Plantinga's foundationalist theory of justification insofar as it rests in the desire to avoid arbitrariness. This is so, I argue, because of what I call the "universality challenge."

The universality challenge is this: given an experience shared by both theist and nontheist alike, nearly everyone will be led to form a shared nontheistic (perceptual paradigm) belief, whereas only the theist will be led to form a theistic belief.<sup>27</sup> So, whereas both theist and nontheist experience awe at the beauty of the universe, only

27. This challenge is a more rigorous form of one presented in Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity: A Response to Plantinga," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 14 (1983): 123–27.

the theist (and perhaps not even she in every instance) will form a belief about God's creativity. Or perhaps more telling (because avoiding potential problems with the aesthetic overtones of "awe"), when both theist and nontheist experience a tree, both will form the belief "I see a tree," whereas only the theist will (sometimes) form the belief that God made the tree.<sup>28</sup> The challenger suggests that this universality of belief formation indicates the firmly grounded nature of the perceptual paradigm beliefs, and since the experience that generates the theistic belief does not provide universality, it does not provide sufficient grounds for proper basicity.

The motivation behind this challenge is broadly egalitarian in spirit. The idea is that every fully rational human has certain belief-forming practices for producing justified beliefs. A general account of these practices might be, roughly, that if some (cognitive) input *I* is taken in by some fully rational person *S*, then *S* will form a (justified) belief *p* whose object is of kind *K*. For example, if Suzie takes in the sensory input of tree-shapedness, then she will form the justified belief that she sees a tree. The universality challenge has the background assumption that all fully rational beings have these practices and that, if one does have the practice, then one will form the corresponding beliefs. As far as justified belief is concerned, all belief formations must be universal in this sense, including theistic belief formations. If one rejects this assumption, then the universality challenge is not relevant to the parity thesis.

To flesh this assumption out somewhat, consider the following. Suppose two people are looking through their home for some object, say, a particular copy of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. If both were to enter the den, look toward the lower left corner of the desk, epistemic equipment in full working order, and the copy of Kant's first critique were lying on the desk in that area, would they not both form the belief "there's the copy of Kant's *Critique*"? Not clearly, and for many possible reasons. Person *S*<sub>1</sub> may be distracted

28. To be exact, perhaps not everyone forms the belief "I see a tree." Perhaps one is not paying attention to one's experience or is distracted by the brilliance of the green color and so does not form any belief. Nevertheless, when asked what it is one is seeing, everyone, or nearly everyone with normal experiential equipment, will say "I see a tree." The theistic belief or description is not universal in this sense. To simplify the discussion, I assume this account but refer simply to the belief's being formed.

by something else on the desk, or by his concern that he is making person  $S_2$  late for her class, having asked her to help him search. But if  $S_2$  picks up the book, holds it in front of  $S_1$ 's eyes, and says, "here it is," surely  $S_1$  will form the belief in question, or something very close to it, or at least a belief that entails it. The point of the egalitarian assumption is not that we form exactly the same beliefs when given the same input, but that we are capable of forming a belief about the kind of object providing the input, and, moreover, that rational people typically do so. And the more fully rational one is, the more likely one is to form beliefs that are in agreement with other fully rational people. As far as we are fully rational, all of us have the same doxastic tendencies. We all share, qua fully rational people, the same objectification scheme for generating justified beliefs. Finally, as far as one lacks these tendencies and schemes, the fully rational person ought to be able to obtain them.

Another brief example. Suppose there is a glass of water in front of  $S_1$  and  $S_2$ .  $S_1$  forms the belief that the glass is half full,  $S_2$  that it is half empty. There is a disagreement in the beliefs formed. But presumably both would agree that one half the glass's capacity contains water. It is the fully rational person's tendency to form beliefs about a certain kind of object, given a certain input, that is the egalitarian assumption's concern, not the details of what  $S_1$  or  $S_2$  focuses on. If it is a glass of water in front of them, and they are concentrating on that rather than something else, they will form a belief about the glass of water. Background beliefs and attitudes may affect the details of the beliefs they generate, but the belief will be a belief about the glass and water.

So, as the theist and nontheist stand in front of the majestic mountains, both will form a belief about the mountains. Why do they not both form beliefs about God's creative activity in the mountains? Should they not both have the capacity to do so? And if not, why not?

What grounds can be produced for denying or affirming what I have been calling the "egalitarian assumption"? Kant assumed that all rational creatures share the same intuitions of space and time and the same categorical structures. Much like this, most epistemologists assume that human minds work alike. In particular, they assume that if we are all fully rational and all take in the same cognitive input we will all form beliefs of the same kind, barring

the typical epistemologist's standard special circumstances or distorting conditions (poor lighting and the like). The best argument in the assumption's favor is that it seems to capture part of our broad notion of rationality. Two rational persons, in a frame of mind to concentrate on a given object, will, being rational, form a belief about that object. If one does not, then, barring special distractions or other excuses, one is rational and the other is not in this instance. To be rational is to belong to a community of believers who, given the full human capabilities, form similar beliefs given similar inputs. The assumption thus allows for the possibility of epistemological research; without the assumption, or some broader assumption that includes it, there would be no reason to think we can talk about human knowledge *qua* human. How could we talk about whether a belief is rational, or rationally produced, unless we assume that our cognitive practices deal with a given set of data in the same way, at least in terms of output? If you can excuse yourself from the requirements of rationality simply by saying that you do not have the doxastic mechanism needed to form a given belief but yet still claim that you are fully rational, you can get away with epistemic murder. Perhaps this is reason enough to justify the assumption. Intuitively, at least, I am inclined to accept the assumption, and I do not see any reason to reject it.

Some further explanatory notes on the universality challenge are in order. First, it is important to understand that the universality challenge does not depend on the theistic belief being generated by an experience only the theist has. That would not count against the proper basicity of the theistic belief any more than your not having the experience of the tree would count against my properly basic belief that I see a tree, given my experience of the tree. Neither can the challenge find a response simply in the claim that not everyone objectifies experiences in theistic terms because one lacks the disposition to do so, lacks the conceptual scheme that allows one to do so, or, perhaps, simply lacks the ability to do so. The challenge assumes that fully rational people *do have* the same basic objectification schemes. One cannot lack the needed scheme *qua* rational being. A comparison of the universality challenge to two challenges suggested by Alston (see Chapter 2, Section 4) is helpful in understanding the former. Alston writes that PP and CP differ in that (1) the capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found univer-

sally among normal adult human beings, and (2) all normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience. Alston's response to these objections is that, although those kinds of universality are interesting and comforting to us, they are not necessary for reliability. This is shown by the fact that not everyone engages in the practice of pure mathematics. But it is important to understand why it is true that not everyone engages in pure mathematics. Here we must move beyond Alston's suggestions.

Does the mathematically inclined student, for example, have some ability or means to objectify information in mathematical terms that other students do not have? I think not. Even where we speak of students not having mathematical ability, the students in question typically have *some* ability. The ability shows up in degrees. Although there are some who may not engage in the practice, this is not because of a total lack of ability. Rather, those who do not engage in the practice of pure mathematics, even at the lowest levels, fail to do so simply because they have no need of it, never thought about it, or have never been exposed to it. For those of different cultures who do not engage in the practice, perhaps their cultures have not developed the appropriate categories even though in principle nothing stops individuals from so doing. The slave boy in Plato's *Meno* is relevant here. At first he does not engage in the practice of geometric reasoning, but he quickly learns that he can. In short, two people one of whom engages in the practice and one of whom does not should be said to differ because the latter lacks the epistemic practice pragmatically although not in principle. I suggest that this lack is the result of the fact that the one capable of engaging in the practice has the appropriate input whereas the other does not have that input. This latter case is comparable to people who have no theistic experience whatsoever and hence do not generate theistic beliefs. But how do we explain Plantinga's cases in which both theist and nontheist have the same experiential input but only one forms a theistic belief?

It could be suggested that the difference is not in experience but in conceptual schemes. The theist has a theistic conceptual scheme, the nontheist does not—rather like the *Meno*'s slave boy, who at first does not have certain geometrical concepts but later does. But surely the average atheist or agnostic has a noetic structure that

contains the concept of God, in spite of all its supposed difficulties. This raises all kinds of interesting and complex questions about the relationships between experience and the conceptual schemes used to understand or objectify them. Do experience and scheme arise together? Can one have an experience without a conceptual scheme? To what extent do conceptual schemes shape experience? But we need not answer these questions in detail to understand the thrust of the universality challenge. It is not that there are two experiences or that there are two different conceptual schemes working. The egalitarian assumption is that everyone, given the same input, will generate (roughly) the same belief, or at least a belief whose object is the same (kind of) thing. The challenge suggests, that is, that there is a close connection between the input of an epistemic practice (the experience, in most cases) and the conceptual scheme used to objectify that input. Whenever a person with normal epistemic practices takes in tree-shaped data, a tree belief is generated. Or, as with Alston's case, the notion of theistic objectification relies on an account of experience in which there is some sort of theistic content (as I argued in Chapter 2). In the experiences to which the universality challenge calls attention, however, there is no theistic content *per se*. Rather, the emphasis is on the shared but nontheistic nature of the experience and the conditions necessary to explain why the theist forms a theistic belief but the nontheist does not. Since the experience is nontheistic, it does not matter that the experiencer has a theistic conceptual scheme. No theistic scheme of objectification will generate a theistic belief if there is no experience on which the scheme can work its magic. How then does the theist legitimately generate her theistic belief when the nontheist does not, given only a shared, nontheistic experience?

The assumption that the experiences are nontheistic in content may appear to be unfair to Plantinga, but I think not. First of all, many, if not most, of his examples appear to have the feature that the experience is one that both theist and nontheist could share—looking at the flower, reading the Bible, feeling guilty. Second, an important result from the criticism of  $PT_A$  applies to Plantinga if the experiences to which Plantinga calls attention are understood as having a theistic content not shared by the nontheist. Such examples fall prey to the background belief challenge. If the experiences

allow for noninferential justification, it is not of the conceptual-reading but only of the noninferential mediated variety. Insofar as the experiences are taken to be direct experiences of God, there is nothing phenomenologically given in the experience that allows one to say truly, "this is phenomenologically an experience of God." There must be background beliefs in the justification of the belief that one's experience is an experience of God. These background beliefs provide the mitigating circumstances that potentially weaken the level of justification of the theistic belief, since these beliefs may themselves fail to have justification. Thus the antecedent conditions set out in  $PT_{PI}$  or  $PT'_{PI}$ , namely, that there are no overriding conditions, may never be met. This in itself may remove the possibility that theistic and perceptual paradigm beliefs have the kind of parity suggested by  $PT'_{PI}$ . One does not use background beliefs to form the perceptual paradigm beliefs, but one does use them in the formation of beliefs about God. In the theistic cases, as in, perhaps, any case dealing with epistemically unique individuals, one may not have the strongest level of proper basicity, for such beliefs involve a special role for beliefs as opposed to concepts alone.<sup>29</sup> In defending  $PT'_{PI}$ , Plantinga cannot retreat to unshared experiences with theistic content. Such experiences cannot be direct, conceptual-reading experiences of God, since background beliefs are part of the epistemic conditions needed for justification.

The universality challenge thus suggests that, when an experience is shared by a theist and a nontheist, both should form (roughly) the same beliefs, including theistic beliefs. If this does not occur, then that fact needs explaining. It is not sufficient to suggest that the theist has a practice by which she generates the theistic belief whereas the nontheist does not have the practice, for, by the egalitarian assumption, one should expect, given the same (cognitive) input, that theist and nontheist should both form the same belief. Of course, if the egalitarian assumption is false, then the universality challenge is irrelevant. But then some other story

29. It will not do for Plantinga to make the content of the beliefs part of the conceptual scheme as in hyper-Kantian category analogues for the reasons Forge rejects the hyper-Kantian understanding of mystical experiences (see Chapter 3, Section 3). To do so vitiates the presumption of veridicality.



needs to be told about how to keep a restraint on the formation of any belief in any set of conditions and experiences whatsoever; arbitrariness knocks at the door. The egalitarian assumption provides a kind of control over what can be legitimately taken as properly basic; it is a backdrop assumption needed for the avoidance of arbitrariness.<sup>30</sup>

I have presented Plantinga's position on rationality and the proper basicity of beliefs about God. From this emerged his parity thesis. The universality challenge to this version of the parity thesis suggests that Plantinga needs to explain why we do not all generate the same beliefs, given the same experience. There are several possibilities in this regard. In the next chapter I explain four of them. Of these, the first three are unlikely candidates for giving aid to Plantinga. The last, although a better candidate, leaves Plantinga with results that are less than sanguine.

30. There may, in fact, be other ways to provide the control needed, but the egalitarian assumption is a place to begin, even if ultimately not correct. Alston has suggested to me, on several occasions, his own reluctance to admit that the egalitarian assumption is correct.

# The Universality Challenge and the Resurrection of Evidentialism

The universality challenge is this: since the experiences that generate theistic beliefs are shared by theist and nontheist alike, Plantinga must explain why only theists generate theistic beliefs whereas (nearly) everyone generates the nontheistic, perceptual paradigm beliefs. I consider several possible responses to this challenge here. The first three of these fail to provide aid to Plantinga. In the last several sections I present and discuss a response which, although successful, leads to the resurrection of evidentialism and the evidentialist objection to theistic belief.

## I. A First Response to the Universality Challenge

To respond successfully to the universality challenge one must provide an account of experience and belief formation such that both theist and nontheist can share the experience but which allows the theist alone to form a theistic belief that is properly basic. Is it enough to generate the challenge if there is a common core to the experience that both theist and nontheist share? Two "common core" cases can be suggested. Both theist and nontheist can admit, for example, that they are awed by the universe, that the flower is beautiful, or that the Bible is profound. But the theist can then either claim to interpret the experience differently from the nontheist or claim to experience something more, a divine awe, a di-

vine beauty, or a divine profundity. In either case, the experience leading the believers to different beliefs could be said to be shared only insofar as there is a common aspect or part of the experience. The first case does not help Plantinga, for although there is a common core of experience, there is an interpretation added to it. Presumably this is inferential and we are no longer considering a properly basic belief. In the second case—in which, for example, both theist and nontheist experience the common core of “awe at the universe” but the theist also experiences “the hand of God” alongside the common core—the aspect of the experience that is *not* common is the theistic part. But the theistic aspect of the experience, insofar as it is theistic and unshared, falls under the censure of challenges already discussed. Insofar as what is not common in the experiences constitutes an additional unshared experience, the universality challenge is not even applicable. At best the case falls under the background belief challenge to direct experiences of God, and at worst the case is irrelevant to Plantinga’s goals.

## 2. A Second Response to the Challenge

A more promising line is suggested by the notion of supervenience. Two examples spell out the account. First, it is widely held that moral facts are supervenient on physical facts. W. D. Hudson provides an intuitive account of supervenience: “You would puzzle your hearers if you said that two things, A and B, are alike in every respect except that A is good and B is not; or if you said that two actions, C and D, were exactly the same except that C was right, or obligatory, and D was not. They would insist that there must be some other difference to account for this one.”<sup>1</sup> This “some other difference” is often taken to be a difference in physical fact. For instance, if two cases of a knife being raised above a child and then plunged into his flesh are not both to count as murder, there must be a physical difference in the two cases; perhaps one is done in the context of the operating room but the other is not. The difference may also be one of intention, so, for example, the person raising the knife intends to murder the unfortunate recipient.

1. W. D. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 164–65.

According to this position there is no difficulty in claiming that moral beliefs are objectively true or false and epistemically justifiable even though the moral facts making them true supervene on physical facts. Further, it is consistent with this position that there be two people, both of whom have exactly the same experience of the physical facts but one of whom does not form the same moral belief as the other. This second person, indeed, does not form any moral beliefs at all. Ethicists sometimes call such a person "amoral." Here we have a case in which the experience of both persons is the same—they experience the same physical events or things—but in which one is led in quite a different direction in terms of belief. One requirement for a counterexample is met: the experience is the same.

But there is a second requirement for a counterexample: the beliefs must not only be generated from the same experience but must also be properly basic. Are moral beliefs properly basic? It seems clear enough that moral beliefs are neither reducible to physical beliefs nor inferred from them. Yet they are typically treated as justified. Thus, it seems plausible enough that some moral beliefs are properly basic, and if so the second requirement for a counterexample is met.

But some may suggest that the claim that moral beliefs are properly basic is arguable, and perhaps a nonmoral example is best. John Rawls, in "Two Concepts of Rules," writes: "Many of the actions one performs in a game of baseball one can do by oneself or with others whether there is the game or not. For example, one can throw a ball, run, or swing a peculiarly shaped piece of wood. But one can not steal base, or strike out, or draw a walk, or make an error, or balk; although one can do certain things which appear to resemble these actions such as sliding into a bag, missing a grounder and so on. Striking out, stealing a base, balking, etc., are all actions which can only happen in a game."<sup>2</sup> There are new facts brought into existence by the practice of baseball. There would be no such thing as stealing second base were it not for the game of baseball. Baseball facts are supervenient on physical facts; stealing second base is supervenient on a person running from one sandbag to another.

2. John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," in *Ethics*, ed. Judith J. Thomson and Gerald Dworkin (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 128.

Now, suppose that I am ignorant of baseball and its rules but you are not. As we sit to watch the game, we both have the same experience of the physical facts. We both see some person running from one bag to another. You form the belief that the runner just stole second base; I do not. Furthermore, your belief that the runner stole second base is quite plausibly properly basic. Here we have a counterexample that appears to meet both criteria for success. The believers both share the same experience, but one is led to a belief that is properly basic and the other person is not.

The supervenience account applies to the theistic case in this way. First, the theist and nontheist both have the same experience—being awed by the beauty of the universe. Second, the theistic facts are supervenient on the physical (or aesthetic) facts. The theist is led to a theistic belief, the nontheist is not, just as the morally aware person and the person who knows baseball are led to moral and baseball beliefs, whereas the amoral person and the person ignorant of baseball are not led to moral or baseball beliefs. We have then allowed for the areligious (or atheistic) person, one who simply does not see the religious point of view, and the challenge appears to be met on its own grounds. There is a shared experience along with the generation of a nonuniversal but properly basic belief.

So the universality challenge appears to be met. But we need to look more closely here. First of all, there probably is no separate epistemic “baseball practice.” Where beliefs about supervenient facts are generated, I suggest, the generation is because of the larger belief practices we all share. The difference appears to be that the non-baseball believer fails to have certain concepts the baseball believer has. Thus the supervenience cases seem to provide a *prima facie* counterexample to the egalitarian assumption lying behind the universality challenge. But I do not believe these cases provide true counterexamples. Apparently not everyone sharing the same experience will generate the same belief. As noted, some people grasp concepts that others do not. But this is not to say that their conceptual schemes are fundamentally different or, for that matter, that their belief-forming practices are fundamentally different. Surely we all have the ability to generate beliefs about supervenient facts. Nevertheless, we need to explain the nonuniversality of belief formation about supervenient facts. I believe the best explana-

tion is that not all people share the same *concepts* (although they do all share roughly the same conceptual scheme). This failure to have certain concepts is a pragmatic failure, however, and thus, as in Alston's case of the practice of pure mathematics, it does not indicate that we should be epistemically suspicious of the practice itself.

Does this work for theistic belief formation? Can theistic beliefs be understood as beliefs about supervenient facts? One might suggest that the nontheist is epistemically deficient in just the way the non-baseball believer is: she lacks theistic concepts. The problem here is that many nontheists apparently have the requisite theistic concepts. How one is to explain the lack of theistic belief generation in their case is difficult. These observations suggest that we need to look elsewhere to explain the nonuniversality of theistic belief formation.

Furthermore, even if the supervenience cases do meet the universality challenge, for the theist the supervenience approach qua supervenience is an unwise direction in which to seek solace. The problem arising with understanding theistic facts to be supervenient on natural facts is one of ontology. According to the generally accepted account of supervenience, (significant) change in the physical facts leads to change in the supervenient facts. And if there is a change in the supervenient facts, there must be a corresponding change in the physical facts. As far, then, as the ontology of the matter goes, the supervenient facts are inextricably related to the physical facts. In the supervenience account of moral facts, for example, the moral state of affairs, although not reducible to the physical state of affairs, would have no ontological status without the physical state of affairs. And a stealing of second base would never occur if no one ran around a diamond-shaped field touching sandbags.

So it would be in the religious case. If the experience shared by the theist and nontheist were of the same natural facts, and the theistic facts supervened on those natural facts, then the theistic facts would be inextricably bound up with the natural facts. But in the commonly accepted picture of theism, God is ontologically independent of the physical world. That facts about God are supervenient on physical facts presents us with an ontologically inferior God, an unhappy state of affairs for the Christian theist and hence

for Plantinga. At best this account allows a type of pantheistic God whose ontological status is not independent of the physical universe.

Thus, although there may be counterexamples to the underlying claims of the universality challenge (and even this I am not willing to admit), they are not of a variety that rescues Plantinga's parity thesis from the grip of the challenge. To make this point explicit one need only consider the following modification of the challenge. Instead of "all properly basic beliefs are universal" being the central claim of the challenge, it can be replaced by "all properly basic beliefs about nonsupervenient facts are universal." Since theistic beliefs are not about supervenient facts, they must be universally formed. The challenge is not yet met. One must show how theistic beliefs can be nonuniversal and yet properly basic.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. A Third Response to the Challenge

A final possible but unsuccessful response to the challenge relies on the notion of a gestalt shift. Two analogies to the theistic case bring out this possibility.<sup>4</sup> First, suppose I have a defect in my eyes so that I see only the dots on a surface covered with red and white dots. You, and everyone else without this peculiar defect, see a pink surface. Your experience, then, is infused with pinkness. There is a gestalt shift that I simply do not make. Thus we both see

3. Hidden in these comments may be the beginning of a way to avoid certain difficulties with the egalitarian assumption. Perhaps the practices surrounding supervenient beliefs are not universal, as the egalitarian assumption suggests, and perhaps this is because of background beliefs. There are, in fact, many cases each day of perceivers having the same experience but not generating the same beliefs. Perhaps some of these happen because of supervenience conditions that involve background beliefs, and perhaps others are not supervenience cases but still involve background beliefs—like the Tim and Tom Tibbetts case of identifying twins. But recall that the universality challenge, supported by the egalitarian assumption, is concerned with beliefs formed in an immediate way—unlike the Tim and Tom Tibbetts case. If there is a way background beliefs can play a noninferential role in belief formation, perhaps a reply to the universality challenge can be developed. I explore issues related to these suggestions in the following chapter.

4. I have Francis W. Dauer to thank for these examples. He was also helpful in my thinking about the issue of supervenience. The suggestion that a supervenience understanding of religious experience provides only for an ontologically inferior God is his.

something different and form different beliefs. Can we both be said to experience the same thing?

Two suggestions are available. On the one hand, one might argue that there is a common core to our experience—the white and red dots. In fact, if you pay very close attention to the surface, you too see the red and white dots. Nevertheless, it seems that the experiences that generate the corresponding beliefs are phenomenologically quite different. You will not generate the pink surface belief unless you have the phenomenological experience of pinkness. And unless you make a special effort, your experience is one of being appeared to pinkly whereas mine is one of being appeared to dottedly. Our experiences are thus quite different. On the other hand, suppose your experience is so infused with pinkness that you simply cannot see the dots no matter how close you get to the surface. In this case, we do not at all share the same experience. In either case, the analogy does not suffice to reply to the universality challenge.

Second, suppose you and I are at the symphony. You hear only a succession of musical notes played by the orchestra whereas I hear a melancholy melody. It is implausible that we both have the same core of experience but that I experience something more. Our experiences are the same: we both seem to hear the musical notes. Yet our beliefs are quite different. Further, I do not hear the melancholiness of the music above and beyond the musical notes or form the belief about the melancholy melody by inference.

There are two ways of understanding this example, neither of which provides much ammunition against the universality challenge. First, the melancholy melody may be understood as a quality or feature that supervenes on the pattern of musical notes. This interpretation does not provide an alternative to the conclusion reached about supervenience earlier. Second, the experience I have of the melody may be explained by a type of gestalt shift, as in the former case in which one sees pink where there are, in fact, only red and white dots. Thus, just as in the former case in which you are appeared to pinkly, in this case I am appeared to in a melancholy-like manner. This understanding of the case challenges the claim that our experiences are the same, putting it on no better footing than the pink-surface case in which the perceivers have two different experiences.



Of the two interpretations, the second seems the weaker, for there appears to be a difference between the dot case and the melody case. In the red and white dot case, the belief that one sees a pink surface is tied to the phenomenological content of being appeared to pinkly. To see the surface as covered with red and white dots, one presumably must “shake off” the apparently pink phenomenological experience. One must replace, so to speak, one experiential content with another. But in the melody case I do not have to shake off the apparent melancholiness in order to hear the musical notes. Somehow the melancholiness rests in the musical notes, and I hear both, which is not to say that there is no phenomenological difference between hearing the music as melancholy and not.

The argument here does not, fortunately, rest on our making a choice between the alternative interpretations. Whether one takes the supervenience interpretation or the gestalt interpretation, the example does not help Plantinga reply to the universality challenge. He must turn elsewhere.

#### 4. Exaggerated Alstonian Epistemic Practice

As we saw in Chapter 2, Alston suggests that one way to avoid the difficulties with the bifurcation of belief formation into experience and explanation is to understand belief formation in terms of what he calls objectification. He uses the term “objectify” to stand for “taking a certain kind of experience as an experience of something of a certain sort.” In the physical object case, we take perceptual experiences as experiences of physical objects (rather than psychological data). He suggests, then, that just as we form physical object beliefs directly on the basis of perception, so we form theistic beliefs directly on the basis of theistic experience.

Recall the suggestion that the “certain range of experience” objectified by CP must have, on Alston’s own grounds, a theistic content not, presumably, experienced by the nontheist. As in the case of PP, in which there appears to be a link between how the experiencer would describe the experience and the belief generated by it—a lingo-conceptual link—so it is with CP. It is here that PT<sub>A</sub> falls prey to the background belief challenge that relies on the distinction between conceptual reading and noninferential mediated

beliefs, for the latter seem more weakly justified than the former. For a theistic belief to be formed, given Alston's account of direct experiences of God, the generation of the belief must rely on background beliefs as opposed to a mere conceptual scheme.

In Plantinga's case, however, I suggest an even stronger reliance on background beliefs, for with his generation of theistic beliefs the experience and the belief generated through it are not linked in the lingo-conceptual manner suggested with regard to Alston's position. Hence, there is nothing in the experience alone that even hints at a theistic belief. The theistic content of the generated belief appears to derive solely from the background beliefs. I suggest, in other words, that Plantinga could not simply adopt Alston's account of CP but could use only a modified, exaggerated version. This, in turn, brings the necessity of justification for the background beliefs into clear focus.

It is possible that the theist's objectification of certain experiences in theistic terms does not rely on a lingo-conceptual link or a related underlying theistic experience as suggested by Alston's account. Although objectification of an experience in physical concepts perhaps must rely on an experience that is describable in physical object language, in the exaggerated practice I am suggesting, objectification of an experience in theistic concepts does not demand the possibility of a description of the experience in theistic object language. Rather, background beliefs may allow the theist to objectify *any* perceptual (or aesthetic or moral, etc.) experience into theistic language and beliefs. The reason some do not objectify their experiences in this way is just that not everyone shares the same set of background beliefs.<sup>5</sup> We all objectify perceptual beliefs in terms of physical object language because we all share the physical object conceptual scheme. We do not all share the theistic background beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

5. Here I call attention to the fact that the objectification must be noninferential. If it were otherwise, the resulting belief would not be basic and the case would not be significantly different from an interpretive common core type of experience and belief formation suggested in Section 3.

6. Someone might raise an egalitarian-assumption question about this whole idea. This exaggerated CP does not solve the universality challenge, the critic might say, since it does not meet the egalitarian assumption driving the universality challenge. The reply to this suggestion is that the egalitarian assumption—that everyone has (roughly) the same epistemic practices and hence given the same input will generate the same beliefs—does not come into play here. It associates a

Consider the following examples analogous to this kind of theistic objectification. Suppose Letitia recently married and one afternoon on coming home finds her spouse, Jack, away. He left several clues as to his whereabouts. She discovers that his truck is still in the laneway, but his bush boots are missing. Further, she notes that Jack's favorite foods are missing from the pantry. Finally, Letitia finds a note in Jack's handwriting stating that he has gone to the bush. Letitia makes the inference and forms the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. All kinds of beliefs come into play, and she reasons to the conclusion that Jack has gone to the bush. Here the belief is clearly not basic, it is inferred. Suppose, after a lengthy marriage, however, that Letitia comes to know Jack very well. As she comes in the door, Letitia notices Jack's bush boots missing from the normal spot. She immediately forms the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. In these circumstances the belief depends on a complex set of (background) beliefs about Letitia's husband—he acts in thus and so ways, for example, he only uses his bush boots for trips to the bush—but Letitia does not reason to it. Such a belief formation seems more than plausible; in fact, we form beliefs in like manner many times each day. When we are very familiar with circumstances and hold the relevant background beliefs, we do not reason to the belief we form; we form it immediately. Furthermore, there appears to be no lingo-conceptual link, or at least the same kind of link, between the experience of the boots being missing and the belief that Jack has gone to the bush.<sup>7</sup> The belief

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certain kind of content, say, physical object content, with a certain kind of belief. In the case of PP, for example, physical object experiential content generates, via the physical object conceptual scheme, physical object beliefs. The egalitarian assumption does not just claim that everyone forms the same beliefs given the same input, but also that everyone has roughly the same practices and conceptual schemes available to them. Presumably the same (kind of) practice is available to everyone, as the examples that follow in the text indicate, but the practice is so widely variant in its application that just about any experience can generate just about any belief. The difference between the beliefs one person forms as opposed to another are not because of a different practice or different concepts but because the application of the practice depends on one's background beliefs (and not merely a conceptual scheme).

7. I say there is not a lingo-conceptual link, but there may be some kind of link between the experience of the missing boots and the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. There may be a link as well between experiencing a beautiful flower and the belief that God created it. But in neither case is it the same kind of link as that between "I see a tree" and "being appeared to treely." When I believe "I see a

formed is not about the boots' being missing but about Jack. Nevertheless, such a belief is basic, since Letitia does not infer it.

That this example would be acceptable to Plantinga can be defended in the following manner. Plantinga writes that "a belief can easily change status from nonbasic to basic and vice versa."<sup>8</sup> His example is that I may now believe that  $21 \times 21 = 441$  on the basis of calculation but later I merely remember it. It is at first nonbasic but later basic. He also claims that self-evidence is relative to persons, and thus that what is self-evident to you may not be to me. It can therefore be suggested that what is at first nonbasic because not self-evident may later become basic because it becomes self-evident. For example, I may come to believe that  $256 + 327 = 583$  only by calculating it, but later, if I am particularly talented at arithmetic, I may just "see" that  $256 + 327 = 583$ . It is not that I merely remember that  $256 + 327 = 583$ . Rather, I have become so adept with arithmetic that I know that  $256 + 327 = 583$  much like I know that  $2 + 3 = 5$ . What is self-evident to the learned is not necessarily self-evident to the unlearned. We form all types of beliefs without reasoning to them, and, although it might be argued that we reason subconsciously that  $256 + 327 = 583$  or that my husband has gone hiking, this seems to be little more than an ad hoc defense. So, for Plantinga, a belief's being basic for a person seems to come to little more than the fact that the person has not inferred it; it is a psychological fact about that person. If it is inferred, it is nonbasic; if not, then basic.

Furthermore, it appears that a belief formed in the context of other background beliefs can be basic even when that belief was once inferred from the background beliefs. Plantinga says simply that for a belief to be basic one must not hold it because one inferred it by discursive reasoning; that is, one must not hold it on the basis of other beliefs, one must not consciously infer it from those beliefs. In the case of the wandering spouse and the bush boots imagined above, Letitia does not believe on the basis of evi-

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tree," I also admit, when questioned, the truth of "I am being appeared to treely"; but Letitia need not admit the truth of "I am being appeared to missing-bootedly" whenever she has the belief "Jack has gone to the bush." Neither is it the case that I always admit to the truth of "I am appeared to beautiful-flowerly" when I believe "God created the flower."

8. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 50.

dence that her husband has gone hiking, if what is meant by evidence is that she inferred from some of her other beliefs that Jack went hiking. Letitia did not infer anything at all. It is simply a matter of fact that some beliefs require, for their formation, a complicated set of background beliefs, and yet beliefs formed against that complicated background can be basic. She merely objectifies her experience in terms of Jack's having gone hiking.

In cases such as Letitia's, not everyone who has the same experiences will form the same beliefs. I may experience the spot where the bush boots should be as empty and not form any belief at all about Jack. What we have here is a noninferential mediated epistemic practice with a twist. The beliefs in question are generated in the context of experiences and sets of background beliefs in which the burden of the work is on the background beliefs. By breaking the lingo-conceptual link between the experience and the generated belief I have, in effect, moved the role of the experience away from a justificatory toward a genetic position. The experiences are much more the occasion for the belief generations, and their content is less important epistemically.<sup>9</sup>

How do these suggestions and examples help with the universality challenge to PT<sub>1</sub>? First, the suggestion allows the theist to have exactly the same experience as the nontheist. We both experience the same flower and the same beauty (and in a parallel fashion the same lack of bush boots). Second, it begins to explain, although admittedly in an extremely cursory fashion, how the theistic belief comes to be held. It is not inferred and hence it is basic.<sup>10</sup> I do not infer from the flower's beauty that God created it anymore than Letitia infers from the missing bush boots that Jack has gone to the bush. The experience initiates a complex, noninferential belief-forming process that leaves me with the belief, an objectification of the experience in theistic language. Third, the experience need not lead to the same belief for everyone. Both of us may see

9. Perhaps this could be understood as a kind of holistic justification rather than a foundational one, or at least a justification with a strong holist component. I return to this suggestion in the final three chapters.

10. Here one should compare note 9 and the account Plantinga gives of coherentism in "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," p. 125, in which he argues that coherentism is really a kind of foundationalism where all justified beliefs are foundational.

the beautiful flower but only one of us be led to believe that God created it, just as we may both experience the lack of bush boots but only one of us be led to the belief that Jack has gone to the bush. It seems, then, that there is a least one possible solution to the universality challenge.

### 5. Evidentialism and the Intuitive Results

Although the exaggerated Alstonian response appears to supply the features needed for a reply to the universality challenge, the response is not without its difficulties. These have to do with the thrust behind evidentialism, and thus a brief review of evidentialism's tenets may be helpful.

Evidentialism, recall, is the view that claims the following:

- (1★) There are obligations, standards of excellence, or (other) normative patterns to follow with respect to belief that, when followed, provide permissive justification for belief.
- (2★) It is either intellectually wrong or intellectually defective for anyone to believe, on insufficient evidence, any belief requiring discursive justification.
- (3★) Since belief in God requires discursive justification, it is irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified to accept theistic belief in the absence of sufficient evidence or reasons.

The evidentialist objector holds (1★), (2★), and (3★) along with this denial:

- (4) We have no evidence, or at any rate not sufficient evidence, for the proposition that God exists.

Plantinga, recall, rejects not only (4) but (3★) as well.

One central motivation behind the evidentialist understanding of justification is the desire to avoid arbitrariness in what should be taken as justified. Not just any belief should be taken as justified; there must be some good reason or ground. Plantinga himself follows this general spirit when he rejects the Great Pumpkin objection as not applying to his theory. But the evidentialist objector goes one step beyond merely requiring grounds and requires dis-

cursive grounds for belief in God. Since it has no discursive grounds, the objector says, belief in God is arbitrary and hence not justified. Plantinga denies that it must have discursive grounding.

According to Plantinga, foundationalism is the theoretical support for evidentialism. The historical motivation behind the foundationalist account of justification is the search for some means of tying our beliefs to the independently existing world. The motivation is a drive toward a guarantee of truth, the avoidance of arbitrariness. But more recent foundational accounts, Plantinga's included, are not quite so bold. They do not seek such a guarantee. Nevertheless, the closer the foundational beliefs are to providing the link to the independent world, the more likely it is that the belief system built on those foundations is not arbitrary. We can sum up the thrust of the foundationalist/evidentialist platform with the claim that both attempt to avoid arbitrariness with respect to justified belief. Insofar as Plantinga strives to remain a foundationalist, we can understand his goal to be to escape the arbitrariness evidentialism seeks to avoid.<sup>11</sup>

But the spirit of the evidentialist seems to haunt the halls of the foundationalist mansion Plantinga builds for us. Doing away with classical foundationalism is not sufficient to do away with evidentialism, or at least its central thrust. If the reply to the universality challenge provided in the earlier parts of this chapter is a representative account of how Plantinga must reply to the challenge, the evidentialist is surely going to press the arbitrariness charge against Plantinga's position. Three problems immediately come to mind.

First, the account allows virtually any experience to be objectified into theistic language and belief, since there is no mandatory lingo-conceptual link between the experience or its content and the belief formed. An experience of any event, object, or person potentially leads to a theistic belief. Now, Plantinga himself denies that just any belief can be legitimately taken as properly basic. Properly basic beliefs are formed in certain kinds of difficult-to-specify but nonarbitrary conditions. But he fails to spell out these conditions, and the pressure brought to bear against the parity thesis by the universality challenge questions the likelihood that

11. Plantinga does admit to a kind of polemical relativism but does not seem to take this result to be of great importance.

Plantinga *can* spell out any conditions that rule out arbitrary beliefs. His claim that not just any belief can be legitimately formed seems somewhat idle.

Second, the background beliefs that allow the objectification of any experience into theistic language and belief are extremely individualized. Consider the following analogous case. Suppose some person, Norm, is not at all attentive to the amount of milk left in the refrigerator. Frequently his wife asks him to bring milk home, but he, being distracted by another hundred details in his life, fails almost as frequently to bring milk home. After being chastised many times for his failings, Norm begins to connect the experience of driving past Mike's Milk Store, and seeing the sculpted plastic milk jug in the front, to the belief that he should bring milk home.

At first Norm has to use his seeing the sculpted plastic milk jug as a cue to his memory, not as to whether he was asked to bring milk home but rather to what belief his seeing the jug is to be connected to. He must, therefore, reason along the following lines: "That jug is supposed to remind me of something. What is it? Oh, yes. It's a milk jug. Why a milk jug? Probably has to do with milk. Oh, yes. I remember. I should bring milk home." But after a while Norm does not reason this way. He simply sees the sculpted milk jug and forms the belief "I should bring milk home." Here it is not Norm's memory at work but rather an idiosyncratic belief-forming mechanism.

Whatever goes on in Norm's mind, it seems so conditioned by his unique background and experience that a criticism of the justification of the belief may be impossible by someone who does not have the same background or experience. It might just as well have been an experience of a telephone or automobile that triggered the belief that Norm should bring milk home. The lack of commonality among background beliefs suggests a minimal likelihood of common ground for an evaluation of the justification of the belief. In other words, the general drift of the exaggerated Alstonian account suggests that such an individualized picture of the ground of belief formation makes it highly unlikely that we can ever agree on a set of criteria for justification. Plantinga admits that there may be no generally shared set of criteria when he suggests an inductive procedure to discover it. He even suggests that the criteria will not be polemically useful in coming to agreement on the grounds for



justification, at least across theistic–nontheistic lines. But this admission seems only to indicate the need for wariness. If Plantinga's only defense against the universality challenge is the exaggerated Alstonian defense, then extreme caution is suggested, for on that account even if there is a community to which one can appeal for shared examples of proper basicity (in the sense, say, of a Christian community) there is no guarantee that everyone in that community uses the same or even similar sets of background belief in their generation of theistic beliefs. This may be a more radical result than one with which Plantinga is willing to live.

Finally, the plausibility that the belief "Jack has gone to the bush" is properly basic seems to derive from the fact that Letitia once reasoned to the belief. When she does not reason to it, what justifies it? Is there some experience that provides justification? One is tempted to suggest, following the spirit of the evidentialist, that if her belief is ever to be justified it must, at least somewhere back in her personal epistemic history, have been inferred. If this is so, the notion of a belief being basic may come to no more than an account of one's own psychology, and we can discover the basicity of beliefs merely by conducting an empirical survey. "Did you infer the belief consciously on this occasion?" "No." "Then it is basic." But thus far this has nothing to do with the propriety of the belief. On what grounds is a belief such as "Jack has gone to the bush" taken to be proper? Without some discursive grounds, it seems quite likely that it is not proper. So far, the account given only provides us basicity but not propriety.

The exaggerated Alstonian view suggests that the background beliefs enable the objectification of experience into belief. Thus these beliefs are important. Following through with the example, it is natural to suggest that the role these beliefs play is something like this. What justifies the belief "Jack has gone to the bush" is that if Letitia's background beliefs were transcribed into discursive form they would provide reasons for her belief or, when taken together, they would provide an argument for the belief. If this is true, whence derives the propriety of properly basic beliefs? As suggested earlier, it appears that we can cash out being basic simply in terms of not being consciously inferred. Thus, basic beliefs may be beliefs held without discursive evidence but which must have been discursively held in the past. If what really provides

epistemic justification is the background beliefs or some relationship between the supposed basic beliefs and the background beliefs, the evidentialist ghost begins to appear.

These issues raise the suspicion that Plantinga's theory commits him to a type of arbitrariness insofar as he wishes to retain the parity thesis. But suspicions are only suspicions. We now need a more rigorous account of the problems; we need an explicit statement of the revitalized evidentialist challenge.

## 6. The Resurrection of Evidentialism

The intuitive charge against the exaggerated Alstonian apparatus is that it results (theoretically) in any belief counting as properly basic. There is, in short, a kind of arbitrariness that results from Plantinga's theory. The only way Plantinga can protect his position against the charge of arbitrariness is to return to an evidentialist approach to theistic beliefs.<sup>12</sup> But to do so is to give up the parity thesis, for perceptual paradigm beliefs are then possibly properly basic, not needing background beliefs, whereas theistic beliefs are not.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that there is a way a noninferred belief is justified for a person when she has appropriate background beliefs as in exaggerated Alstonian objectification. Insofar as Plantinga must use the objectification approach to avoid the universality problem, he must appeal to certain background beliefs. What is the status of these beliefs? First, it is clear that they have theistic content. It is hard to see how background beliefs that make no reference to God at all can be used to objectify theistically neutral experiences into theistic beliefs. For ease of discussion, let us call these background beliefs "theistic\* beliefs." Theistic\* beliefs are the background beliefs needed to objectify an experience into theistic belief, and they are fairly high-level beliefs in terms of their theistic content. Second, theistic\* beliefs stand in need of justification.<sup>13</sup> Consider the following. Suppose I arbitrarily believe (without justification) that there is a Great Pumpkin; I develop Great

12. Or, as a secondary response, to retreat to a kind of holist justification for theistic beliefs; see Chapters 10–12.

13. I do not mean that I have to justify them but rather that I am justified in them.

Pumpkin\* beliefs. Suppose further that I then begin to objectify my everyday experiences in terms of Great Pumpkin beliefs. If I have no justification for these background beliefs, surely my objectifications (although perhaps basic) are unjustified. So it is with theistic\* beliefs. These background beliefs must be justified if the objectifications resulting from them are to result in properly basic beliefs. The central issue is, then, how theistic\* beliefs are justified. I present several options here briefly, then return to them below.

Theistic\* beliefs could be properly nonbasic, that is, they could result from an inferential procedure. This option is not attractive to the Reformed epistemologist; if one needs natural theology (or some other inferential means, e.g., inferential appeal to authority, Scripture, or tradition) to justify the very beliefs needed to allow for objectification, the Reformed epistemologist has only put off the evidentialist objection one step. The other options fall within the proper basicity camp. There is first the possibility that theistic\* beliefs are generated by another application of theistic objectification; that is, at some time in the past one formed theistic beliefs via objectification of some experience. These beliefs then became part of one's noetic structure and are now the theistic\* beliefs used to objectify other experiences into theistic beliefs. This option has the obvious difficulty of generating an infinite regress. The final possible source of justification for theistic\* beliefs is some externalist principle. It should not surprise us that Plantinga may need to appeal to some externalist principle, for it seems that all versions of foundationalism ultimately appeal to externalism.<sup>14</sup> This claim needs defending, however, so an argument is in order.

One can distinguish among internalist and externalist theories of justification. Many foundationalists rely on an internalist picture of justification. They say, for example, that it does not suffice for *p*'s justification that it be the result of some reliable belief-forming mechanism outside my awareness or access. The evidence I have for *p* must be evidence in reach of my awareness and not merely some causal or lawlike connection between the fact of the matter and my

14. Perhaps an internalism constrained by reliabilist requirements would do the trick here; see Alston's version of internalism discussed in Chapter 4. The important point is that at some stage the epistemic principles allow one to *be* justified in holding a belief or using a practice without also demanding that one *has to* justify the belief or practice.

holding a belief about the fact. Hence, the emphasis on (conscious) discursive reasoning is a significant part of the justificatory procedure.

But there is a sense in which all viable versions of foundationalism rely on externalist principles.<sup>15</sup> Typically this appeal to externalist principles occurs for properly basic beliefs. But then, since properly nonbasic beliefs rely on properly basic beliefs for their justification, the whole edifice collapses without an externalist principle (or principles) at the bottom. To see the need for externalist principles, consider the following strong understanding of internalism:

Internalism<sub>1</sub>: *S* is justified in believing *p* if there is some causal or lawlike connection between *p*'s truth and *S*'s believing *p* and *S* is justified in believing that there is such a connection.

This account can be made more general. Where  $\phi$  is some property that connects the truth of *p* to *S*'s believing *p*, consider the following:

Internalism<sub>2</sub>: *S* is justified in believing *p* if *p* has some property  $\phi$  and *S* is justified in believing it does.

This general version of internalism results fairly quickly in an infinite regress the foundationalist will be quick to reject.

The infinite regress is generated since on this strong kind of internalism the only justified beliefs are those for which I have justification for accepting the justification. Any foundational belief of mine must have its justificatory principles justified for me. But that justification must itself be justified, and so forth. The regress begins early and perhaps the only way to avoid it while holding either version of internalism is to move to a holist model of justification in which justification is not foundational. Thus, this version of internalism begs the question against the foundationalist and against the idea of proper basicity.

There must then be some externalist principle to which the foundationalist appeals without also being required to provide jus-

15. I thank Francis Dauer for helpful discussion on this point.

tification for it. Any foundationalist must accept some externalist principle of this form:

Externalist Principle<sub>1</sub>: If *p* meets such and such (externalist) criterion, then *S* is justified in believing *p*.

One should not add to what is required for *p*'s justification that *S* must be justified in holding to any externalist principles of the form suggested by this principle. To do so would be to add the strong internalist requirement that *S* must be justified in believing the principle before she is justified in believing any belief it delivers.

An example helps clarify the point. The following principle meets the above form:

Externalist Principle<sub>2</sub>: If *p* is self-evident for *S*, *S* is justified in believing *p*.

There are no epistemic requirements in the antecedent; *S* need not believe or be justified in believing that *p* is self-evident. If this were required, the regress would begin; for *S* must then be justified in accepting the principles on which *p*'s justification rests, and to do that *S* must be justified in accepting the justification for the justificatory principles themselves, and so on. One cannot have Alston's *full reflective* justification. This second externalist principle merely claims that, if *p* is self-evident for *S*, then *S* is justified in believing it and need not be justified in holding the principle itself. To demand a thoroughgoing internalism would be to demand too much of the foundationalist and hence of Plantinga. All viable foundational models must rely on some externalist principles.

Returning now to the main argument, it is clear that there must be some source of justification for the needed theistic\* beliefs. In light of the externalist requirement, a brief review of the options for this source of justification is in order, for one can now more clearly see the folly of several of the approaches to theistic\* beliefs noted above.

First is the possibility of properly nonbasic status for theistic\* beliefs. Given that there somewhere (typically at the base) needs to be an appeal to externalist principles, one might suggest that theistic\* beliefs result from discursive reasoning at the bottom of which are at least some beliefs whose justification derives from externalist

principles. These beliefs are not theistic in content; they are garden-variety beliefs about the world. This suggestion amounts to a return to natural theology (or some other kind of inferential justification procedure), but my supposition is that Plantinga *qua* Reformed epistemologist cannot appeal to inferences to generate and justify theistic\* beliefs.

A second possibility is to claim that theistic\* beliefs are properly basic. Here one can claim that they might result from the exaggerated Alstonian practice presented above; that is, theistic\* beliefs might themselves be objectifications of nontheistic experiences. This possibility, however, has the obvious disadvantage of raising more forcefully the question with which we began: how are theistic\* beliefs justified given the requirement that appeal must be made to externalist principles? The present suggestion seems only to lead to an infinite regress we can now recognize as similar to that which the foundationalist is attempting to overcome via the appeal to externalist principles.

Two things seem clear. First, the justification of theistic\* beliefs must itself appeal to some externalist principle. In other words, one cannot put off an appeal to externalist principles for some other belief (a belief nontheistic in content) and then expect to derive theistic\* beliefs from it. To avoid evidentialism, theistic\* beliefs must be generated out of, and justified by, some fact or experience directly. Second, the justification of theistic\* beliefs must be nondiscursive. This, naturally, is part and parcel of the move to an externalist justification for theistic\* beliefs, but it is also a reminder that natural theology or other inferential procedures are not available to the Reformed epistemologist.

How then are we to understand this externalist generation and justification of theistic\* beliefs? Suppose we model our understanding of theistic externalist principles after the less controversial, nontheistic varieties suggested by epistemological externalists. Typically the suggestion is that externalist principles rely on some causal or lawlike relation between the world and one's belief. More specifically, one moves from an experience of the world to a belief about the world. A person takes in cognitive input *i* and forms belief *p*. In the typical perceptual model, *i* is some visual, tactile, olfactory datum which then, following lawlike or causal principles, generates a belief about the physical world. Further, it is important

to remind ourselves of the lingo-conceptual link between the experience and the formed belief. Earlier I suggested that the experience leading to a physical object belief is typically described by borrowing from physical object language; for instance, the experience generating "I see a tree" is described by "I am being appeared to treely" (or some near relation of this language).

The exaggerated Alstonian practice of theistic belief generation does not have this lingo-conceptual link, at least not in every instance. In fact, it cannot be required to have the link insofar as one is to have an account of theistic belief formation and justification which answers the universality challenge. The exaggerated Alstonian practice is a successful solution to the universality challenge only insofar as it disconnects the content of the experience (and hence its lingo-conceptual description) from the generated belief. This is the case since the universality challenge suggests that from a shared experience both theist and nontheist ought to generate the same belief. Since they do not, an explanation is needed. The explanation is simply that the experience can be objectified in any way the belief framework of the perceiver allows. There need be no lingo-conceptual link tying experience to generated belief. The relevance of all this is just that, since theistic\* beliefs also have theistic content, one must ask about the nature of the conditions that generate them. Can the conditions be described completely in nontheistic terms, or must they be described in theistic language; is the experience nontheistic in nature or is it theistic? If the conditions are nontheistic, the lingo-conceptual link is lacking; in theistic cases it is not.<sup>16</sup>

If the experience is theistic in nature, the difficulties raised in Chapters 2 and 3 reappear. Any account of nondiscursive epistemic justification for theistic beliefs supposedly grounded in theistic experience alone needs to recognize the role of background beliefs in

16. My suggestions here assume that it is legitimate to extend the claims about the exaggerated Alstonian practice to externalism. Is this move in fact legitimate? I believe so. For even if the externalist were to argue that the cognitive perceptual input is reducible to certain patterns of colors or shapes, or even to certain patterns of energy (light waves and the like), there is still at some level a description of the input that is conceptually tied to the output, the physical object belief. With theistic belief formation, at least with varieties that avoid the difficulties raised by the universality challenge, the parallel does not hold. There need not be a conceptual link between the belief formed and the (description of the) experience.

the generation of the beliefs. One should therefore wonder about the epistemic value of theistic experiences taken independently of other complex sets of beliefs—one's epistemic base or background beliefs. The problem of noninferential mediated beliefs and practices is pressed once again. In short, it is difficult to see how so-called theistic experiences can legitimately provide an increase in epistemic justification for theistic\* beliefs without reintroducing the very question with which we began. The move from theistic experience to theistic belief via externalist principles is questionable.

What of the case in which the lingo-conceptual link between experiential input and belief is lacking? Can one move by externalist principles from some nontheistic information to a theistic\* belief? Given the universality challenge, it is hard to see how. Once again, one can simply reintroduce the challenge at this new level, raising the same questions of theistic\* beliefs as were raised of theistic beliefs.

Here it is relevant to consider the supposed lawlike nature of the externalist principles. If everyone has the same (nontheistic) input, why do we all not share the same theistic or theistic\* beliefs? It is also important to remember why theistic\* beliefs were first introduced: the solution to the universality challenge was that we do not all share the same background beliefs and thus do not all objectify experiences in the same way. As can readily be seen, this reply cannot be used here, for the question now is how theistic\* beliefs—the background beliefs themselves—are justified. As we have already seen, to appeal to further theistic\* beliefs begins Plantinga on an infinite regress. There appears to be little promise for an externalist justification of theistic\* beliefs, at least insofar as one uses a kind of lawlike externalism as a model.

Perhaps one can develop an alternative view of externalism not patterned after the less controversial, nontheistic varieties put forth by externalist epistemologists. Perhaps theistic externalism does not rely on the typical lawlike mechanism model. Perhaps all that is necessary for externalism is something like the following:

Externalist Principle<sub>3</sub>: If *p* has property  $\phi$  (that links up, in some reliable way, *p*'s truth with *S*'s believing *p*), then *S* is justified in believing *p*.



Maybe, for example,  $\phi$  is simply the property of having been formed by God in *S*. God does this for persons to whom he wishes to reveal himself. Here the "mechanism" is not a natural one about which lawlike predictions can be made. Indeed, there is no mechanism at all. The formation of the belief is simply a result of a sort of divine telepathy, a supernatural action; it is God following through on his intention to reveal himself to at least some humans. Being God, he guarantees the truth of the belief, but he need not supply theistic beliefs for all. His actions are not lawlike and neither is the formation of theistic beliefs. There is nothing in us, the human knowers, to account for any pattern in the formation of beliefs. It is entirely God's doing. Our minds or noetic structures need not be understood in one way or another for God to do his work.<sup>17</sup>

The critic may reply that, although this seems possible, it does not provide a particularly attractive account of theistic belief. Why does God create theistic belief in some but not in others? Perhaps sin or spiritual blindness could be introduced here. But one must be careful to point out that the fault is not with us or with our noetic equipment. God can overcome any obstacle we set up. The reason God shows himself to some and not others must be a reason *God* has. We are dealing with God's intentions and motivations, not with faulty mechanisms. As long as this is understood, God may be justified in not revealing himself to all.

The critic may continue with a second point. This is, he may say, a strange kind of externalism. It is difficult to see, for example, how this type of externalism, if it can be so called, gives us justified belief. For the lawlikeness of the mechanism seems to be exactly what is attractive about externalism as an understanding of the criteria for justified belief. It enables us to explain why so many beliefs we typically take to be justified are held by most people.

17. Consider these comments of Alston, in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," pp. 109–10: "Unlike justification, reliability of belief formation is not limited to cases in which a belief is based on adequate grounds within a subject's psychological states. A reliable mode of belief formation *may* work through the subject's own knowledge and experience. Indeed it is plausible to suppose that all of the reliable modes of belief formation available to human beings are of this sort. But it is quite conceivable that there should be others. I might be so constituted that beliefs about the weather tomorrow which apparently just 'pop into my mind' out of nowhere are in fact reliably produced by a mechanism of which we know nothing, and which does not involve the belief being based on anything."

In reply it could be suggested that the only important thing about externalism is that the formation of a belief, no matter how it occurs, is reliable. Since God is the source of the beliefs, and since he is reliable, the source is reliable. Is the predictive, lawlike mechanism really as important as the critic suggests? Perhaps not. Perhaps what is really important is that from within a developed set of beliefs and experiences there is some account of how the formation of theistic beliefs could be reliable even if they are not lawlike. I consider such an account in some detail in Chapter 10, so I suspend further commentary until then.

The avoidance of arbitrary results via an externalist formation and justification of theistic\* beliefs seems unlikely, unless we return to the natural theology (or otherwise discursive) approach. In order, then, to understand the justification of the required background beliefs by externalist principles, one must understand them as being basic but nontheistic beliefs on which the arguments of natural theology (or some other inferential argument) must be constructed. But this is to return Plantinga directly into the hands of the evidentialist and perhaps into the hands of the evidentialist objector. To avoid arbitrariness with Plantinga's foundationalist account of justification, one must rely on evidentialism's claims. Natural theology, discursive justification, is necessary to avoid just any belief being taken as properly basic on strictly foundationalist grounds.

Plantinga's parity thesis fails because it does not take into account the role of background beliefs in the formation and justification of theistic beliefs. His position, however, appears to be more precarious than Alston's since Plantinga seems to need an exaggerated Alstonian approach to explain why we do not all form the same beliefs given the same input. But this approach leaves Plantinga's position open to arbitrariness which, in turn, demands a return to some type of discursive provision of evidence. In the next chapter I consider whether Alston's position is really any stronger and explain why Alston himself finally moves away from the parity thesis.

## 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)<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup> 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 intrapractice 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."<sup>9</sup> 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.*<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup> 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<sub>X</sub> 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.

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## [ 9 ]

## Plantinga on Warrant

In Chapters 6 and 7 I argued that  $PT_{P1}'$  and hence  $PT_{P1}$  founder on the need for background beliefs in the generation and justification of theistic beliefs. The problem for Plantinga is generated by the kinds of examples he gives, examples in which the theistic believer and nonbeliever share the same experience but the former generates a belief about God whereas the latter does not. My discussion to this point has worked only with Plantinga's essays published before 1986. His research emphasis changes beginning with his essay "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," in which he for the first time considers at some length the notion of warrant or positive epistemic status as opposed to epistemic justification. Although in that essay he is still directly concerned about the evidentialist challenge and the proper basicity of theistic beliefs, later essays and two books deal less directly with those concerns but tackle the issue of positive epistemic status or warrant—that thing or quantity enough of which separates mere true belief from knowledge. What is his account of warrant, and can it help his case for epistemic parity between paradigm and theistic beliefs?<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I attempt to answer these questions. I first explain Plantinga's account of warrant and suggest a new parity thesis on

1. I use the terms "warrant" and "positive epistemic status" interchangeably.

the basis of his account. The new thesis is weighed and found wanting for reasons similar to those we have been considering all along.

### 1. Plantinga's Account of Warrant

Plantinga shifts to the language of warrant and positive epistemic status from the language of justification. He writes:

What is this quantity enough of which . . . epistemizes true belief? . . . Whatever exactly this further element or quantity may be, it is either epistemic justification or something intimately connected with it. So perhaps the natural procedure would be just to *baptize* this element, what ever it is, "epistemic justification." But this would be misleading. The term "justification" suggests duty, obligation, permission, and rights—the whole deontological stable. Furthermore, one of the main contending theories or pictures here . . . explicitly identifies the quantity in question with *aptness for epistemic duty fulfillment*; to use the term "justification," then, as a name for the quantity in question would be to give this theory a confusing and unwarranted (if merely verbal) initial edge over its rivals. I shall therefore borrow Chisholm's more neutral term "positive epistemic status" as my official name for the quantity in question.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere he uses the term "warrant" for this same item.<sup>3</sup>

What is positive epistemic status? Plantinga says, following Chisholm, that it is a term of epistemic appraisal. Furthermore, it comes in degrees. Finally, it is related to knowledge. Thus, "positive epistemic status . . . initially and to a first approximation, is a normative property that comes in degrees, enough of which is what epistemizes true belief."<sup>4</sup>

In various places Plantinga examines and finds wanting other accounts of warrant. He rejects Chisholmian internalism, non-Chis-

2. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," pp. 2–3.

3. See Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," p. 119, *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warrant: The Current Debate*. These last two works give the fullest account of Plantinga's thinking on warrant. Unfortunately, at the time the present book went to press, Plantinga's books were not yet published. Unless otherwise noted, where I quote in this chapter from these works, the page numbers are those of Plantinga's final manuscripts.

4. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 3.

holmian internalism, coherentism, and reliabilism. I do not recount the details of his criticisms, but his basic point in many, if not all, cases is that the accounts "come to grief when we reflect on the variety of ways in which our noetic faculties can fail to function properly." In each case, the reason for the failure of the accounts "is *cognitive malfunction*, failure of the relevant cognitive faculties to function properly."<sup>5</sup> This observation results in a positive characterization of positive epistemic status. Following Plantinga's lead, let us consider this account one aspect at a time.

One necessary condition of positive epistemic status is that one's "cognitive equipment, one's belief forming and belief sustaining apparatus, be free of . . . cognitive malfunction. A belief has positive epistemic status for me only if my cognitive apparatus is functioning properly, working the way it ought to work in producing and sustaining it."<sup>6</sup> Plantinga notes that proper functioning is not to be identified with normal functioning. One's cognitive equipment might be functioning normally (in the statistical sense) when one forms the wishful belief that one is about to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Under such conditions, one's equipment is not functioning properly; it is not functioning the way it ought to, but it is functioning normally.

Furthermore, consider a case in which your cognitive equipment is functioning well in the environment for which it was meant but you are moved to an environment in which your equipment was not meant to function—Alpha Centauri, for example. Suppose there are subtle epistemic differences in the two worlds. Cats are invisible in Alpha Centauri, but whenever one is present to a human he or she forms the belief that a dog is barking. Suppose there is a cat present, and hence you hear a dog barking. Even if there is a dog barking (in a soundproof room) and thus one's belief that there is a dog barking is true, the belief has little by way of positive epistemic status. One's equipment may be functioning properly for its home environment, but it does not match the environment in

5. Quotation from Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 32. On these issues, see also Plantinga, "Chisholmian Internalism," in *Philosophical Analysis: A Defence by Example*, ed. David Austin (Boston: D. Reidel, 1987), "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," "Justification and Theism," *Warrant and Proper Function*, and *Warrant: The Current Debate*.

6. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 32.

which it is operating. "So we must add another component to positive epistemic status; your faculties must be in good working order, and the environment must be appropriate for your particular repertoire of epistemic powers."<sup>7</sup>

The final aspect to warrant is the addition of a "firmness of belief" rider. Plantinga says that it is tempting simply to identify a belief's having positive epistemic status with its being produced by properly functioning equipment in the appropriate environment. This identification would be mistaken, however. Two beliefs could be thus formed and yet one have much more warrant than the other. Belief in the corresponding conditional of *modus ponens* has more warrant than a vague memory belief even though both are formed by properly functioning equipment in the correct environment. What is needed here is recognition that when one's epistemic equipment is working well one's beliefs are held with the appropriate level of firmness:

Obviously another element of positive epistemic status is the degree to which I do or am inclined to accept the belief in question; I can't be said to *know* *p*, for example, unless I believe it very firmly indeed. If my faculties are working properly, the more strongly I believe . . . *p* the more positive epistemic status *p* has for me. When our cognitive establishment is working properly, the strength of the impulse towards believing a given proposition . . . will be proportional to the degree it has of positive epistemic status—or if the relationship isn't one of straightforward proportionality, the appropriate functional relationship will hold between positive epistemic status and this impulse.<sup>8</sup>

So, at this stage Plantinga's account of warrant is this: "In the paradigm cases of warrant, belief *B* has warrant for *S* if and only if that belief is produced in *S* by his epistemic faculties working properly in an appropriate environment, and if both *B* and *B*\* have warrant for *S*, *B* has more warrant than *B*\* for *S* if *S* believes *B* more firmly than *B*\*."<sup>9</sup> This account, he says, needs further refinements, some of which he attempts. I do not, for the most part, consider these in detail, but only list several of his concerns. First,

7. Ibid., p. 33.

8. Ibid., p. 34.

9. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 8.

he notes that not all my cognitive faculties need to be working properly for a belief to have warrant for me. One's memory may play one tricks, but that is not a reason to reject introspective beliefs. Second, proper functioning also comes in degrees. A faculty does not have to be functioning perfectly in order to produce warranted beliefs. Third, that one's environment is misleading need not deprive one's belief of warrant. "What counts . . . are uncorrected and uncompensated malfunctionings."<sup>10</sup>

A more central issue is what Plantinga calls the "design plan." Comparing human beings by analogy to an automobile, he suggests that, just as there are specifications for an engine's operation, so there are specifications for the way a human being operates. He writes that there is

something like a set of specifications for a well-formed, properly functioning human being—an extraordinarily complicated and highly articulated set of specifications. . . . Suppose we call these specifications a "design plan," leaving open the question whether human beings and other creatures have in fact been designed. Then of course the design plan will include specifications for our cognitive faculties (as well as for the rest of our powers and faculties). They too can work well or badly; they can malfunction or function properly. They too work in a certain way when they are functioning properly—and work in a certain way to accomplish their purpose.<sup>11</sup>

Our design plan is such that our faculties are "highly responsive to circumstances." Intuition, sight, memory, and so forth do not all operate the same way. Experience—both sensuous experience and the sort of experience involved in feeling impelled or disposed to accept a given belief—is important in the responses of our epistemic faculties. And the design plan orders us such that the purpose of our epistemic faculties is the production of beliefs that are true rather than false. There may be aspects of the design plan that allow for other ends for faculties. It might be part of the design plan that a person with an illness that typically leads to death believes that she will be the exception to the statistics telling her that it is highly likely that she will die. This feature of the design plan

10. Plantinga, "Positive Epistemic Status and Proper Function," p. 36.

11. Ibid., pp. 36–37.

may increase the chances of survival. Nevertheless, she is not warranted in such a belief. Or certain kinds of wishful thinking—that one's girlfriend still loves one, for example, when the evidence is against it—may reduce one's suffering and hence be a good thing—part of the design plan—and yet one is not thereby warranted in that belief. And so Plantinga wants to concentrate on that segment of the design plan aimed at the production of true beliefs.

He also argues that his picture of warrant can help us deal with Gettier problems:

We might generalize the idea of a design plan: there is a design plan not only for our cognitive faculties, but for the entire cognitive situation. Take the metaphor in this notion of design more seriously for the moment; then the designer of our cognitive powers will have designed those powers to produce mostly true beliefs in the sorts of situations their owners ordinarily encounter. The designer will be aiming at a kind of match between cognitive powers and cognitive environment; there will be, we might say, a sort of design plan not just for cognitive faculties but for cognitive-faculties-cum-cognitive-environment. In Gettier situations, however, there are relatively minor departures from the design plan for the cognitive situation in question; the cognitive environment [or the cognizer's equipment] then turns out to be misleading for someone with our cognitive powers. And the force of saying that in these cases the beliefs just happen to be true, are true *by accident* . . . [is that] the belief[s]'s being true [are] not a result of things working in accordance with the design plan.<sup>12</sup>

This account of warrant is, clearly enough, a kind of externalism. What are its relationships to internalism? Let me point out only a few highlights. In speaking of Alston's account of justification—an account that we have seen has both internalist and externalist components—Plantinga says that, once Alston (rightly) rejects the deontological notion of justification, he has to choose among many "epistemically valuable but non-deontological states of affairs" such as usually believing the truth, now believing the truth, having a belief formed by a reliable belief producing mechanism, and so forth. Plantinga suggests that Alston is guided in his choice by the received tradition in epistemology which "involves a marriage of the idea that deontological justification is central to

12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

warrant . . . with the notion that . . . a fundamental intellectual duty is that of believing only on the basis of evidence." Hence we find Alston's emphasis on grounds and on the accessibility of those grounds. But Plantinga notes that the received tradition is incoherent: although it claims that deontological justification is sufficient for warrant, clearly it is not. One can have done all one's duties, be within one's epistemic rights, and so forth, and yet have little if any warrant for one's beliefs. Also, there is supposed to be a connection between evidence and warrant. But the deontologically justified belief need not rest on evidence. Plantinga's point is that, insofar as Alston's understanding of justification is constrained by the received tradition (even though Alston explicitly rejects a straightforwardly deontological account of justification), it founders on the fact that all we need for counterexamples to it are "cases where some phenomenon is in fact a reliable indicator of the truth of a proposition, but my believing the proposition in question on the basis of that phenomenon arises from cognitive malfunction." So even though Alston moves away from deontological notions of justification, he does not completely escape their influence, at least according to Plantinga.<sup>13</sup>

So, says Plantinga, epistemic duty fulfillment is not nearly sufficient for warrant. Since the internalist tradition is, by and large, deontologically understood, an internalist aspect to justification is not sufficient either. But is it necessary? In particular, is epistemic duty fulfillment necessary? Plantinga's answer is an initial no. But his answer here is not firm.<sup>14</sup> First he notes that one can conclude that *in general* the doing of one's intellectual duty is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant. But then he goes on to wonder whether it sometimes is important. He specifically wonders how to state a question about this issue, for if duty fulfillment is not necessary, how can it be important, ever? He concludes by stating:

The deontological internalist ordinarily exaggerates our degree of control over our own beliefs; and she is certainly mistaken in thinking that epistemically dutiful behavior is sufficient for warrant. It

13. Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, pp. 246, 248, 252.

14. In, perhaps, more ways than one. What I say and quote in this paragraph is not derived from the version of the manuscript Plantinga sent to the publisher. The discussion does not, to my knowledge, appear in those final versions. I therefore do not wish to put too much weight on this point.

also seems that dutifulness isn't necessary for high degrees of warrant (although here there is more room for doubt). Still, there are indeed circumstances when a failure to be dutiful is all that stands between me and high warrant. And now the main point: when things are going properly, when I am behaving in accord with the design plan for human beings, I will not be violating my epistemic duty. Perhaps it is my duty not to take drugs that will prevent me from forming true beliefs or cause me to form wildly false ones; our design plan, you might say, *presupposes* that I won't do that; it makes no provision for my doing that, and if I do that my faculties will not produce the results they are supposed to. No doubt it is part of my epistemic duty not to try to alter my noetic inclinations and tendencies just for the fun of it, to try to become extremely skeptical, for example, so that I come to believe next to nothing—or, on the other hand, to become unduly gullible. . . . Our design plan includes our doing our epistemic duty, at least for the most part.<sup>15</sup>

So there is some kind of "epistemic duty fulfillment internalism" involved in warrant, but the relationship is not a clear one—except that this internalist aspect is neither necessary nor sufficient for warrant.

In another place Plantinga allows for an internalist aspect to warrant-conferring circumstances that is not obviously related to deontological considerations. Plantinga notes Alston's rejection of the demand that one must know or justifiably believe the epistemic principles on which one's beliefs rest. He grants that one may believe that  $2 + 1 = 3$  on the basis of its just seeming utterly obvious to one. Neither justification nor warrant requires that one have any views as to whether its seeming that way to one is a reliable indication of its actually being that way. But this is not true in all cases, says Plantinga. One may believe that a bear has passed by on the basis of the way the brush looks; and to have warrant for *this* belief, one must know or warrantably believe that the brush's having that particular crushed sort of look is indeed a reliable indicator that a bear has been by. In summary Plantinga writes:

So there isn't anything at all like a simple, single answer to the question whether warrant for grounded beliefs requires that the subject know that the ground is [a reliable] indicator of the belief; sometimes this is required and sometimes it is not. And the reason is not

15. Quoted from an early draft of Plantinga's work on warrant, the chapter on externalism, p. 22.

far to seek. In some cases it is perfectly in accord with proper cognitive function to believe A on the basis of B even if you have never had any views at all as to whether B is an indicator of A; in a wide variety of other cases a properly functioning human being will believe A on the basis of B only if she has first learned that B reliably indicates A; in certain cases where you are aware of partial malfunction, to have warrant you will have to believe of a ground that it is a reliable indicator, even though in the *absence* of such malfunction you would not have had to have any views at all on the subject. Of course there will be many other complications. And the point is that it is the complex, highly articulated nature of the human design plan that makes impossible simple generalizations of these sorts about rationality and warrant.<sup>16</sup>

One presumes that such an occasional requirement does not lead to an infinite regress of the type that motivates Alston to deny the requirement that one be justified in believing the justificatory principles that ground one's beliefs.

The central point in all this is just that the basic idea of Plantinga's account of warrant is externalist even though internalist features sometimes come into play. These cannot be specified ahead of time, for they are dependent on details of the epistemic situations. In sum, then, Plantinga says, there is a presupposition in thinking about warrant in the way he suggests. This presupposition is that

when our faculties function in accord with the design plan (in an appropriate environment) the beliefs they produce are for the most part true. . . . Further, we take it for granted that these faculties are *reliable*; they not only *do* produce true beliefs, but *would* produce true beliefs even if things were moderately different. . . . our presupposition is that in general (for a person S with properly functioning faculties in an appropriate environment, and given the above qualifications [not all of which have been discussed in this chapter]) the more firmly S believes p, the more likely it is that p is true.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Warrant, Knowledge, and the Parity Thesis

Recognizing that Plantinga's concerns just explained are not those of his earlier essays in which he directly argues for an epi-

16. Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, p. 56.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

stemic parity between paradigm and theistic beliefs, it is nevertheless worth while to ask how his account of warrant might apply to the issue of parity. Can it help  $PT_{PI}$ ? The first thing to note is the obvious role Plantinga's theism has played in the development of his account of warrant. This role is explicitly discussed in "Justification and Theism." To keep the point short, since Plantinga is a theist, it is natural for him to think of humans, made in the image of God, as cognitive creatures capable of knowing. Hence God is the designer, and the notion of a design plan is a natural outflowing of this view of the world. But Plantinga does not suggest that one has to be a theist in order to accept his account, or that his account obviously entails theism. It may, but he does not press the point.

Nevertheless, given that God is the maker of the design plan, and that he is loving, kind, and interested in us knowing him, it is natural to think that God would have included in the human design plan a way we could come to know God. Plantinga's occasional reference to Calvin's *sensus Divinitas* illustrates this. What is the relationship between these suggestions and the claim that beliefs about God can be properly basic? Plantinga himself asks this question and urges other theistic philosophers to consider it too.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, a belief's being properly basic is not the same thing as its being warranted; a belief's being properly basic is not sufficient for warrant. Since proper basicity, as I have been using the term, is a kind of justification, and warrant and justification are not the same thing, then warrant and proper basicity are not the same thing.<sup>19</sup>

But is a belief's being warranted (in a noninferential manner) sufficient for its being properly basic? This is not clearly the case; even though one is generally doing one's epistemic duty when one's epistemic equipment is functioning properly, Plantinga indicates that the connection is not a necessary one. So being properly basic, that is, being noninferentially normatively justified (being within one's rights in holding a belief without discursive evidence) is not straightforwardly analyzable in terms of proper function. Nevertheless, Plantinga's earlier work certainly relies on the supposition that there is one piece of our belief-forming equipment

18. Plantinga, "Justification and Theism," p. 425.

19. In *Warrant and Proper Function*, Plantinga does make use of the notion of basicity in ways not necessarily connected to justification. See Chapters 3 and 5, for example.

that generates theistic beliefs. So perhaps to the extent that he would say that the generation of theistic beliefs is due to the proper functioning of our equipment it is fair to suggest that  $PT_{PI}$  receives some support from his latest analysis. Just as our equipment functions properly to generate and warrant paradigm beliefs, so it operates to generate and warrant theistic beliefs. To the extent that a belief's having warrant for us makes that belief justified for us, it is true to say that Plantinga's analysis of warrant supports  $PT_{PI}$ .

More direct yet is this suggestion. Although epistemic justification (and its internalism, deontologism, proper basicity, etc.) is an interesting and important notion, it does not provide us with an analysis of the feature that turns mere true belief into knowledge. Since we are interested in the strongest account of epistemic parity, what more could we ask than to say that propositions about physical objects, other minds, and the past, on the one hand, and God and his actions, on the other, can all be known? So, just as Mary can know that there is a tree in front of her, she can know that God exists, or perhaps that he wants her to concentrate on philosophical theology rather than the ontology of art. Such a parity thesis would certainly be interesting. And I believe Plantinga's work might allow him to make such a claim. But let us set knowledge aside for the moment and simply ask about a parity thesis making reference to warrant.

Plantinga might suggest that both paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs have warrant, but since there are levels of warrant, to make it a *parity* thesis he might propose the following:

Plantinga's Parity Thesis\* ( $PT_{PI}^*$ ): For person *S*, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.

A more narrowly construed parity thesis is

Plantinga's Parity Thesis\*' ( $PT_{PI}'$ ): For a person *S*, whose epistemic equipment is functioning properly in the appropriate environment, physical object beliefs and theistic beliefs have the same level of epistemic warrant.

If that level of warrant is strong enough for knowledge, and if one believes a true theistic proposition, then one can know the theistic



proposition, just as one can know the paradigm propositions, or, more particularly, physical object propositions.

Are  $PT_{p1}^*$  or  $PT_{p1}$  true? I suggest not, for something like the reasons we have considered all along. Let us suppose that, for the kinds of reasons discussed throughout this essay, even where one's equipment is functioning properly, the part that generates and warrants theistic belief must rely on background beliefs. Where it is justification, as opposed to warrant, that is at stake, the background beliefs themselves need justification. At least so I have argued. With warrant, however, this is not true. One's epistemic equipment may need background beliefs for the generation of certain kinds of beliefs, but warrant may derive simply from the proper function of the equipment in the appropriate environment (and so forth). The background beliefs appealed to may not themselves need to be warranted. Nevertheless, the reliance of our equipment on background beliefs worries us epistemically, even if no warrant is explicitly required for them. The basic reason for this is complexity. There is more room for slip-ups or mistakes. Epistemic practices involving background beliefs may function as well as those that do not, but the simple fact of their greater complexity warns us away from trusting them as much, even if they are functioning properly in their environment. Put another way, even if functioning properly, two practices may function differently and one may not function as well as the other. Memory, for example, may not be as reliable in producing true beliefs as perception. So, noninferential mediated practices may not be as reliable as conceptual-reading practices. This is true whether Plantinga understands the role of experience to be of the direct Alstonian type or the exaggerated Alstonian type considered in earlier chapters. In the case of  $PT_{p1}^*$ , physical object beliefs and theistic beliefs are always separate, epistemically, since the practice delivering one is a noninferential mediated practice and the practice delivering the other is a conceptual-reading practice. The appeal to background beliefs in identifying an experience as one of an epistemically unique individual simply puts epistemic practices that make such an appeal on a different epistemic level. This does not entail that one does not have warrant for theistic beliefs, or that one can not *know* them. It only says that there is some reason to think that the level of warrant is not the same. Furthermore, this does not mean that belief-

forming practices that are noninferential mediated practices are not practices capable of generating warranted beliefs. It may be part of the design plan that some practices are noninferential mediated practices, just as some practices, or at least some application of practices, need access to beliefs about the reliability of the practice, as Plantinga suggests.

What about memory beliefs and beliefs about other persons? The issue is less clear, at least to me, in the case of memory. It seems that memory is a conceptual-reading practice, or at least not a practice in which one uses background beliefs. Suppose one's memories are attended by the sensuous experience to which Plantinga refers in several places. Surely one simply forms the memory belief in the conceptual-reading manner noted above. At least it seems obvious that one generally does not bring in background beliefs. If, on the other hand, one's memories are not attended by the sensuous experience, as some apparently are not, then it seems quite clear that no background beliefs are needed for the formation of memory beliefs; they are simply present to one's consciousness. The practice or subpractice of generating beliefs about other persons needs further analysis, which I defer until the next chapter. Let me just say that, as with PP versus unique physical object practice, and religious practice versus CP, there seems to be a distinction between the practice of forming beliefs that categorize what is experienced into kinds of things (persons) and the practice of forming beliefs about epistemically unique persons. Insofar as Plantinga's concern is the former, then  $PT_{p1}^*$  (as well as  $PT_{p1}$ , for that matter) is not true with respect to other-mind paradigm beliefs.

Back to the main point. There is some reason to think  $PT_{p1}^*$  is not true, most obviously in the case of the parallel between the formation and warranting of theistic beliefs and physical object beliefs. But even though I suggest that there are different levels of warrant for theistic beliefs as opposed to physical object beliefs, this does not show that one could not know theistic propositions. There is, as Plantinga notes, a minimal level of warrant needed for knowledge. But nothing says that a proposition could not have more warrant for me than is needed for knowledge (and thus one could perhaps know one thing more strongly than another). So even though, as it seems to me,  $PT_{p1}^*$  is not true, a parity thesis

according to which one can know both paradigm beliefs and theistic beliefs might be made out.

Plantinga's account of warrant does not help the parity thesis vis-à-vis justification. In the next chapter I consider a challenge to Plantinga's claim that belief in God can be properly basic. It is found unsuccessful, but the discussion leads to some further observations and the development of a new parity thesis that does not fall prey, I believe, to the background belief challenge.

[ 10 ]

## Confirmation and Theism

My focus has been to explain and analyze various versions of the parity thesis. One goal in this chapter is to explore a challenge to Plantinga's claim that theistic beliefs can be properly basic. In Chapter 2 I explained Alston's response to a challenge relying on the supposed lack of confirmation of theistic beliefs. In Chapter 4 I used a similar challenge to refute  $PT_{AS}$ . The challenge to Plantinga's position also rests on the notion of confirmation. The lesser part of my purpose here is to show that Alston's reply to the confirmation challenge is appropriately applied to the challenge to Plantinga's position. The more important goal is to use the discussion of confirmation as a springboard to further observations. This discussion enables me to develop, in the next chapter, a new parity thesis that does not fall prey to the challenges brought against  $PT_A$  and  $PT_{Pl}$ . Thus, in Sections 1 and 2 I present what I call the "predictive confirmation challenge" and show that it fails. Section 3 fulfills the other goal, that of making certain observations that feed into my suggestion that a holistic approach is needed for the justification of theistic belief.

### 1. The Predictive Confirmation Challenge

The challenge to Plantinga's parity thesis is brought by Richard Grigg, who writes:

Plantinga points out that a belief such as the one that I had breakfast this morning is properly basic in certain circumstances, i.e., as long as I have no reason for supposing that my memory is defective. But note that we can trust beliefs such as . . . [the paradigm beliefs] not only because we are unaware of defects in our experiential equipment but also because we constantly have outside sources for confirmation of such beliefs. Indeed, is it not only through such outside sources that we can become aware of a defect in our equipment? For example, when I return home this evening, I will see some dirty dishes sitting in my sink, one less egg in my refrigerator than was there yesterday, etc. This is not to say that . . . ["I had breakfast this morning"] is believed because of evidence. Rather, it is a basic belief grounded immediately in my memory. But one of the reasons that I can take such memory beliefs as properly basic is that my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence. But this cannot be said for a belief about God, e.g., the belief that God created the world.<sup>1</sup>

Grigg's argument, briefly stated, is that paradigm beliefs are properly basic because of some type of confirmation they have, whereas belief in God is not similarly confirmed. Since according to PT<sub>P1</sub> paradigm beliefs and beliefs about God are both properly basic, the lack of confirmation for beliefs about God proves the thesis false. That Grigg's confirmation challenge to Plantinga is related to the confirmation challenge to CP Alston considers is obvious. The deliverances of CP are said not to have the kinds of confirmation that the deliverances of PP have, so, although PP's results are justified, CP's are not. As we know, Alston argues that the challenge is irrelevant to his claims. For the same reasons, the challenge is irrelevant to Plantinga's claims.

Why should Grigg's disanalogy show that theistic beliefs are not properly basic? Grigg's assumption seems to be that properly basic beliefs are beliefs that are reliably produced by a mechanism or practice that generates beliefs about objects that are regular in a way that allows for predictions to be made about them. Thus, insofar as Grigg's challenge rests on the belief that confirmation is necessary for reliability, his challenge falls prey to Alston's response to similar confirmation challenges. The nature of the confirmation for which Grigg calls is not clear, however, and some clari-

1. Richard Grigg, "Theism and Proper Basicity," p. 126.

ficatory terminology and distinctions are in order. At one point Grigg seems to call for the confirmation of *beliefs*, as when he suggests that "I had breakfast this morning" is confirmed by there being dirty dishes in the sink. At another point he seems to suggest that it is the reliability (where, I take it, "reliability" refers to the tendency to produce true beliefs) of the belief-generating *practice* that stands in need of confirmation. Grigg says, for example, that "my memory is almost always subsequently confirmed by empirical evidence." It is convenient to call the confirmation of a practice's reliability the "validation" of a practice, reserving the term "confirmation" for the confirmation of the truth of a belief. Confirming that a belief is in fact true, however, does not entail that it is properly basic. But one clear feature of properly basic beliefs, according to the challenge, is that their confirmation at least makes it likely that they are true and thus, perhaps, if not inferred from other beliefs, basic and properly so.

A second point is simply that not every properly basic belief is confirmed, and thus confirmation of a given belief is not necessary for its proper basicity. Two issues come to mind. First, some beliefs, even when we try to confirm them, fail to be confirmed. Nevertheless, it does not follow that such beliefs fail to be properly basic. The memory belief that I took a walk by myself in the woods yesterday may not be confirmed because no one else saw me. My hiking boots show no evidence of the walk, I brought back no evidence of the walk from the woods, and so on. So, even though many memory beliefs are confirmed, some are not. Nevertheless, such beliefs do not fail to be properly basic, at least on those grounds. The second issue deals with the simple fact that many beliefs are not confirmed because we have neither the time, the interest, nor any special reason to do so. Generally speaking, I do not concern myself with the confirmation of my memory beliefs unless there is some special reason to do so. I do not worry about whether I ate breakfast this morning, unless, for example, I am being asked by the physician just before she does surgery. If my memory seems vague on the topic, I might then try to confirm or disconfirm my memory belief. The failure of a given belief to be confirmed surely does not entail that the belief fails to be properly basic.

Two morals should be drawn here. First, the concern ought to

be not that each and every properly basic belief is confirmed but that, when, in general, one attempts to confirm certain kinds of belief, they are confirmed. There are, however, some exceptions to the rule. This brings to focus the second moral, that attention should be paid to the source of the belief to be confirmed—the epistemic practice—rather than to the belief alone. This brings Plantinga's and Alston's positions close together on the issues of confirmation and reliability. Some important relationships seem to hold between the confirmation of beliefs and the validation of the practice that generates the beliefs. One of these relationships may be, for example, that, since many beliefs generated by a given practice are confirmed, the practice is validated. If this relationship were to hold, then it might be enough for defense of Plantinga's theory against the confirmation challenge to show that, if the practice from which a belief comes is validated as reliable, then any belief generated by the practice, all other things being equal, can be legitimately taken to be properly basic. Here we find a potential explanation for the fact that we generally trust our beliefs even though not every belief can nor should be confirmed. But, as Alston correctly notes, such an approach to showing a practice reliable is epistemically circular. Thus, talk about validation on Grigg's behalf is better recast in terms of the rationality of engaging in such practices. More on this below.

We cannot yet reply to the confirmation challenge. The nature of confirmation and validation remains unclear. How exactly are we to understand the challenge? We can take one clue from W. V. O. Quine, who has taught us well that beliefs do not face the tribunal of experience alone. The web of our beliefs is complex in many ways, not the least of which is the very detailed set of confirming and disconfirming relationships that hold between one and another belief (or sets of beliefs) and between beliefs and experience. What I suggest here is that this web of belief and experience provides various understandings of the nature of confirmation from *within*, depending on the kind of belief one considers. To develop this point, we can concentrate initially on beliefs and experiences having to do with the physical world, drawing out some implications of Alston's suggestion about the practices he calls basic. Recall that a basic practice is "one that constitutes our basic access to its subject matter. [For example,] we can learn about our

physical environment only by perceiving it, by receiving reports of the perceptions of others, and by carrying out inferences from what we learn in these first two ways. We can not know anything a priori about these matters, nor do we have any other sort of experiential access to the physical world."<sup>2</sup> Alston's suggestion, in part at least, is that any judgment about the truth or falsity of a claim about the physical world (or the reliability or unreliability of a practice giving us information about the world) must be made within the epistemic practice that provides access to the physical world. There are, to be sure, some overlapping situations. For example, memory might be partly but not wholly validated by what we learn from perception (a second practice), even if the remaining parts involve appeal to memory. But the basic point stands: we think that paradigm beliefs have a link to something that makes them likely to be true only because we accept (pragmatically) the practices that generate them. It is only within the basic practices that we discover the nature of the physical world that gives the paradigm beliefs that confirming link. Alston goes further than this with his doxastic practice approach when he suggests that we should understand reliability through the notion of rationality.

Compatible with this position is the suggestion that, because of the nature of the physical world and the epistemic practices we use to form beliefs about it, we take confirmation to be predictive *in a certain way*; we take it that, when we go about confirming the truth of a certain belief, we ought to look to see if certain other things are true. We expect certain features or facts about the world to become apparent to us as we continue to use the epistemic practice (and its many subpractices) that grants us access to the physical world. If, for example, I want to confirm that I see a tree, I look again or ask someone else to look. Similarly with nonperceptual practices. If I believe that I ate breakfast (a memory belief) and I wish to confirm it, I look to see if I left dirty dishes in the sink. Since physical objects do not normally disappear from view without some reasonable explanation, and since my epistemic faculties are operating normally (as far as I can tell from within the practice), I fully expect to find my beliefs about the world confirmed when I try to confirm them. Thus, as Alston suggests, PP is self-

2. Alston, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," p. 117.

supported; it is then *prima facie* rational to engage in PP and, furthermore, the rationality that attaches to engaging in PP extends beyond the kind that comes from the trivially supported type of self-support accruing to all epistemic practices.

## 2. The Failure of the Predictive Confirmation Challenge

Grigg's challenge, interpreted through the notion of basic practices, comes to the following. Although many of the paradigm beliefs can be confirmed (and their corresponding practices validated) in a predictive way, theistic beliefs and practices cannot. Therefore, theistic beliefs cannot be properly basic. We have already seen, in Chapters 2 and 3, that this kind of predictive confirmation challenge fails, according to Alston, because of irrelevance. Alston's response to the fact that CP lacks confirmation whereas PP does not is that the perceptual world is regular, and on the basis of this regularity we can confirm and disconfirm our beliefs. The physical world and our access to it are predictable simply because the things about which we are seeking confirmation are regular and predictable. We do not, however, find the regularities in our access to God or his activities that we find in perceptual or memory experiences. The regularities in religious experience are absent not because of any fault in our epistemic faculties but because the object about which we seek information is not regular or predictable; God is not predictable. We can say, in summary, that theistic beliefs are not confirmed and the practice by which theistic beliefs are formed is not validated—not nontrivially self-supported—simply because the attempts at validation and confirmation depend on the regularity of the objects that the beliefs are purportedly about.

This much we saw in Chapters 2 and 3. But the additional, positive claim Alston makes, which I have mentioned before but only briefly, is that if the confirming features were true of CP they would tend to show CP unreliable. Alston writes: "The reality CP claims to put us in touch with is conceived to be vastly different from the physical environment. Why should not the sorts of procedures required to put us in effective cognitive touch with this reality be equally different? Why suppose that the distinctive features of PP set an appropriate standard for the cognitive approach

to God?"<sup>3</sup> In other words, our access to God and information about him is different in an important way from our access to perceptual objects. The object of the former lacks the regularity of the object of the latter. Whereas the breakfast dishes I put in the sink remain there, enabling me to perceive them (*ceteris paribus*) when I try to, God does not act in this predictable fashion.<sup>4</sup> We do not even know which features of things, if any, God typically uses to reveal himself. For all we know, there is no typical revelation of God. But there is an explanation for this lack of regularity: God's revelation of himself is not confined by the regularities of the natural order. The lack of regularity in our experience of God, then, is no reason to reject the reliability of the practice by which we sometimes form beliefs about him or his activities. In fact, if some of the things Christians believe about God are true, then not only is predictive confirmation not necessary for the trustworthiness of the practice of forming theistic beliefs, but if we did discover great regularity in God's dealings with us we would have reason to distrust the deliverances of the practice.

Simply stated, then, the Alstonian reply is that the predictive confirmation challenge is irrelevant. An account of confirmation internal to one kind of practice cannot be relevantly applied to another kind of practice. That theistic belief-forming practices do have predictive confirmation available for their deliverances should be no surprise. Let us consider an example that illustrates the reluctance of theists themselves to appeal to predictive confirmation. The prayer of a Christian student that he score well on the medical school entrance examinations may not be answered affirmatively. Thus, a belief formed in the context of the prayer, for example, "God will help me do well on the exams," would remain unconfirmed. In this case it is not that one cannot imagine what will confirm the belief but rather that one receives more or less direct disconfirmation. This in itself is not a problem for the notion of predictive confirmation of theistic beliefs, but it does point in the general direction of a rather telling fact about the way theists deal with confirmation. Many Christian theists specifically make al-

3. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

4. There may be an object of the belief that remains regular. For example, in a case in which "God created the flower" is taken to confirm that "God created the world," the flower is regular (parallel to the dishes) although God is not. On the analysis supplied, however, the latter irregularity is the real issue.

lowances for "unanswered" prayer. Hence they would admit that prayer-related beliefs such as "God will help me to score well on the examinations" often fall into one of two categories. They are either forthrightly disconfirmed (God does not act as the theist expects, as when the prospective medical student fails the entrance exams) or they are neither confirmed nor disconfirmed (at least immediately—perhaps God makes the student wait for years to take the exams). In fact, the mature believer would say that such beliefs ought to be held with a great deal of tentativeness, if they are held at all.

This does not mean that one could never receive confirmation of this type,<sup>5</sup> and many theists do take events in their lives as confirmation that God exists or that he wants them to do one thing rather than another. Nevertheless, it points out a certain reluctance on the part of theists "to put God to the test" or to be so pompous as to think that they have this kind of access to the mind or will of God. The central point is that, although one might receive confirmation of these specific beliefs on occasion, theists are reluctant to claim that such confirmation is readily available. The question to be asked is why theists make such allowances. The lesson to be learned is that theists understand that God's actions toward us are not always predictable, at least not in the same manner as natural phenomena. For all the importance of predictive confirmation in realms dealing with physical objects, it is clearly not as important to theists or to the practice by which they form beliefs about God. In short, basic practices can give us different, internal accounts of what confirmation should look like, and to apply the standards internal to one kind of practice to another is simply to apply an irrelevant standard. Perhaps, then, we should look for another kind of confirmation for theistic beliefs.

### 3. Nonpredictive Confirmation

I turn now to explore two examples, one theistic and one dealing with a human person. My purpose is twofold. I note both

5. As already noted, however, a great deal of such confirmation might tend to show the theistic belief practice unreliable. Still, one could receive such confirmation on occasion without it affecting one's judgment of the practice's reliability.

differences and similarities between the two kinds of examples in terms of confirmation and epistemic justification. I also provide further grounds for my Alstonian observation that, although the theist might know what would confirm her theistic beliefs, she does not know when or if the confirmation will occur. The main implication of this observation is that there is a kind of nonpredictive confirmation that, given the framework of basic practices developed by Alston, is exactly what one should expect given the nature of beliefs about individual persons and God.

Grigg gives an example of a theistic belief that is unconfirmed, at least in terms of predictive confirmation: God created the world. How might one approach confirmation of such a belief? It cannot be done through predictive means, for the object of the belief—God—is not predictable. So, for what kinds of things should one look? Two possibilities suggest themselves. First, it might be enough for the provision of confirmation if there were some nontheistic event or fact to which one has epistemic access; that is, it might be enough to confirm the belief that God created the world if we can discover some ordinary, nontheistic fact about the world. If this is enough, then one could have confirmation via a nontheistic belief-forming practice such as one of the paradigm practices—perception, for example. Take the mere existence of the world. After all, if God created the world, then the world must exist. And surely we can discover that the world exists. The second possibility is that we need some other theistic belief to provide confirmation. If this is the case, perhaps the practice through which one forms theistic beliefs must come into play. This, and thus that nonpredictive confirmation for theistic beliefs is a possibility, is what I argue here.

Return now to the first alternative. It perhaps provides some kind of confirmation. It seems, however, that if confirmation of theistic beliefs occurs through a nontheistic practice, the confirmation provided is very weak. Consider this analogy. Suppose it is suggested that the belief "Kirsten created this sculpture" is confirmed by the fact that this sculpture exists. Now, although it is surely true that the creation of something entails the entity's existence (or at least entails that the thing exists for some time), the entity's existence seems to do little to confirm the belief needing confirmation. It is best described as a fact that is necessary to the

confirmation but not sufficient for confirmation. Thus, although the sculpture's existence can immediately be inferred from Kirsten's creating it, the discovery of the sculpture does little toward confirming that Kirsten created the sculpture. The same seems to be true in the theistic case. If the existence of the sculpture were enough to provide confirmation for the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture, then the analogous theistic belief about God's having created the world would be confirmed by the existence of the world. But in neither case does the mere existence of the entity in question confirm one's beliefs about its creator. What seems to be needed is an experience of, or belief about, the world (or the sculpture) that more strongly links it to its creator.

We can now turn to the second possibility for confirming theistic belief, in which another theistic belief is needed for the confirmation. Here I appeal, once again, to Alston's notion of a basic practice. Continuing with the sculpture analogy, what is needed to confirm that Kirsten created the sculpture is some information about the sculpture that more strongly links this sculpture to Kirsten's creative touch. What could this link be?

Although many suggestions could be made, perhaps we can divide the various options into three types. First, there could be some sort of uniquely identifying features of the sculpture that allow one to judge that it is indeed Kirsten's creation. One could be an expert on Kirsten's style, for example, and be able to recognize this piece as being in her style. Second, one could rely on the authority of someone who knows that this sculpture is Kirsten's creation; perhaps an expert testifies to the claim or perhaps one is told by a friend that this sculpture comes from Kirsten's creative hand. Finally, perhaps the creator herself informs you that the sculpture comes from her hand; maybe Kirsten simply tells you that she made it. All these link this sculpture to Kirsten.

Some observations about the sculpture example can provide insight into the possibility of nonpredictive confirmation of theistic beliefs. Parallel to the sculpture case, there seem to be three possible means of linking the theistic belief to be confirmed with the world created. First, one may be an expert on God's "style" and thus be able to recognize the world as being in that style. Second, one may be told (perhaps by one's parents or one's religious community) that the world was created by God. Third, one may be told by God that he created the world.

What do we learn from these three parallel pairs of possibilities? First, on the assumption that I am an expert and that I am paying attention and trying to see whether this sculpture did indeed come from Kirsten, I should be able to find features that (more or less) uniquely identify this sculpture as Kirsten's creation. But note that at some point I have to learn that this style is Kirsten's style. There is nothing at the phenomenological level that allows me to identify this object as the unique one that is the center of my concern. Nor is there anything that uniquely connects the object to another individual qua that unique being. To return to the language developed earlier, one simply cannot develop conceptual-reading beliefs about such situations. There is always information in the background somewhere that has significant content about the individuals involved. This information is held in the form of beliefs; more than just a conceptual scheme is needed. Thus, one does not link the unique features of some object to a unique person without at some point learning about the intimate connections between the two; and what is learned has substantial belief content. So it is with God's creative work, or at least one might suspect. One cannot know that this world was created by God through unique features of the world unless one follows through with a learning process that moves beyond a conceptual-reading level.

The comparison indicates some disanalogies as well. There are two. First, what is the significance of "being an expert"? Are there any experts when it comes to recognizing God-touched features of the world?<sup>6</sup> But a more important disanalogy is that there appear to be no uniquely identifying features of the world that link its creation and God's creative touch. Unless one claims that the world's apparent design is sufficient to conclude Christian theistic creation, I see little promise here. So, although there are some interesting parallels between the Kirsten case and the case of God in terms of where one might look for confirmation (both involve background content beliefs), there is an important difference in that when it comes to God's creation of the world there appear to be no unique features of the world that can be attributed only to God (or least none to which we have epistemic access). Why the God and Father of Jesus Christ, for example, instead of Krishna?

6. It might be interesting here to look closely at how difficult it is to become an art expert and the interesting phenomena surrounding forgeries in the art world.

I suggest that in fact this disanalogy teaches us something important about CP. I have already noted (Chapter 8, Section 1) that CP needs Christian\* beliefs to generate religious beliefs with specifically Christian content. I argued that these background beliefs need justification. Where are they to be found? My argument is that such a demand leads to either an infinite regress of justification or natural theology (or other inferential reasoning) with a Christian result. Neither of these is felicitous for the Reformed epistemologists. But there is another possibility that I considered briefly (Chapter 7, Section 6): a theistic, nonlawlike externalism.

This kind of externalism is not lawlike in that its working in us is not natural (in a sense that allows for predictive possibilities) but supernatural. It depends on God's inclining himself toward us and not on some lawlike mechanism. It is rather like the reliabilism Alston rejects in arguing that justification is not simply reliability but has, rather, a reliability constraint. He says that it may be that accurate weather predictions simply pop into my head—but I have no access to their source even though they are reliable. Rather like that, perhaps God simply pops things into the theist's head. Let us call this "theistic reliabilism." But would this reliable source of belief provide the kind of justification required for Christian\* beliefs? Certainly not on Alston's account of justification, for theistic reliabilism has no internal access as Alston requires. What about according to Plantinga's view? Insofar as one is impelled to believe these God-inspired beliefs (and one has met whatever normative requirements there are), they would meet Plantinga's criteria for justification or proper basicity. But that is just to raise an important question about the extraordinarily weak notion of justification in which Plantinga's account of proper basicity is embedded. Why should we take such beliefs to be justified, even *prima facie*? Alston seems to have the happier account of justification here, and once again, the theistic reliabilism I have suggested does not specify an internalist constraint.

Why not add one? The answer is that, unlike other reliable practices in which one can return again to the practice for "retesting," it is not clear that one can do so with CP. The account of God provided by CP is one of a deity who hides himself. One can have a religious experience and never have another by which to test the first. At least with the human case—Kirsten and her sculpture—

one can check the features of Kirsten's style, or check with Kirsten herself, or ask other experts. In the religious case, can these other approaches be used to check earlier experiences? Perhaps, but another problem arises here.

Recall my distinction between CP and religious practice. Although it is true that many, if not most, Christian believers have a large number of religious experiences, they must learn to take these as *Christian* experiences since nothing in the phenomenon of the experience is explicitly Christian. What is the source of the Christian content? This brings us to the second possibility noted above, my being told by my parents that God created the world. Is this really parallel to my being told by a friend that this is Kirsten's sculpture? In the case of the sculpture there are other means of checking the story. I can appeal to features of the sculpture that pick it out as Kirsten's or I can ask Kirsten.<sup>7</sup> Can I ask God? Perhaps, but asking does not imply receiving a reply. Of course, the same is true for Kirsten; she does not have to grace us with a reply either. And here we learn something of value. The access we have to information about persons *qua* unique individuals depends in an important way on the self-revelation of the person involved or on information given to us by others. Let me expand on this.

Just as I must learn from someone to take the markings on the sculpture to be in Kirsten's style, thus connecting this sculpture to Kirsten, so I must learn to take religious experiences to be Christian. Where do we learn such things? Barring prophets and the founder of Christianity, we learn the set of Christian beliefs, symbols, and concepts from our parents, the broader Christian community, and, more generally, the entire tradition—its history, myths, and scriptures. Here what Reid calls—and the Reformed epistemologists call attention to—the "credulity disposition" is important. We all have a natural disposition to trust what others tell us. This disposition is modified as we mature as epistemic agents. We learn not to trust certain people, or not to trust them on certain issues. This disposition, I suggest, is important in the formation of Christian beliefs (as well as those of competing traditions such as

7. The former approach seems ruled out in the God case, for there may be no unique features to which I can appeal as evidence that this world was indeed created by God.



Buddhism or Hinduism). In fact for most of us—once again barring prophets and religious visionaries—this is the sole source of our Christian framework of beliefs and concepts. But one of the things we learn as we mature epistemically is that, although much of what we learn through the credulity disposition is true, when it is crucial we should check the claims of others ourselves.

Is it crucial to do so for the Christian tradition? It appears so, for the tradition is in competition with others as it claims exclusive truth for its central beliefs. And unlike other epistemic practices that are conceptual-reading practices, CP is not—it is *completely self-contained* in its belief content. By “completely self-contained” I mean that, for those in the tradition whose sole source of that belief content is the authority of others, we must either find some means of checking our employment of the credulity disposition or recognize the rather radical circularity of our Christian worldview. The former seems unlikely, for the only people who seem to have access to Christian truth by some means other than the word of other Christians are the prophets and founders. This brings us to the third possibility suggested above, that I am, or *some* human is, told by God that he created the world. But just how would God communicate such a thing? Scripture tells us, but that is little if any better than being told by a friend. And prophets are the source of Scripture. Furthermore, information we have about the prophets is largely internal to the tradition, its scriptures, and its authority; once again we must rely on the credulity disposition. Even if we could ask Jesus himself—and what better source than him to ask—if he is the Son of God, would we not have to take his word for it? Not even his miracles take us from this-worldly events to theologically laden beliefs. Although they are certainly surprising, all historical research can give us *that* they happened. What history does not give us is *why* they happened, and in particular that they happened at the hand of God. So this route seems unpromising—unless, perhaps, one wants to return to natural theology. But even here it seems that we cannot get explicitly Christian results but at best only a rather generic theism.

What of the other option—recognizing the rather radical circularity of the Christian worldview? This is the position I believe we should take, but not without noting the fact that such circularity has been thought by many to provide justification for the beliefs

the circle contains. This is a holistic kind of justification, or at least a justification with a strong holistic component. This should not, I think, be a surprise, for when I presented the account of exaggerated CP above I in effect greatly loosened the justificatory connection between the experiences that are the occasion for the generation of theistic beliefs and the resulting theistic beliefs. This is an important claim of the holist: experience is the genesis of belief but is not needed for justification. This distancing of justification from experience is no less true for CP. Although there is a religious experience at the bottom of CP, the generation and justification of the explicitly Christian reading of that experience depends wholly on other Christian beliefs. I have more to say on this below.

Now, this all seems parallel to cases of linking individual humans to their activities. It seems clear enough that the belief or experience needed for confirming that Kirsten created the sculpture is one that makes reference to Kirsten. It is not sufficient to know some “bare” fact about the sculpture, that is, a fact that stands free of some attribution of Kirsten’s activity or even, for that matter, the fact that *some person* created it. So it seems with the belief that God created the world. If the world’s existence is to be understood to confirm the belief that God created the world, there must be some information that links the world to God besides the original belief. There must be some means of access to further theistic data for the confirmation of theistic beliefs to occur. And this is, I suggest, just where the holist justification, with its reliance on the credulity disposition, comes into play.

The theist may be quite willing to suggest that she does have access to further theistic data. The theist may receive confirmation, on occasion, that God created the world. The predictive confirmation challenger can point out, however, that this access fails to have an important feature. The access to theistic data needed for confirmation does not, unlike the access to ordinary perceptual objects, allow for *predictive* confirmation. Why? Because whatever access one has to the needed information—information that has a theistic component—relies on God’s revealing himself or his activity. When trying to confirm that it is the desk in my office that had ink spilled on it, I can put myself (typically) in a position to confirm it by looking (again) to see if the ink stain is still there. But I cannot put myself in a position for God to speak to me and be in

the least guaranteed that he will. Although one can predict what event would confirm a theistic belief (e.g., God's telling us he did something), one cannot predict the occurrence of the event. Its occurrence relies on God's action, to which we have no predictive access. In summary, with perceptual beliefs and PP there appear to be (under many if not most circumstances) means by which we can predict the occurrence of happenings or events that would confirm the belief in question. Although sometimes these predictions fail, generally they do not. We believe this because the predictions rely on a certain understanding of the physical world and the epistemic practice through which we have access to that world. This understanding is internal to the set of beliefs we have about the world, the experiences we have of the world, and the practice through which these two are connected. Furthermore, the perceptual epistemic practice can become internally validated through repeated confirmations, allowing us generally to trust the practice as reliable. With theistic beliefs the case is different. We can say what (theistic) facts or events might provide confirmation, but we cannot say ahead of time when (or even if) we will have access to them; we cannot predict their occurrence. I suggest that the practices through which we have access to God, through which we form theistic beliefs, do not give an understanding of God that provides for predictive confirmation—and that is precisely as it should be. The same is true, however, for belief-forming practices that provide us with beliefs about epistemically unique, spatiotemporally nonrooted individuals, especially those with free will. There is no epistemic access to such individuals apart from the practice that generates beliefs about them. One must always turn to the same practice (or subpractices) to confirm the belief in question. And with these practices there is no predictive element. The objects of the beliefs are unpredictable, just as God is.

To complete the discussion of our examples, one further issue needs consideration. There is a sense in which any person holding the belief "God created the world" has access to the information needed to confirm theistic beliefs. For example, it follows immediately from the fact that God is the creator-sustainer of the world that God created the flowers, the hills, the trees. It might be suggested that these (theistic) beliefs provide the needed confirmation. I believe this suggestion does not suffice, for this "access" is not really access and therefore does not provide an interesting kind of

confirmation. Grigg speaks of the confirmation being "outside." Although it is less than fully clear what Grigg means by outside confirmation, it surely should not include confirmation by beliefs whose truth is known simply by an immediate, one-step inference from the belief needing confirmation.

The problem can be seen by exploring the following case. Consider meteorologist Smith who, after research, forms the belief *p* that sundogs can be seen whenever conditions *C* are met. As she continues her research, Smith discovers that conditions *C* are, in fact, about to occur. To confirm her belief, she predicts that at time *t* and location *l* a sundog will appear. Those conditions come about, the sundog appears, and Smith has confirmation of *p*. Now Smith holds the belief that sundogs appear under certain conditions. Were she merely to infer that a sundog did *in fact* appear under those conditions, without the corresponding experience, she would not have truly confirmed her belief. Armchair science is ruled out. Likewise, without some further data beyond the theistic belief "God created the world," confirmation seems unlikely. The confirming information must be generated from an "outside" source.

This raises the important issue: what exactly is the appropriate sense of "outside"? I do not think I can provide a full answer to this question. Two things can be noted, however. First, I have already suggested that to be outside is to extend beyond immediate inferences from the belief to be confirmed, beyond what can be done in the armchair. Second, in some ways confirmation is always "inside." This is where Alston's notion of basic practices, the notion of epistemically circular reasons, Alston's larger doxastic practice approach to epistemology, and the possibility of holistic justification come into play. The sculpture analogy is a case in point. What confirms the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture is an awareness of a further fact connecting the sculpture to Kirsten's creative work. The information needed for confirmation must make reference to or contain at least some of the members of the very set of notions contained in the belief being confirmed. A belief about Kirsten must be confirmed by some further information about Kirsten; a belief about God must be confirmed by further information about God.<sup>8</sup>

8. It is not clear that one can draw a hard and fast conclusion on this point. For example, the confirmation in the breakfast case does not directly rely on the notion

A somewhat different although related point is that I have access to this connecting information by Kirsten telling me, someone else telling me, or some feature "telling" me that Kirsten did indeed make the sculpture. The source of the confirming data is, presumably, the same source as (or a source closely allied with) the source from which I derived my original belief. Otherwise the content of the data is not likely to be immediately related. It seems true that there are only a limited number of means through which one has access to the needed information and also true that certain kinds of information can be discovered only by certain kinds of approach. This is in part the point of Alston's suggestion that beliefs about physical objects are formed through a basic practice. My claim is that I came to hold the belief that Kirsten created the sculpture via a belief-forming practice that relies on someone telling me (whether Kirsten or someone else) or recognizing that the sculpture is one of Kirsten's and that any confirmation I come by is not outside these practices (or closely related practices) and their related beliefs and experiences.

The lesson I wish to draw from these observations is that it appears that confirmation is circular in two senses. First, confirmation seems to rely on the fact that the confirmation available for a given belief must typically appeal to the epistemic practices and related beliefs and experiences that formed the original belief needing confirmation. Thus, if there is a link between confirmation and validation, one might begin to suspect that it is somewhat circular. Such confirmation and validation are not "outside" in any absolute sense. Second, confirmation is circular, since even how it should be conceived is dependent on the practice and the nature of the objects about which the practice provides us beliefs. For practices dealing with regular predictive things, confirmation should be predictive. For those not dealing with predictive things, confirmation should not be predictive. Accordingly, if confirmation is to have an epistemic role, one should suspect that that role has a large holistic component, especially where a noninferential mediated practice is at stake.<sup>9</sup>

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of breakfast. It does, however, seem to rely indirectly on the notion: there is one less egg in the refrigerator because I ate it for breakfast.

9. A general note on this chapter. Alston makes the point, in *Perceiving God*, pp.

I have suggested that confirmation is a holistic notion, or at least that it has strong holist components. In the next chapter I suggest a new parity thesis and defend it against two potential difficulties. In the final chapter I flesh out certain aspects of the holist position needed for the new thesis.

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211–12, as does Peter Losin in "Experience of God and the Principle of Credulity: A Reply to Rowe," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (1987): 59–70, that the checking procedures for PP make use of what is learned in PP. Their general point is, so far, in agreement with mine in this chapter, except that neither of them pushes the holist line I do. PP has its confirmation and appeals to itself for that confirmation. CP likewise has its confirmation (albeit of a different stripe) and appeals to itself for that confirmation.

## [ II ]

## A New Parity Thesis

One goal in this chapter is to suggest and explore a new parity thesis in terms of its appeal to holistic principles, Reid's credulity disposition, and the theistic nonlawlike externalism introduced briefly earlier. A second goal is to consider two potential rejoinders to the position developed here. In Sections 1–3 I concentrate on the first goal; in Sections 4–6 I deal with the second.

## 1. Interpersonal Practice and the New Parity Thesis

Many of the concerns uncovered in the discussion to this point grow out of two issues. The first is that according to both  $PT_A$  and  $PT_P$  epistemic parity exists between theistic beliefs that are about an epistemically unique, spatiotemporally nonrooted individual—God—and beliefs about epistemically unique but spatiotemporally rooted things. The second issue is the confirmation of justified beliefs. Just what constitutes confirmation, what role does it play in justification, and do theistic beliefs have it?

Taking these in order, the first issue suggests that perhaps a successful parity thesis is to be found in beliefs that parallel one another more closely—in a comparison between beliefs about God understood as an epistemically unique, spatiotemporally nonrooted individual and beliefs about other individual entities akin to God in just that way, that is, epistemically unique and spatiotemporally

nonrooted. Humans fit the bill here, and something to which Alston alludes can help us get started in our thinking about a new parity thesis. In wondering whether there is some way CP “proves” itself, as PP does with all its “payoffs in terms of prediction and control of the course of events,” Alston calls attention to another epistemic practice:

interpersonal perception, our awareness of other persons as persons. There is controversy over whether to regard this as an autonomous practice or simply as a department of perceptual practice, but I shall adopt the former view. That is, I shall suppose that we have a practice of objectifying certain ranges of our experience in terms of the presence, condition, characteristics, and activities of other persons, and that this practice can no more be justified from the outside than any of the others we have been considering. It is, in a way, intermediate between PP and CP. In particular . . . its internal self-justification is not so purely in terms of predictive efficacy as is PP. To be sure, by perceiving what we do of other persons we are thereby enabled to anticipate their behavior to some extent, and this is of pragmatic value. But persons are notoriously less predictable than things, and the value of this practice for our lives is not restricted to that payoff. To compensate for this relative unpredictability there is the possibility of entering into communication, fellowship, competition, and so on with other persons. And, most basically, that is what this practice enables us to do.<sup>1</sup>

Alston notes that this practice is intermediate between CP and PP. He does not say in detail exactly in what regard this is true. He would, I am sure, include the fact that persons are less predictable than things and that God is even less predictable than we humans. But I believe there is another important distinction to which Alston does not call attention but toward which I have been aiming. The practice through which we generate Christian theistic beliefs is a practice that has, as its central focus, a single epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individual—God, and his desires, thoughts, and actions. God is the only member of his kind. Interpersonal perception does not have as its focus the solitary member of a kind. Here I wish to distinguish between interpersonal perception, as the practice through which we generate beliefs about per-

1. Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” pp. 131–32.

sons qua persons, and another practice through which we generate beliefs about persons qua epistemically unique individuals. Alston's discussions do not make such a distinction, but it is precisely this failure that leaves his position open to the background belief challenge. The practices that generate beliefs about individuals qua epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individuals require background beliefs for the formation of their deliverances, and thus all such practices are noninferential mediated practices (or perhaps, if some are inferential, then simply mediated).

As Alston notes, there is debate about whether interpersonal perception is an independent practice or a subpractice of PP. Like that, one might debate the existence of independent practices that generate beliefs about epistemically unique objects and suggest that they are subpractices of broader practices. So, for example, the practice that allows us to come to know Tom versus Tim, and Jack versus Tom, and so forth, is really a subpractice of interpersonal perception, the practice that allows us to generate beliefs about persons qua persons. I treat them as independent practices.

I suggest that some of the practices that generate beliefs about individual things qua epistemically unique spatiotemporally nonrooted individuals are on the same level as CP. These practices are more parallel to CP than they are to PP. Let us call the practice that allows us to generate beliefs about persons qua persons "interpersonal perceptual practice" and the practice that allows us to generate beliefs about persons qua epistemically unique individual persons "unique person practice." What kind of beliefs does interpersonal perceptual practice generate? Interpersonal perceptual practice is closer, I think, to religious practice than to PP. Whereas PP gives us fairly clear and specific sortal beliefs—that thing is a tree, for example—religious practice does not. Religious practice's deliverances, recall, are somewhat vague and general recognitions of a reality beyond the physical and the (humanly) personal. Interpersonal perceptual practice, I suggest, gives us (more or less) general beliefs about the realm of the humanly personal. It is interpersonal perceptual practice that allows us to recognize that we are in the company of personal beings rather than merely physical things. It is a difficult practice to describe, or to individuate, for we almost always engage in unique person practice when we engage in interpersonal perceptual practice. Whenever we form beliefs about per-

sons based on experience, we pick out individual persons (either by proper names, indexicals, or unique descriptions) and not just the reality of the personal. Nevertheless, our ability to pick out the personal from the nonpersonal seems necessary for us to pick out the individual person.<sup>2</sup>

Given this distinction between unique person practice and interpersonal perceptual practice, and continuing with Alston's concern with rationality, a new parity thesis can be suggested:

Parity Thesis<sub>New</sub> (PT<sub>N</sub>): Under appropriate conditions, engaging in CP and engaging in unique person practice have, for S, the same level and strength of overall rationality.

There is no extension to beliefs, for overall rationality, as we have been using the term, is a metaepistemological notion applicable only to the evaluation of practices.

Why suggest parity only between CP and unique person practice and not either unique physical object practice or memory beliefs about epistemically unique things? In the latter case, as I indicated earlier (Chapter 9, Section 2), memory beliefs are formed by a conceptual-reading practice. There appears to be no parallel to unique person practice or CP. Although we do have memory beliefs about epistemically unique individuals, it is not clear that they are generated or justified in a way different from memories about anything else. Perhaps this is because the kind of experiences attached to memory beliefs is always internal to the rememberer.<sup>3</sup> As to the former, it seems to me that, because of the regularity of physical objects and the intimate connection between this regularity and the spatiotemporal nature of these objects, a practice for the generation and justification of beliefs about unique physical objects is best understood as a subpractice of PP. Unique physical object practice turns out, thus, to be a conceptual-reading practice. The identification of epistemically unique physical objects seems to rely in im-

2. Consider a young child's ability to tell the difference between a stuffed, grey toy cat and a real grey cat—or science fictional androids who are supposedly conscious or alive and the confusion this engenders for legal cases against the androids.

3. Plantinga has some interesting comments about the role of experience in memory; see *Warrant and Proper Function*, Chapter 3.

portant ways on the spatiotemporal web that is part and parcel of the world picture of PP, as well as on the predictive nature of PP. Another way to state this point is that this subpractice does not seem to be independent of PP and its requirements in the manner in which CP is independent of religious practice, or unique person practice of interpersonal perceptual practice. CP and unique person practice seem, in short, to be noninferential mediated practices and therefore entirely self-contained in terms of their belief content. We have seen this with CP: the Christian content seems to be wholly internal to that religious tradition and is communicated through authority and the credulity disposition. I submit that unique person practice functions in roughly the same way. Our coming to learn the names of people, and hence to identify and reidentify them, is entirely internal to the authority of others, the credulity disposition, and certain social relationships conditioned by these first two factors. Accordingly, if our unique person practice beliefs are justified, it is through holistic considerations and not experiential ones (more on this below). I think, then, that PT<sub>N</sub> stands the best chance of being true, rather than a parity thesis in which CP is paired with unique physical object practice or a practice generating memory beliefs about epistemically unique individual things.

One final point needs to be clarified. In Chapter 5, Section 2, I argued that one could rank epistemic practices within the subclass of nontrivially self-supported practices. This could be done, I said, on the basis of the closeness of the cognitive connection between experience and belief (the issue of conceptual-reading vs. noninferential mediated practices). I also called attention to Alston's claim that one might rank practices from a cognitive point of view because of features such as predictive power, and I raised the issue of the relationship between these "cognitive attractions" and what I argued above are the epistemically important roles of the background beliefs. One might raise the following question: if conceptual-reading practices are epistemically and not simply cognitively superior to noninferential mediated practices, then why cast PT<sub>N</sub> in terms of rationality rather than justification? Briefly, it seems to me that Alston's characterization of the relationship of the justification of beliefs to doxastic practices is correct, and, although we have an intuition about the epistemic superiority of conceptual-

reading practices over against noninferential mediated practices, this intuition rests in the cognitive attractiveness of the former over the latter. At the end of the day, the best way to get at these rankings, even though they have an epistemic justificatory component, is to discuss them in the metaepistemological framework of rationality, with its internal *judgments* that the practices are more, or less, reliable. In addition to this point, I believe that, although the distinction between conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices is an epistemically important one, the epistemic advantage of the former over the latter does not remove the latter from being reliable or justified.

PT<sub>N</sub> has, then, at least one advantage over the others we have considered. It does not fall prey to a disanalogy in regard to the need for background beliefs. Both CP and unique person practice are noninferential mediated practices. The obvious question to ask, however, is why this is an advantage, since I have already argued that the appeal to background beliefs seems to force the Reformed epistemologist into either natural theology (or other inferential evidence provision) or an infinite regress of justifications, in either case calling the Reformed epistemology project into question. The best response to this issue is seen in the move to certain holistic considerations that seem to be required by noninferential mediated practices or at least such practices that strongly rely on their background beliefs. I have hinted at certain aspects of these holistic considerations. In the next section I make them at least somewhat more explicit. Natural theology or arbitrariness are not the only options for CP's background beliefs.

## 2. Comportment and Confirmation

Beliefs are not held individually; they are held in complex groups. The web of belief is intricate. The relations between one belief and another, and between beliefs and experiences, are not easily untangled. This complex of beliefs and experiences might be described in terms of beliefs more or less "fitting" well together, "cohering" well together, or, as I say here, "comporting" well together. The example of remembering eating breakfast this morning provides an illustration of what I mean by comportment. But,

before looking at the example, some observations are in order. First, consider the more traditional models of foundationalism such as those that emphasize self-evidence or incorrigibility as the criterion for proper basicity. On such models a person would, under normal circumstances at least, not attempt to confirm a properly basic belief. After all, a basic belief has the advantage of being so well grounded that no other belief is more firmly grounded. Thus, not only is there supposed to be no need for further justification or confirmation, no such justification or confirmation is even possible. To which beliefs would one appeal? Properly basic beliefs are considered certain or unassailable in terms of their epistemic justification. No other belief or set of beliefs could provide assurance of justification for a properly basic belief, because no other belief is more firmly justified. On such models properly basic beliefs are considered to have a privileged epistemic status.

With weaker models of foundationalism, Plantinga's included, basic beliefs do not hold such a special status. They can be challenged, and one may then wish to appeal to other beliefs to shore up the status of the belief in question. Returning again to the discussion of the confirmation challenge, recall that Grigg claims that, although we constantly have outside sources for confirmation of such beliefs, this shoring up does not provide justification. He is correct, if justification's only source is experientially grounded. Here Grigg seems to be wary of the danger of letting beliefs slip from a properly basic status to an inferential status. But if confirmation provides holistic grounds for justification, and Plantinga's account of coherence systems is correct (i.e., given that coherence provides justification, all justified beliefs in coherent systems are properly basic),<sup>4</sup> then the beliefs in question can remain properly basic even though other beliefs are involved in their justification. Putting this concern into Alston's language, such beliefs could be justified by coherence relationships but not be mediated inferentially. Furthermore, confirmation need not be understood in a strictly predictive manner. Instead, we may simply appeal to the fact that under most circumstances the paradigm beliefs comport well with the rest of our experiences and noetic structure.

4. See Plantinga, "Coherentism and the Evidentialist Objection to Belief in God," pp. 123–26.

What does it mean to say that a belief comports well? Return now to the breakfast example. Even on the weaker foundational models one would not, in most circumstances, worry about confirming one's belief that one ate breakfast this morning. It is a memory belief and under typical conditions can be legitimately taken to be properly basic. Although I may rely on the fact that the practice that generated this belief—memory—is validated by many other sets of circumstances and beliefs, I do not typically *set out* to confirm my memory beliefs or to validate the practice from which they come. But suppose I have the belief that I ate breakfast this morning and then come home to discover that there are no dirty dishes in the sink. This bit of information may be disconcerting, for I know that this week my wife is away on one of her research trips, my son is with some friends, no one else has a key to my condo, I never wash the dishes in the morning because they are few (being aware of our current drought, I do not wish to waste water in a half-empty dishwasher), and so forth. Now, to discover a lack of dirty dishes at least generates a certain amount of wonder; why are there no dishes in the sink? Here we have a lack of comportment between belief and experience (or the belief generated by the experience)—a lack of confirmation, as it were.

How can this lack of comportment be explained? There are many ways, no doubt, but one example suffices. Although I do remember eating breakfast this morning, what I had forgotten is that I woke up late and therefore merely stopped for a doughnut on the way to work rather than taking time to cook. This explains the lack of dishes in the sink, and now the complex of my noetic structure confirms the original belief. The lack of comportment I discovered initially as I found the sink barren of dishes is explained by reference to other factors. The important thing to note is that my belief is related in detailed ways to my other beliefs and experience and that these relations provide a certain kind of confirmation. Also important is that one cannot tell ahead of time which (set of) belief(s) will be problematic in the face of new experiences or beliefs that lack comportment with present beliefs.

Given this somewhat broader understanding of confirmation, the theist can suggest that she has what I call comportment among her theistic beliefs, or at least comportment similar enough to that found for beliefs delivered by unique person practice to allow the

move from that comportment to the status of being nontrivially supported (in Alston's sense). From there she may legitimately claim that many of her theistic (or Christian) beliefs are properly basic or immediately justified. I believe there is comportment for PP's and interpersonal perceptual practice's deliverances as well. These constitute nontrivial self-support for those practices. Comportment for CP and unique person practice's deliverances plays dual roles, however. Not only does it provide nontrivial self-support for the practices, but it provides justification for the beliefs in question. This is necessary for the deliverances of CP and unique person practice, for they do not have the advantage of being experientially justified as do the deliverances of PP, interpersonal perceptual practice, religious practice, and unique physical object practice.

### 3. Examples

I think the best evidence for these claims is to develop a set of examples of unique person practice beliefs and CP beliefs that comport well with other beliefs and experience, within their respective frameworks. That, at least, is the approach I take here.

First consider unique person practice and its deliverances. Our use of proper names for individual humans is in many ways philosophically problematic. What do we do when we pick someone out of the crowd with such utterances as "Stan went over there"? Is "Stan" to be understood as a definite description or a proper name? What is the nature of reference? What about extension, or intension? Fortunately, here we need not worry about these issues. I want simply to call attention to certain epistemic considerations that come into play with our everyday use of proper names in perceptual contexts. Note, first, that when one learns to pick out, perceptually, a unique individual person one either has to be introduced to that person by the individual in question or by someone else. One is told (by an authority) that "this or that individual" is "so and so"—that person by the tree wearing the bright orange shirt is Stan (or, in first person, "I am Stan"). Our credulity disposition is activated at the very introduction of the name and the link to its referent. Is there some independent vehicle for checking this information? Maybe one could attempt to verify the information

by checking the government records, but here one still relies on authority. Once the name is learned—once the person is epistemically baptized with the name—we can only appeal to memory or other "reintroductions" to access the information. Where do beliefs thus generated get their justification? The best one can do is appeal to that initial learning situation and the trust we have in the source. Wherein lies that trust? The credulity disposition, as noted above, is modified as we mature epistemically. We learn to trust others, but only with discrimination. In particular, some people are bad with names. It is in circumstances in which one believes one's sources not to be good with names that one's belief that that is Stan needs confirmation—at least explicitly. And so we listen to others' identifications of the person in question and in particular note the extent to which the belief (or its near relatives) is socially embedded. Once we have the belief that Stan is such and such a person, then we learn to use and apply the name in appropriate contexts. In particular, we learn how Stan (typically) looks or acts: that he has certain features (a young face for his middle-fifties, and slightly stooped shoulders) or that he is habitual in certain ways (his office door is always closed when he is working inside, he is friendly with David but he greatly dislikes Sue). It is this complex of associations, physical and social, along with other background information (such as that Stan is back from vacation) that allows unique person practice to generate beliefs such as "Stan is coming down the hill." But suppose I know that Stan said he would not be back in town until the 20th and it is only the 15th, and the figure I see, although it has stooped shoulders and a characteristically youthful facial appearance, is laughing and talking with Sue? Then unique person practice does not, except when not working well, generate the belief "Stan is coming down the hill." In short, we learn to generate beliefs about epistemically unique individual persons—and are justified in holding these beliefs—only if they comport well with other beliefs and experiences.

In short, justification of unique person beliefs is holistic in these ways. First, no experience itself (qua phenomenon) gives us beliefs about persons qua epistemically unique individuals. There is always reliance on authority and credulity. There is, then, some kind of experience that is the source of belief, but the experience itself does not justify beliefs generated by it. Second, such beliefs either



fit or do not fit with our other beliefs and experiences. They either comport well or they do not (there is, of course, a continuum here). When they do, they are justified.

What of the deliverances of CP? Theists, in particular Christian theists, do not hold their religious beliefs as free-standing beliefs. Much as humans hold more ordinary beliefs in complex patterns and with more or less loose relationships to experience, theists organize their religious beliefs in patterns that entangle beliefs one with another as well as with experience. For example, the belief that God loves me is often connected to beliefs about God's providential care for me. Beliefs about God's providential care may well be related to beliefs about God's gracious activity in molding my character, to beliefs about the activity of God through the loving actions of others, or to beliefs about God's meeting my needs, emotional and otherwise. Furthermore, these beliefs may well be entangled with some of my experiences.

Consider this. The pastor of a church believes that God cares for her and her church deeply, but the pastor is discouraged about the progress in her parish. New converts are not coming into the faith, the parishioners are not as active as they ought to be, and the like. Suppose, however, a parishioner who has not been active is counseled by the pastor. This is the beginning of an education in the meaning of Christian service and in the meaning of sharing the gospel. The parishioner begins to serve and to share. Eventually, through the work of this parishioner, the parish begins to grow, people begin new relationships with God and other people, and so forth. Over a period of time, the discouragement wanes, the pastor is renewed. She has, it appears, had confirmation that God does, indeed, care for her and her church.

A further example. Christians and Jews believe that the dove is a symbol of the renewal of the world. Noah sent out a dove when he tested to see if the waters of the great flood had subsided. The dove was sent out three times. On the first it returned not having found a place to rest. It returned from the second carrying a newly sprouted olive leaf to Noah. On the third it did not return. Noah then knew the waters had abated. And for the Christian there is an additional layer of meaning: the dove is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came to John the Baptist to be baptized, "the spirit, descending as a dove," came to rest on Jesus (John 1:32, NASV). These symbols are entwined in the minds of many Chris-

tians by the belief that the Spirit is both the Comforter and the Creator, the one who encourages and the one who renews the world. The Spirit, the dove, is thus considered the one who renews discouraged believers. Now suppose a Christian, holding a set of beliefs such as those described, becomes discouraged. He is questioning whether God really cares for him. As he walks out among the trees of the church grounds, a dove descends and alights on his shoulder. The bird rests there for four or five minutes, as the Christian considers his plight, his commitments, his God. Could this dove's activity be taken as confirmation that God does indeed care? As the dove wings its way back toward heaven, the Christian feels his burdens lightened and a sudden rush of joy fills his heart; he is emotionally and spiritually renewed. Although the link may be weak from the point of view of a nontheistic web of belief, for the Christian holding a full-blown set of theistic beliefs this event would be very strong confirmation that God does indeed love and care for him.<sup>5</sup>

There are clear parallels to our beliefs about individual humans. Suppose I am discouraged by a disagreement I have some morning with my wife. On arriving at work later that day, I find some freshly cut blue flowers in my office. Knowing that the first flowers I ever gave my wife were blue, that they have become a symbol of faithfulness and love for us, that many if not most people would not give flowers to a man, I believe that these flowers came from my wife. I cease being discouraged, believing that all is well with our relationship.

A final example. Suppose a committed Christian—call her Rebecca—believes that God calls some people to leadership. In fact, Rebecca believes that God wants some believers to be in leadership, in particular academic leadership. Suppose further that after prayer Rebecca has the impression that God wants her within the halls of academia. Thus motivated, she acts in ways consistent with

5. A series of events similar to these happened to my pastor, Curtis D. Peterson. On reading part of an earlier draft of this essay, Burleigh T. Wilkins noted that my pastor was lucky that the dove wasn't a turkey vulture! But what would such an event have meant for the Christian? Perhaps nothing, or perhaps it would have been understood as one more bit of evidence for the evil in the world. How Christians respond to such evil can itself be part of the web of belief and experience which, when taken together, provides confirmation for the Christian worldview. Compare the stories of Job and Habbakuk from the Hebrew testament.

this impression; she asks her academic advisers about her suitability for further graduate work. She is encouraged to, and does, apply to several of the best graduate schools. In the midst of this endeavor, Rebecca maintains her cautious skepticism. She thinks acceptance at these schools quite unlikely. As human beings are wont to be, she is not particularly self-assured.

To complicate matters, Rebecca is married to another graduate student. She is concerned that her marriage remain strong, for as a Christian she believes God is unhappy with broken relationships and, in particular, broken marriages. In this regard, she is concerned that her husband's career not be adversely affected by her plans coming to fruition. Finally, suppose Rebecca is also concerned that she not go further into debt to pay for her education. She is thus inclined to pray that, if God truly wishes her to attend graduate school, he confirm her rather tentatively held belief that she should go to graduate school in order to be eventually enabled to work within academia. Specifically, she asks God for the following two things. First, if she is to attend one of these graduate programs, God must provide sufficient funds so she can avoid further debt. Second, if she is to attend, her husband's career ought not to be hurt.

In light of the first request, three things occur. First, Rebecca is admitted to four of the five Ivy League schools to which she applies. Second, three of the four schools that grant her admission provide financial support. Third, two of the three schools offering support provide very large financial packages, one covering three years of tuition and living expenses, the other covering four years. This appears to be confirmation that God wants Rebecca in graduate school and, by extension, that he wants her in academic service. As to the other request, Rebecca's husband, having not yet finished his Ph.D., is offered a one-year teaching post (an event, given the job market of recent years, that is nigh unto a miracle in itself!). This offer is quite unexpected and certainly furthers his career more quickly than were he not gaining teaching experience. Rebecca's attending the graduate school of her choice seems to be open at this point and her belief confirmed.

The web of Rebecca's belief system is complicated; the experiences she has and beliefs she later forms comport well with the belief that God wants her to serve within the halls of academia. This case and the earlier two (and others that can be generated

easily) seem close enough to cases of unique person practice belief and unique person practice experience comportment to allow the move to proper basicity or justification for Christian theistic beliefs; one's engaging in such practices is rational and nontrivially supported.

Furthermore, unique person practice and CP are parallel in more than the comportment of their deliverances with other beliefs and experiences. They also have quite parallel self-support in terms of relational development. As Alston notes, CP receives nontrivial self-support from the fact that its participants develop spiritually. In short, they mature and develop in their relationship to God. Unique person practice allows us to develop similarly in our relationships to other people. Alston claims that it is interpersonal perceptual practice that does this. More likely, I believe, it is unique person practice, for in most cases our relational skills develop only where we know, more or less intimately, other people. Interpersonal perceptual practice, as I characterized it, is not the practice that allows us such intimacy. But there is no hard and fast rule here. Interpersonal perceptual practice can perhaps generate beliefs such as "humans are the types of beings who suffer when in pain" even when I have no names attached to them, and hence no intimacy. I can still feel impelled to provide aid and thus become more relationally sensitive. Parallel to this, religious practice may make us more religiously sensitive, but it is only the intimacy allowed by CP (or other practices, e.g., Buddhist practice, Hindu practice) that provides for deep spiritual and relational growth.

In short, these sets of beliefs and experiences, when the beliefs and experiences are taken together, seem to provide some reason for one to think that the Christian theistic beliefs in question are true (or at least as much reason as in unique person practice cases, given that there too confirmation comes from within the very practice from which the original belief came), even though the situations and circumstances are not predictable. They thus give the theist some reason to take her beliefs to be properly basic or immediately justified, even though the experience that provides for their genesis does not function in a justificatory manner. It is, of course, important to remember that comportment is not (typically) consciously inferential. When it is, then the beliefs generated are not basic or immediate.

## 4. The Anything-Goes Challenge

The critic is likely to raise a challenge to  $PT_N$  that is related to the confirmation challenge. She can claim that the problem with these examples is that, although it may be true that the suggested beliefs comport well with other beliefs held by the Christian or theist, just about any experience or belief can be taken to comport well with such beliefs. The theist can twist and turn to make any beliefs or experiences fit. The important question, the critic continues, is this. What exactly does *not* comport well with the theist's beliefs? Let us call this the "anything-goes challenge."

The anything-goes challenge introduces some new issues into the discussion which merit attention. Perhaps the challenge is correct. The disanalogy is not that theistic beliefs do not comport well with other beliefs and experiences but that they comport too well. Perhaps theistic noetic structures can be manipulated to fit whatever facts come along, whereas nontheistic structures cannot. The anything-goes challenge is a kind of arbitrariness challenge. It is reminiscent of the challenge brought against theists by Antony Flew in the now famous discussion "Theology and Falsification." There Flew challenges the religious believer thus: "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of God."<sup>6</sup> Now, Flew's challenge is intimately tied to the question of the falsifiability of theological assertions, but we can avoid that issue to concentrate on another. If we rephrase Flew's challenge in terms of the present discussion, it can be understood in this way: just what set of beliefs and experiences would lead the theist to conclude that there is a lack of comportment within the theistic noetic structure?

Considering Basil Mitchell's parable given in response to Flew's challenge sheds some light on this issue:

In time of war in an occupied country, a member of the resistance meets one night a stranger who deeply impresses him. They spend that night together in conversation. The Stranger tells the partisan that he himself is on the side of the resistance—indeed that he is in command of it, and urges the partisan to have faith in him no mat-

6. Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 99.

ter what happens. The partisan is utterly convinced at that meeting of the Stranger's sincerity and constancy and undertakes to trust him.

They never meet in conditions of intimacy again. But sometimes the Stranger is seen helping members of the resistance, and the partisan is grateful and says to his friends, "He is on our side."

Sometimes he is seen in the uniform of the police handing over patriots to the occupying power. On these occasions his friends murmur against him: but the partisan still says, "He is on our side." He still believes that, in spite of appearances, the Stranger did not deceive him. Sometimes he asks the Stranger for help and receives it. He is then thankful. Sometimes he asks and does not receive it. Then he says, "The Stranger knows best." Sometimes his friends, in exasperation, say "Well, what *would* he have to do for you to admit that you were wrong and that he is not on our side?" But the partisan refuses to answer. He will not consent to put the Stranger to the test. And sometimes his friends complain, "Well, if *that's* what you mean by his being on our side, the sooner he goes over to the other side the better."

Mitchell's parable is rich in insight and deserves fuller treatment than I give here. I wish to concentrate on only one facet. The partisan has some experiences that do not comport well with the rest of his Stranger beliefs. When the Stranger is in the uniform of the police and turns over members of the resistance to the enemy, the partisan wonders about the loyalty of the Stranger. One might even imagine a slightly different—but more existentially powerful—parable in which the Stranger appears to be turning over the partisan himself to the enemy. Surely neither of these events comports well with the partisan's commitment to the Stranger's being "on our side," just as the theist's commitment to the love of God may not comport well with the appearance of God's giving the theist over to evil. But in neither the Stranger nor the God case does the believer hurriedly give up the belief in question.

This brings to light an important fact. Although it is true that some things may not comport well with a given theistic structure, this seems equally true of nontheistic structures. If we take a naturalistic (read: the physical universe is all there is) worldview to be a competitor of the Christian worldview, we discover that not all the

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 103–4.

"facts" always fit. Suppose we take the scientific theorizing of the naturalist to be (roughly) parallel to the theologizing of the Christian, and then take scientific methodology to be a subpractice of PP. I do not mean to conflate science and naturalism here. Rather, I am relying on what appears to be the temptation, and indeed practice, of many naturalists to take science as the best approach to the discovery of the most general truths about "all that is." On this kind of naturalism, PP, scientific methodology, and the scientific theorizing that go along with them take on the role of being the primary, if not the only, means of obtaining truth. Insofar as the naturalistic worldview provides control over what will or can be taken to be factual or meaningful, metaphysics reduces to the results of science. Accordingly, science can be construed as essential to naturalism in a way that it is not to theism. But I do not mean to suggest that science and naturalism are identical, nor that science has no home within a theistic worldview.

With this framework understood, consider the problem of anomalies in scientific theorizing. What does one do when one's theory conflicts with some newly discovered data or when one's confirming experiment fails to confirm? Or what happens when one's naturalistic science runs up against an apparent miracle? Something has to be given up, but it is not always clear which belief (or beliefs) ought to go. Sometimes it is hard to tell, and the best policy is to wait. This is, indeed, what the naturalist does. Likewise with the theist, at least on occasion. There are things that engender a lack of comportment with a theistic noetic structure, and it may appear to the anything-goes critic as if the theist can take anything to comport. But this is not the theist's special problem. The theist learns to live with some of that lack of comportment, as does the naturalist.

Mitchell rightly recognized a similar thrust behind Flew's challenge and hence raised a question of his own parable: when does it become silly for the partisan to continue to believe in the Stranger? We can paraphrase the question and ask at what point it becomes silly for the theist to modify her noetic structure so that any experience or belief comports well. Such a point exists, or at least so it seems. Plantinga, for example, admits that counterevidence against theistic belief may lead one away from theistic belief. Ultimately, then, not just any and all beliefs or experiences can be made to

comport well with theistic beliefs. Although one must admit that some theists may be irrational and allow anything to comport well with their theistic beliefs, we need only consider a believer who is closer to being a model of rationality. The anything-goes challenge, I claim, does not apply to her.

Which beliefs and experiences can and which cannot be made to comport well with the rest of one's noetic structure must be decided on an individual basis. But it seems that the critic who accuses the theist *in general* of taking just any and all beliefs and experiences as comporting well with her noetic structure is wrong. Suppose Rebecca, after her prayer, had not received financial aid. Suppose further that her husband did not obtain a job. Could she have incorporated these events into her noetic structure and maintained it as well-comporting? Do these experiences and beliefs continue to fit with her belief that she should go to graduate school? Possibly. Suppose Rebecca also believes that God is testing her faith; she understands these new circumstances as God's means of encouraging her to fulfill her commitment of faith to him in some other way. As noted in Chapter 10, one of the cautions mature Christians often urge on the younger is that requested confirmation not be of a predictive variety. The premedical student who asks God to help him do well on the entrance exams fails to get the kind of confirmation he wishes. A caution against expecting too much, however, does not mean that God never provides.

But there are some things that Rebecca could not incorporate, at least not in any simple way. Suppose her husband becomes quite ill and she is needed at home. Or suppose it becomes clear that Rebecca's attending graduate school will indeed bring her marriage to an end. Depending on how deeply rooted her commitments to marriage are and perhaps on how deeply entwined her beliefs about marriage are with Christian beliefs, she may be unwilling to understand these new events as comporting well with her belief that God wants her to attend graduate school. Clearly she is wrong about something, and given the hierarchy of beliefs she has within her noetic structure, it would seem that her belief that God wants her in graduate school is the one that should be given up. Not just anything comports well with a theistic noetic structure.

If the anything-goes challenger is persistent, she might press again. She might suggest that, with enough alterations in the the-

ist's noetic structure, Rebecca can make these beliefs comport. She may need to alter her understanding of God in some radical way—maybe God is really evil and intent on destroying her marriage. At this point the defense can rest on two points. First, such a radical modification of Rebecca's noetic structure seems to destroy the claim that it is theistic or at least that it is specifically Christian. To demand this much of one's noetic structure in order to retain one's commitment seems somewhat disingenuous. Second, if theistic structures face the problem of radical noetic modification to protect a cherished belief, a similar point is true of nontheistic noetic structures.

This last point can be fleshed out. R. M. Hare's contribution to the "Falsification and Theology" discussion can help here:

A certain lunatic is convinced that all dons want to murder him. His friends introduce him to all the mildest and most respectable dons that they can find, and after each of them has retired, they say, "You see, he doesn't really want to murder you; he spoke to you in a most cordial manner; surely you are convinced now?" But the lunatic replies, "Yes, but that was only his diabolical cunning; he's really plotting against me the whole time, like the rest of them; I know it I tell you." However many kindly dons are produced, the reaction is still the same.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly the lunatic is prepared to take any experience to be consistent with his belief that the dons want to murder him. Nothing will stand in his way.

The lesson to be drawn from this parable for the anything-goes challenger seems to be that the reading of a set of beliefs and circumstances can vary widely and that the possibility of such a wide variety of changes in one's noetic structure is not limited to theists. One can always attempt to add explanatory epicycles to one's beliefs in order to hold on to them. When should one add epicycles? That varies with the circumstances and with the depth of ingression of the beliefs involved. How many and what kind of epicycles can be rationally added is a function of how deeply entrenched the beliefs are in one's epistemic structure and how much other evidence is connected to the beliefs. These issues cannot be decided independently of looking at a given noetic structure.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 99–100.

If the picture presented here is correct, the anything-goes challenge is met. Not just any data can be made to comport well with one's theistic noetic structure, at least for the model rational theist. There comes a point beyond which it is silly to add explanatory epicycles to one's noetic structure. Furthermore, just as one can move beyond being a model rational theist, one can move beyond being a model rational nontheist. There is nothing unique about theistic noetic structures, at least in this regard.

### 5. Religious Plurality Revisited

A second challenge to  $PT_N$  depends again on the existence of diverse religious epistemic practices. The critic might challenge  $PT_N$  in the following way. There is an important difference between unique person practice and CP. Those who engage in unique person practice with particular persons do not generally disagree about the existence or the characteristics of persons with whom they do not (but others do) engage in unique person practice. And those others can come to engage in unique person practice with the persons with whom the former engage in it without giving up all previous involvements. But among the beliefs involved in CP is the belief that there is only one God and that that God has certain characteristics. Therefore, one cannot engage in CP and, for example, Jewish practice or Muslim practice or Hindu practice. Thus, the decision to engage in CP implies the decision not to engage in any of these other particular religious practices. But those who engage in CP typically do not merely refrain from engaging in these other practices. They also claim that these practices are based on (or essentially involve) false beliefs. But there is no analogy to this in unique person practice. In short, to engage in CP I must hold that there are false beliefs involved in the religious practices of others, but to engage in unique person practice with my colleagues I do not have to hold that there are false beliefs involved in the interpersonal belief-forming practices of other people. Nor do I have to hold that people engaged in unique person practice with those with whom I do not engage in it are all somehow badly mistaken about the existence or characteristics of those with whom they engage in unique person practice. If it is said that adherents of different religions are not involved with a different

deity but instead have different beliefs about the same deity, then one should still have to ask why one should think that distinctively Christian beliefs about this deity are correct. The presence of this feature in CP (and presumably in other religious practices as well) raises the specter of arbitrariness again. The same sorts of confirmation available to Christians who engage in CP would be available to Jews who engage in Jewish practice and to Muslims who engage in Muslim practice. And it is likely that confirmations actually occur in the lives of people engaging in Jewish practice and Muslim practice in roughly the same quantity and quality as the confirmations that occur in the lives of those who engage in CP. But some beliefs essential to each of these practices seem to contradict each other, so they cannot all be true. For example, either God reconciled the world to himself in Jesus or God did not, so either Christians or Jews are wrong on this matter. Why then engage in CP rather than Jewish practice, Muslim practice, or Hindu practice?  $PT_N$  turns out not to be true, since there is a kind of arbitrariness involved in engaging in CP that does not exist when one engages in unique person practice. Let us call this challenge the "religious plurality challenge."<sup>9</sup>

There are several issues involved in the religious plurality challenge to  $PT_N$ , but perhaps the central one is that anyone engaging in CP must claim that those who engage in other competing religious epistemic practices have false beliefs. In short, there are inter-practice contradictions. This criticism has similarities to the challenge of religious diversity to the parity thesis between PP and CP which is the straw that breaks the camel's back in Alston's discussion. Recall that, according to Alston, the challenge of religious plurality to the rationality of engaging in CMP (CP) arises in the following way. Even if the perceptual beliefs we have about God do not conflict themselves, the practices forming such beliefs are still subject to serious conflict by virtue of the associated belief systems. Given the rich diversity among religious doxastic practices, only one, if any, of the practices can be reliable. Why suppose it is CP? There are many reasons internal to CP, but we seem to need

9. The source of this criticism is an anonymous reviewer for Cornell University Press. Although not an exact quotation, the previous two paragraphs are a very close paraphrase of a section of the reviewer's report to the press.

reasons external to the practice, since all the practices presumably have internal reasons.

As we have seen, Alston argues that this fact does not dissipate the justificatory efficacy of CP, but it does reduce the strength of justification for CP vis-à-vis PP, and therefore a parity thesis between PP and CP is not forthcoming. Similar points can be made about CP here. CP is not stripped of its rational efficacy because of plurality. But then the religious plurality challenge does not suggest that it is. The criticism is that  $PT_N$  is not true not because CP lacks rationality altogether but because the strength of rationality that accrues to CP is not as great as that which accrues to unique person practice. But exactly why should that be taken to be true?

CP requires that those who engage in it claim that those who do not (but rather engage in competitors to CP) are engaged in a practice based on or essentially involving false beliefs. Unique person practice does not. But what exactly is the problem? Is it that unique person practice has more overall rationality than CP? That is not the criticism, at least not explicitly. But that is what it would take to show that  $PT_N$  is false. Why think that the "arbitrariness" attached to engaging in religious practices shows that the overall rationality is lower than it would be without that arbitrariness? The basic point seems to be that, because of the existence of competitors to CP, engaging in CP is arbitrary. Therefore, as Alston suggests in discussing the justificatory efficacy of CP, even though the existence of these other practices does not dissipate the justification, it does seem to reduce it significantly.

In Alston's case, however, the comparison is between competing practices—CP, Muslim practice, Jewish practice—and PP, which has no actual competitors. The comparison is between practices taken, so to speak, from the "outside." What I mean by "outside" is that CP and PP are compared from a sort of neutral point of view. CP, Jewish practice, Muslim practice, and so forth are, taken as individual practices, each supposed to put us into effective epistemic relationship to the Ultimate. Thus each one provides us with competing understandings of the Ultimate. PP has no such actual competitors. It has only possible competitors—the Whiteheadian or Cartesian ways of viewing physical objects as opposed to the Aristotelian way of so doing. Alston suggests that because these are only possible ways of viewing the world, whereas with

the religious practices there are actual ways of viewing the Ultimate, the epistemic status of CP (and its competitors) is lower than that of PP.

But this "outside" view is not the one taken by the religious plurality challenger vis-à-vis PT<sub>N</sub>. Rather, the criticism relies on "inside" features of the various epistemic practices. Although there are no competitors to unique person practice, an important feature of unique person practice is that it can be engaged in with many different people, thus giving us beliefs about many different people. This is not true of CP. There is, supposedly, only one person with whom CP puts us into contact. This, in addition, perhaps, to certain exclusivity claims involved in CP ("No one comes to the Father but through me," as Jesus says), leads to a denial of CP's competitors understood as legitimate means of gaining rational beliefs about the Ultimate. With unique person practice the assumption is that when you and I engage in it, if we meet and get to know two different people, I will not suggest that your engaging in unique person practice with Sally rather than Jim, say, is based on false beliefs. This assumption is internal to the practice itself. From this internal perspective, there is no arbitrariness involved in engaging in unique person practice with different people. If you were to meet Jim, as I have, you too would have (justified) beliefs about him. In contrast, if I engage in CP, while you engage in Muslim practice, I will not admit that you are in contact with Allah, nor will I admit that Allah, understood as a being metaphysically distinct from the God and Father of Jesus Christ, exists. These beliefs are internal to CP.

But why does this show that the strength of rationality accorded to CP is less than that accorded to unique person practice? There are many, many human persons with whom we can have social engagement, and unique person practice is a practice designed to allow just that. But there is only one God, according to CP. The religious plurality challenge, as construed above, treats all the competing religious epistemic practices as if, taken as a group, they were like slices of a grand, Ultimate unique person practice, one slice, let us say, being the Christian unique person practice, another the Muslim unique person practice, and another the Jewish unique person practice. This would be comparable to dividing up unique person practice into slices, one being, let us say, the Jim unique

person practice, another the Sally unique person practice, and again, the Frank unique person practice, and yet another, the Mary unique person practice. To get an appropriate analogy between unique person practice and CP, on this understanding, one would have to say that those engaged in the Jim unique person practice are suggesting that those engaged in the Sally unique person practice, Frank unique person practice, or Mary unique person practice are engaged in practices based on or essentially involving false beliefs about Sally, Frank, or Mary. But this is ludicrous. It is part and parcel of unique person practice that one assume that there are many other humans with whom one engages in unique person practice. That is part of unique person practice's nature. This is not true of CP or, for that matter, of Jewish practice, Muslim practice, or (at least many of) the other religious epistemic practices. It is the reverse of surprising, then, that there are competitors in the field of religious epistemic practices, at least from the point of view of a strict analogy between the "inside" commitments of unique person practice and CP. It simply is not required of us, when we engage in unique person practice, that we make the kind of denials that are required of us when we engage in CP or the other religious epistemic practices. If it were otherwise, we would suspect something amiss in our epistemic conduct of the religious practices.

Perhaps, however, the religious plurality challenger means only to suggest something closer in line with Alston's evaluation of the parity between PP and CP. Perhaps the criticism is simply meant to claim that the important difference between unique person practice and CP is that, taken from the outside, unique person practice has no actual competitors whereas CP does, and although this does not dissipate the rationality of engaging in CP it does lower the strength of the rationality by lowering the strength of the non-trivial self-support of CP. What is to be said here? If one admits that Alston's account of the matter vis-à-vis PP and CP is accurate, does the same not hold true here?

The best way to combat this challenge is head-on. There are two steps to so doing. First, the argument relies on the fact that Jewish practice, Muslim practice, CP, and so forth all have, more or less, the same strength of internal support and, furthermore, that there is little if any external support. Recall, as a first step, that Alston takes the worst-case scenario and assumes that there is no external

support for CP over other practices. One thing to do, in response to the religious plurality challenge, is to consider the possibility that there is external support for CP. That, of course, is a tall order and one I do not attempt to fill here. It is, furthermore, one I consider to be an unlikely source of solace for the religious believer. Nevertheless, if it could be shown that there is significant external support for CP which is not matched by other religious practices, that would effectively kill the criticism.

The second step, and to my mind a more promising one, is to challenge one of the central assumptions of the criticism—that Jewish practice, Muslim practice, CP, and so forth all have the same strength of internal support. The critic certainly assumes this to be the case, as does Alston. As far as Alston's case goes, and this is not to belittle its strength, there may be much more to say about the internal support of various religious practices. But to say anything about them in this regard requires a great deal of work on the details of various religions and the epistemic practices in which their practitioners engage. This is a much larger task than I am able to take on. But before the religious plurality challenge can be said to be successful against  $PT_N$ , this work needs to be done. Of course, in an era of pluralism and of extreme religious tolerance, the suggestion that we need to engage in what Paul Griffiths calls "inter-religious apologetics" is going to be controversial.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, it needs to be done. Until it is, the religious plurality challenge to  $PT_N$  cannot be fully evaluated.

I have not done the hard work needed for a full reply to the religious plurality challenge to  $PT_N$ . I have pointed out where the digging needs to start and that is, I believe, enough at least to raise questions about the success of the criticism. In short, it is not obvious that it will be successful. People on both sides need to engage in more work before the grave can be completed.

## 6. Confirmation, Validation, and Rationality

Two final comments about confirmation are in order before we leave the subject. First, in some cases nonpredictive confirmation

10. See Paul J. Griffiths, "An Apology for Apologetics," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 399–420.

of theistic beliefs may be possible only where the theistic belief to be confirmed is a fairly general or broad belief. This is one similarity between (some cases of) nonpredictive and predictive confirmation. The more general is confirmed by the more specific. "All swans are white" is confirmed by the next swan; "All sundogs are formed in conditions C" is confirmed by the next set of conditions and the next sundog; "God loves me" is confirmed by the love of my Christian brothers and sisters empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Second, could we ever validate theistic practice? It was mentioned early in Chapter 10 that, perhaps when one confirms a sufficient number of beliefs delivered by a given practice, the practice is then validated. This suggestion seems to rely on predictive confirmation, for it seems clear enough that what connects the confirming instances and the validation of the practice is an inductive argument that relies on the regularity of the objects about which the beliefs are formed. This is not unlike Alston's appeal to the inductive subargument in his overall justificatory argument for a belief in the reliability of a doxastic practice. Induction, resting as it does on our trust in the regularity of nature, provides grounds for the move from confirming instances to validation only if the principle of induction is assumed (practically, at least) within the practice.

If this model for the relationship between validation and confirmation is correct, then insofar as nonpredictive, comportment confirmations do not rest on the regularity of nature the inductive inference is not possible. We could never have validation of a theistic practice, at least if that validation rests on predictive confirmation. This aligns well with Alston's claim that, if we discovered that God was dealing with us in a predictable fashion, we would have evidence that the theistic practice is unreliable. To expect validation of this type is to expect too much. Perhaps we must be satisfied with nonpredictive confirmation of individual beliefs or perhaps, for many of us, no confirmation whatsoever.

But this is not to say that there is no nontrivial self-support provided for CP. Is there another model for understanding the relationship between the confirmation of beliefs and the validation of practices? I believe so. On the comportment understanding of confirmation, if beliefs and experience fit together well, they are confirmed. One of the beliefs that fits with the rest of the beliefs in a theistic noetic structure is that, although God does not reveal him-



self on demand, he does love us and will provide enough information to allow us to become committed to him. The confirmation I have of certain theistic beliefs occurs when those beliefs are taken together with my entire set of beliefs and experiences. The practice that allows me to move from experience to theistic belief—CP, exaggerated CP, or whatever other practice—is “validated,” in this case shown to be rational, within the broader system of beliefs and experience. I can judge beliefs generated by a practice to be reliable because the belief that it is reliable comports well with my entire (or at least a large part of my) noetic structure; there is nontrivial self-support for the practice. This comportment is exemplified in particular by the relationship between the belief about the reliable nature of the theistic practice and the belief that God loves me and will provide sufficient information for me to commit myself to him.

This is circular but not, I think, in a surprising way. As Alston suggests, our epistemic practices are basic practices. We should not, therefore, hope for a noncircular type of confirmation. Unique person practice and CP seem to be just such circular practices. Since we have no other access to the objects about which we form beliefs besides the practices that generate the beliefs, we cannot appeal to outside, independent information as a source of confirmation.

So, just as the only access we have to the physical world is through perception, perhaps at the end of the day the only access we have to God is through the practice that generates theistic beliefs. Thus the range of practices from PP through unique person practice and CP are nontrivially self-supported. The confirmation of their deliverances relies on the practices that form them, and in turn the validation of the practices themselves—their rationality—relies on the confirmation (predictive or nonpredictive) of the beliefs generated by them. The confirmation challenger might argue that we could have access to theistic beliefs by using a discursive belief-forming practice (natural theology) and that this is what should validate the practice of forming theistic beliefs. But given the lack of success with natural theology (comparable to the lack of success in epistemology with confirming perception's deliverances by reasoning from beliefs about sensations, or from sensations themselves, to beliefs about the external, physical world), it hardly

seems likely that we should turn there to show the rationality of the practice or, by extension, confirmation of beliefs. Furthermore, discursive reasoning is no less a basic practice, on Alston's terms.

Whatever one demands of beliefs about God, one should demand no more of them than that demanded of unique person practice beliefs. Confirmation and validation of an independent, non-circular variety is not available for either unique person practice or CP beliefs. Since an independent check is not available, one should anticipate a kind of circularity in their confirmation. So, there is or can be as much link between basic CP beliefs and other information (which makes the theistic beliefs likely to be true, or at least our taking them as such to be rational) as there is between unique person practice beliefs and other information (which makes unique person practice beliefs likely to be true, or our taking them as such to be rational). In either case, the beliefs can be properly basic or immediately justified: their practices can have rationality and that at the same level. Thus the requirement that theistic beliefs be confirmed and theistic practices validated in the sense that confirmation requires predictive regularity is overly strong. The demand assumes that regularity of the object of belief is a necessary feature for confirmation of belief. In turn, this assumes that justified beliefs can only be formed about objects for which regular, predictive confirmation is possible. But what is necessary for justification is not regularity but trustworthiness or reliability. Alston provides an account of how a practice can be reliable without having a regular object behind it. I have attempted to provide an extension of his account, suggesting that confirmation of some beliefs about non-regular objects may occur. Whether a given belief about a non-regular object is confirmed is an empirical question to be answered by whether one has the appropriate experiences and forms the needed beliefs.

I have suggested a new parity thesis between CP and unique person practice. I have also suggested a sketch of how the beginnings of a holistic framework for a defense of  $PT_N$  could go, along with a defense of  $PT_N$  against two potential criticisms. In the final chapter I suggest another holistic principle in which Christian beliefs may find justification, and I provide a summary of the book's argument.

## [ 12 ]

## World-Ordering Power and Passionate Commitment

There are two goals for this final chapter. The first is to suggest another holistic principle by which Christian beliefs may be justified, thus indirectly strengthening  $PT_N$ . Although this by no means provides a full account of holism vis-à-vis theistic belief, it provides another small piece of the sketch of a map for further exploration. The second goal is simply, by way of conclusion, to summarize briefly the positions argued in this book.

### 1. More on Holism

All that was suggested in Chapter 11 about the holistic framework for defending  $PT_N$  dealt with confirmation understood from within the various epistemic practices. This was an attempt to meet the internal consistency requirement that is typically taken to be part and parcel of holist theories. But there is much more to holist theories of rationality than mere confirmation and consistency. There is also a comprehensiveness requirement. A holist theory of rationality must include a description of how much of our experience is taken account of by the set of beliefs taken to be justified. The most comprehensive system is the rational one, other things being equal. I say nothing further about this requirement vis-à-vis showing CP to be rationally engaged in except this brief point. To argue that CP is the most comprehensive system of religious be-

liefs would be to argue that the internal support of CP is not only equal but superior to that of other religious epistemic practices. So arguing would be doing the work required to reply more fully to the religious plurality challenge discussed in Chapter 11.

There is also what we can call the requirement of "coherence," that is, the supposed internal relatedness of beliefs in a holist system. This requirement is notorious in that it is very difficult to say just what this relatedness comes to. Is it logical entailment, or a kind of probabilistic relation, or explanatory power, or aesthetic harmony? There is also the requirement of congruence, that is, the ability of the system of beliefs to deal with empirical data, or, put otherwise, the appropriateness of the interpretive scheme to experience. I say nothing in detail of either of these. But I do say something about one feature of our religious belief systems that is often overlooked or at least not dealt with to any degree by epistemologists. The issue touches to some degree on each of the requirements listed here, but what I have to say is not meant to be a fully developed thesis about holism.

### 2. Belief, Acceptance, and Commitment

As is well known, the Bible commands Christians and Jews to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, souls, and minds. Some act on this command. One question to ask is this. When they do, how is the resulting firm religious commitment epistemically acceptable, given what many, theists and nontheists alike, see as the limited amount of evidence for theistic claims? Before answering this question, I need to make some preliminary distinctions.

We can identify at least four senses of the term "belief," labeling them as follows: (a) proposition, (b) belief, (c) acceptance, and (d) commitment. In the remainder of this chapter, I mean by "proposition" what logicians sometimes do—that which is asserted by declarative utterances or that which is either true or false. The remaining three senses of "belief" stand in relation to this first sense. A proposition is that which is believed or accepted or that to which one is committed. Thus, belief, acceptance, and commitment are all propositional attitudes. I took note of some of Plantinga's comments about these distinctions in Chapter 6, but I said little of them

save for calling attention to them. Returning to a few of his comments illustrates more fully what I have in mind.

Plantinga lists what he thinks should be given in an account of a person's noetic structure.<sup>1</sup> In particular, he notes that one can distinguish between belief and acceptance:

Consider a Christian beset by doubts. He has a hard time believing certain crucial Christian claims—perhaps the teaching that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself. Upon calling that belief to mind, he finds it cold, lifeless, without warmth or attractiveness. Nonetheless he is committed to this belief; it is his position; if you ask him what he thinks about it, he will unhesitatingly endorse it. He has, so to speak, thrown in his lot with it. Let us say that he *accepts* this proposition, even though when he is assailed by doubt, he may fail to *believe* it—at any rate explicitly—to any appreciable degree. His commitment to this proposition may be much stronger than his explicit and occurrent belief in it; so these two—that is, acceptance and belief—must be distinguished.<sup>2</sup>

Plantinga says no more about this distinction. Nevertheless, we can extract from his example that beliefs have warmth, attractiveness, and liveliness whereas acceptances do not. Two things should be noted here. First, these characteristics are surely metaphorical. What exactly they come to, when stripped of the metaphor, is difficult to say. Perhaps these characteristics just are the fact that one believes rather than (merely) accepts. Second, whatever they come to, these characteristics surely have more to do with the psychology of the one holding the belief than they do with the propositions held.

Plantinga also seems to suggest that one can doubt that *p* is true and yet accept it, whereas (employing the same notion of doubt) one cannot doubt *p* and yet believe *p*. One can accept some proposition, in spite of its lack of warmth, liveliness, and attractiveness. This may simply be an extension of the point above; perhaps doubt simply *is* the absence of these phenomenological features, just as belief is their presence. We have, thus, an intuitive picture of belief and acceptance with which to work.

1. What follows is an incomplete list of Plantinga's suggestions; see his "Reason and Belief in God" for further information.

2. Ibid., p. 37.

Plantinga also includes in his requirements for an account of a person's noetic structure both an index of degree of belief and an index of degree of acceptance. This brings us to the last sense of "belief," that is, commitment. Plantinga writes: "I believe both that  $2 + 1 = 3$  and London, England, is north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; but I believe the former more resolutely than the latter."<sup>3</sup> Presumably he would say something similar about the index of degree of acceptance. At any rate, here we have what I wish to isolate as commitment. Commitment, as I understand the term, has to do with the relative unwillingness of the epistemic subject to give up a proposition. The more unwilling one is to give up a proposition as true, the more firm one's commitment to that proposition is. So, we hold various propositions with different levels of firmness. This is true whether they are held as beliefs or acceptances; one can be more or less committed to a proposition in terms of how firmly one believes it as well as in terms of how firmly one accepts it. In short, one can be more or less strongly committed to a proposition; thus, there are levels of commitment.

Furthermore, it appears that commitment of these two types (belief- and acceptance-commitment) can be at odds with one another. In his example, Plantinga suggests that the Christian's commitment to the proposition he accepts (but has a hard time believing) is greater than his occurrent belief in that proposition. Although there are many questions one could ask of Plantinga's example, it seems clear enough that there are various levels of commitment to propositions, and this commitment is intimately related to belief and acceptance, even when belief and acceptance conflict.

Now, it is certain that the demands of the Judeo-Christian tradition involve passionate commitment. What kinds of epistemic constraints is such commitment under?

### 3. The Justification Maxim

Let us say that one requirement of commitment is expressed by what I call the "justification maxim." Roughly, the justification maxim is that no proposition should be given more (or less) com-

3. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 54.

mitment than its (epistemic) justification can bear. More formally, where *PA* is any propositional attitude,

Justification Maxim<sub>1</sub>: The commitment allotted *p* by *S*, via *S*'s *PA*, ought to be commensurate with *S*'s (epistemic) justification for *p*.

Note that, so described, the justification maxim is a normative claim. Need it be? Perhaps not. Perhaps the thrust behind it could be understood in Alston's evaluative sense. Thus, one might suggest that the justification maxim is better described as:

Justification Maxim<sub>2</sub>: It is a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, that the commitment allotted *p* by *S*, via *S*'s *PA*, is commensurate with *S*'s (epistemic) justification for *p*.

Whichever framework the justification maxim is best understood in (I work with the evaluative version here, without defending it explicitly), it suggests a certain kind of problem with theistic belief.

Theistic belief is often, if not typically, taken by the mature believer as seriously as, or more seriously than, any other belief. This frequently means that, when other beliefs conflict with theistic belief, the others lose out: the competing beliefs are modified or rejected in accordance with the demands of the theistic beliefs. This signals the extraordinary firmness of the believer's commitment toward her theistic belief. The question on which I focus here is, then, how such firm commitment is justified vis-à-vis what many people, theist and nontheist alike, take to be the relative lack of evidence for theistic beliefs.

My concern is not that theistic propositions lack evidence altogether; it seems clear enough that they do not. It is not, that is, that theists are irrational in believing or accepting certain claims. That, it seems to me, is the burden and the success of Reformed epistemology. Rather, the problem is how to provide *sufficient* evidence for one's believings and acceptings in light of the very firm, heartfelt commitment the theistic believer often has toward these propositions. In suggesting a solution to this problem, the following discussion indicates another reason to move toward a holistic

account of CP's epistemic status, as well as some principles with which to begin the conversation. Conveniently enough, some of Plantinga's claims are suggestive of a solution to the problem of theistic commitment. Thus, I once again engage Plantinga's claims directly, but that is not my primary aim. His work is simply a good place to begin. I briefly review Plantinga's criticism of classical foundationalism and then move on to a challenge to his position. I suggest a response and then use that response as a springboard for further discussion.

#### 4. Plantinga's Criticism of Classical Foundationalism Revisited

Plantinga's response to the evidentialist challenge, insofar as it is rooted in classical foundationalism (see Chapter 6), is twofold. The first claim is that the classical account of the criterion for a belief's being properly basic is self-referentially incoherent. The second aspect of Plantinga's challenge is that the history of skepticism teaches us that, rather than being a steady rock on which to rest knowledge and rational belief, classical foundationalism has been the rock on which knowledge and rational belief founder. According to the skeptical tradition, classical foundationalism's criterion does not allow many of our ordinary beliefs to be justified. That Susan is in pain, or that there is a tree in front of us, are claims that are not properly basic according to the classical criterion for proper basicity (a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses). Yet we have no argument for these beliefs or their kind; we can give no discursive account of them vis-à-vis the requirements of classical foundationalism. They are thus not properly nonbasic either, and skepticism is at the door. How can classical foundationalism remain a viable theory when many of our widespread beliefs cannot be justified in light of its demands? For Plantinga it is not viable and ought to be rejected.

If classical foundationalism is not viable, then neither is evidentialism insofar as it grows out of classical foundationalism. Thus, the evidentialist challenge to theistic belief is not viable either. As we have seen, however, Plantinga has opened the door to another theory of rationality that does not, he thinks, rule out the proper

basicity of either our widespread beliefs or the religious believer's theistic beliefs.

Since the classical criterion for proper basicity has been rejected as too narrow, whatever replacement is suggested should be broad enough to allow our widespread beliefs to be rational. In particular, Plantinga mentions beliefs about other minds, beliefs about the external world, and beliefs about the past. I do not think Plantinga would be against adding to this list beliefs about how we discover things about the world, specifically the principles of induction, deduction, the scientific method, and the like. But I see no easy way to capture such principles. Let us just say that those principles we typically use to advance our knowledge ought not to be ruled out by the replacement criterion.

With these restrictions on what we can take as an acceptable criterion, recall Plantinga's suggestion that we should use an inductive procedure to discover a criterion for proper basicity. Can this approach be successful in producing the results Plantinga desires, namely, allowing for the proper basicity of beliefs about God but ruling out a too-narrow criterion? Why, for example, can the classical foundationalist not argue that, since Plantinga's suggested procedure is person- or community-relative, it may be possible to find a group of classical foundationalists who hold the traditional classical criterion for proper basicity *and* who find it to be self-evident? This is possible on Plantinga's own grounds, they might say, for Plantinga suggests that self-evidence is a person-relative notion.<sup>4</sup>

Suppose, then, that the classical foundationalists do some field-work, finding a group of epistemologists who have done Plantinga's suggested inductive procedure. Furthermore, suppose this group finds the classical criterion to be self-evident. For these epistemologists (call them the "entrenched classical foundationalists"), since the classical criterion is self-evident, the self-referential criticism fails.

4. See Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Rational?" in *Rationality and Religious Belief*, ed. C. F. Delaney (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), where Plantinga discusses self-evidence at length. In a delightfully humorous story, George Mavrodes, "The Stranger," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff, pokes fun at the notion of self-evidence as described by Plantinga. In the story, a proof for God's existence begins with the self-evident premise that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

Plantinga can retort as follows. First, by suggesting that self-evidence is person-relative, he never meant that just anything can be taken to be self-evident. Generally, self-evident propositions are person-relative only in the sense that, as one's knowledge of a field grows, one's grasp of the truths in that field becomes deeper. For example, some mathematical proposition that was self-evident for Einstein is not for me. It might become self-evident for me if I study enough mathematics, but it is not right now. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that one's knowledge of epistemology will ever help one come to grasp self-evidently a proposition as controversial as the classical criterion. Unlike some mathematical propositions, even if the classical criterion is explained to me I will never self-evidently "see" it. On this basis Plantinga might ask the entrenched classical foundationalists if they really find the classical criterion self-evident or if they are only stretching to reach something that protects their favorite theory.

Second, and more important, Plantinga can fall back on the widespread belief criticism. Even if the classical criterion truly does seem self-evident to entrenched classical foundationalists, according to classical foundationalism all one's beliefs must be justified. This demand extends to principles by which we come to know things. In addition to the classical criterion, there are the principles of induction, for example. Yet the classical criterion seems to rule out their legitimate use, since they are not self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. Nor do they follow from beliefs that are. This problem has been a skeptical thorn in the classical foundationalist's flesh since Hume at least.

The entrenched classical foundationalists might suggest that inductive principles are themselves self-evident, but this move seems to open the foundations to just about anything being self-evident. Such a move would play into Plantinga's hands, for if that is what one means by self-evidence, why not take theistic beliefs to be self-evident (and thus properly basic) as well? As an alternative, the entrenched classical foundationalists may suggest that inductive principles ought to be understood as part of a heuristic meta-epistemological framework. By definition, however, this move is ruled out. Foundationalism requires that all rational beliefs be either properly basic or nonbasic. Belief in the principles of induction cannot be outside one's noetic structure. How then are inductive principles to be justified?

Plantinga's modified foundationalism fares better in answering this question. Caution is needed, however, for if there is one thing to be learned from the widespread belief criticism it is this: the criteria for properly basic beliefs cannot be overly strong. But it is simple enough to desire overly strong criteria. Plantinga seems to do this himself in his response to the Great Pumpkin objection, where he writes:

If belief in God is properly basic, why can't just any belief be properly basic? Couldn't we say the same about any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic? . . . If we say that belief in God is properly basic, won't we be committed to holding that just anything, or nearly anything, can properly be taken as basic, thus throwing wide the gates to irrationalism and superstition?<sup>5</sup>

In his response, Plantinga makes it clear that not just any belief can be properly basic but that a properly basic belief, although lacking discursive evidence, does not lack grounding. Thus, some beliefs are not properly basic for they lack grounding. Further, Plantinga claims that arriving at the criterion for proper basicity leads to charging belief in the Great Pumpkin with irrationality. But why should the Great Pumpkinite accept this? Admittedly, belief in the Great Pumpkin is not something I take to be rational, but what if we come on some tribe that believes it is? Suppose this tribe has read Plantinga, followed his inductive procedure, and takes Great Pumpkin belief as properly basic? Suppose they even specify their criterion for proper basicity and it does not lead to incoherence? What is Plantinga to say?

Perhaps Plantinga's desire to rule out Great Pumpkin belief is motivated by the fact that we do not have any natural inclination to believe in the Great Pumpkin whereas we do have a natural inclination to believe in God. Nevertheless, Plantinga qua theist would surely admit the rationality of Great Pumpkin belief insofar as such belief actually resembles theistic belief. But is this not just to say that the force of Plantinga's response is derived from the oddity of the example he chooses? Had he chosen Judaism, Islam,

5. Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," p. 58.

or Hinduism perhaps the rejection of the objection would not seem to follow quite so quickly.

How would it be possible, once the inductive procedure is completed, for Great Pumpkin belief to be rejected as irrational? First, if no one ever had Great Pumpkin experiences and simply chose arbitrarily to believe in the Great Pumpkin, no such belief would be rational. It would not be grounded. Second, if one did have Great Pumpkin experiences to ground such belief and Plantinga still rejected the belief as irrational, he must mean that *no* Great Pumpkinite's belief is rational. He must, in other words, have some independent reason for rejecting Great Pumpkin belief, namely, it fails to meet *Plantinga's* criterion. He must hold that the criteria for proper basicity are quite strong—so strong as not to be person- or community-relative. Plantinga seems to think this way, at least part of the time; if one inductively arrives at *P* as the criterion for proper basicity and *P* rules out Great Pumpkin belief, then no one's belief in the Great Pumpkin could be rational. But, with respect to Plantinga, what if the Great Pumpkinite takes his belief to be properly basic and thus arrives at a different criterion? Plantinga's response is inconsistent with his inductive procedure and its potential results. To be consistent, he must allow for such a potentiality. The Great Pumpkin objection, understood as the demand for a very liberal openness to what *might* count as properly basic, seems to stand against his theory, and thus Plantinga appears to be committed to a weaker sense of rationality than some of his comments indicate.

Since Plantinga himself struggles with the status of the criterion for proper basicity, one wonders about the proper way to understand it. We can say at least two things. First, any criterion must itself be rationally justified. Second, inductive procedures can justify some criteria. This latter point entails that the proposition expressing a criterion is nonbasic, since the proposition (or rather its belief or acceptance) is based on others. The principles of induction, on the other hand, can be either basic or nonbasic. Either way, the criterion must not be overly strong or the grounding of the principles of induction becomes impossible. If the principles are to be properly basic, the criterion cannot rule them out. If they are to be nonbasic, there must be some properly basic belief (or set of beliefs) to justify the principles of induction which is not itself

ruled out by the criterion. For our purposes, given a sufficiently weak criterion, the principles of induction can be properly basic. The following sketch shows how.

Suppose we set out to discover which of our beliefs are properly basic. We decide that, if anything is properly basic, beliefs *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction are. Of course, at this time we do not know the criterion for proper basicity. Intuitively, however, we take these beliefs as basic and properly so. We discover inductively that these beliefs all share property *P*. Property *P* is thus the criterion for proper basicity. The statement that expresses the fact that *P* is the criterion for proper basicity can be based on at least one other belief, specifically, one of the principles of induction. Thus, the statement of the criterion is nonbasic, yet *P* functions as a criterion for *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction. Induction thus legitimately justifies *P* as the criterion. The principles of induction, however, need not be discursively justified but are grounded, since they fall under the criterion discovered by the inductive approach. So, Plantinga's modified foundationalism can fare well, potentially at least, on the issue of how inductive principles are to be justified.

##### 5. Widespread Beliefs as Fundamental Assumptions of Rationality

The above suggestions leave open the possibility of accounting for our widespread belief in the principles of induction. In fact, on the account sketched above these principles are important in discovering the replacement for the classical criterion for proper basicity and yet do not lead to the kind of self-referential incoherence found in classical foundationalism. But what about other widespread beliefs such as beliefs about other persons, the external world, or the past? Do these fare as well? I believe they do, but I do not take the time here to consider them individually. Instead, I consider why these so-called widespread beliefs are important to rationality.

It would be a mistake to think that the importance of these widespread beliefs for rationality lies in the fact that most everyone takes them to be true. First of all, it clearly does not follow from

the fact that most people hold (versions of) the widespread beliefs that the beliefs are indeed true. This is a variation of that infamous freshman fallacy of the bandwagon. But even if they were all true, their truth does not necessarily make them rational. What does? Consider these propositions. "There are other people alive." "There are real trees (or rocks, or mountains, or the like)." "I remember yesterday's events accurately." Such propositions, whether held as beliefs or acceptances, are central in our lives. One cannot imagine, at least with any seriousness, living life without them (or at least their near relatives). Why do we take them so seriously? Why do we take them as a necessary starting point for any theory of rationality? Simply stated, I believe they have the ability to greatly arrange and order our other beliefs and acceptances.

There appears to be a hierarchy of beliefs and acceptances in our noetic structures. Some we are willing to give up quite quickly; others we are not. What I have been calling widespread beliefs fall into the latter category. Another notion from Plantinga's work can help us explore the importance of this observation. He claims that in describing one's noetic structure one must include an index of "depth of ingression":

Some of my beliefs are, we might say, on the periphery of my noetic structure. I accept them, and may even accept them quite firmly, but if I were to give them up, not much else in my noetic structure would have to change. I believe there are some large boulders on the top of the Grand Teton. If I come to give up this belief, however, . . . that change wouldn't have extensive reverberations throughout the rest of my noetic structure; it could be accommodated with minimal alteration elsewhere. So its depth of ingression into my noetic structure isn't great. On the other hand, if I were to come to believe that there simply is no such thing as the Grand Teton, or no such thing as the State of Wyoming, that would have much greater reverberations. And if, *per impossible*, I were to come to think there hadn't been much of a past . . . or that there weren't any other persons, that would have even greater reverberations; these beliefs of mine have great depth of ingression into my noetic structure.<sup>6</sup>

6. Ibid., p. 55.

To give up some beliefs would radically alter one's noetic structure. The connections between beliefs can be enormous in number and complicated in kind. I suggest that the reason the so-called widespread beliefs are so important to rationality is that they have, to borrow Plantinga's phrase, the greatest depth of ingression. Perhaps more intuitive terminology would be helpful here. Let us say that such beliefs have the greatest world-ordering power.

Before moving on, it is important to clarify exactly which beliefs or acceptances have the status of being widespread, as well as the relationships between the notion of world-ordering power and notions such as level of commitment, belief, and acceptance. Obviously we cannot simply identify widespread beliefs as person-specific beliefs. For example,

(1) I am writing at a brown desk

is not widespread. Since you are reading, rather than writing, (1) is not one of your current beliefs. Neither, in all likelihood, is (1) a belief many people have right now.

It is also not the case that

(2) There is an external world

is widely held in the sense that most people now believe it. Many nonphilosophers have not even thought about it, let alone believe it. In fact, it is not belief qua propositional attitude that is important at all. Instead we should consider beliefs qua propositions.

But it is not idiosyncratic propositions that are truly central either. Rather, it is the kind of proposition that is important. Here the kind is picked out by the various contents of beliefs; there are beliefs about physical objects, others about other persons, still others about the past, and so forth. It is certain kinds of proposition that are widely held, rather than any idiosyncratic proposition. Everyone holds these kinds of proposition: physical object propositions, other-mind propositions, and so forth. And although we are willing to admit that we can be wrong about some individual members of the various kinds, we are not typically willing to admit that we can be wrong about the entire kind.

So the terminology "widespread belief" is misleading in two ways. What is important for our discussion is not beliefs qua propositional attitude. Nor is it belief qua idiosyncratic proposition. What is important is rather that certain assumptions are made by every person with ordinary beliefs. It is here, I believe, that the distinction between beliefs and acceptances becomes important. As noted, most people do not explicitly believe propositions such as "There is an external world," or "There are other minds," and the like. I have little doubt, however, that on inquiry most people would admit that they at least accept such propositions as background assumptions. These propositions are immediately entailed by the ordinary kinds of propositions we all hold. Even though many, if not most, people do not explicitly believe them (not ever having really thought about them), they do believe propositions that fall into the kinds "external world propositions," "other-mind propositions," and so forth. Our acceptance/assumption of propositions such as "There is an external world" and "There are other minds" simply expresses our commitment to our ordinary beliefs being (generally) rational.

These acceptances are greatly world-ordering. They are parts of the complex of speech and action that go into making up our shared lives together. One cannot successfully ignore or question these acceptances; questioning comes to an end. These acceptances are so deeply embedded in our noetic structures and our human culture that we simply cannot shake them off. Since we must start somewhere in giving an account of rationality, we might just as well begin with the paradigm cases that seem to be necessary for human communication and culture. These acceptances, in a way, are what make us rational.

If I am right about this, then the concerns of Plantinga's "widespread belief criticism" turn out to be concerns about giving an account of certain acceptances that all rational persons have. We all accept certain propositions about reality. Any theory of rationality that fails to explain them is to be rejected on the grounds that it overlooks fundamental constituents of rationality. In light of all this, let what I have been calling widespread beliefs now be referred to as "fundamental assumptions of rationality."



## 6. World-Ordering Power and Fundamental Assumptions of Rationality

I turn now to give an account of how fundamental assumptions of rationality are related to commitment and world-ordering power. First we need a more formal account of world-ordering power:

World-Ordering Power: The ability of a (change in) belief in, or acceptance of, a (given) proposition to adjust other beliefs or acceptances in *S*'s noetic structure.

All beliefs and acceptances have the power to make us adjust our noetic structures. When we take on a new belief, we make other changes as well. When we lose an acceptance, we make other adjustments to go with the loss. What I wish to propose for consideration is that world-ordering power is connected to a principle of rationality, namely, the justification maxim suggested earlier.

The justification maxim demands that no proposition be held with greater commitment than that permitted by its justification. Taking commitment to be the level of (un)willingness to give up one's propositional attitude toward a proposition, one must find some principle that connects one's commitment with one's justification for the proposition. One possibility for linking commitment to epistemic justification is to make commitment a function of world-ordering power. Let us call this the "principle of commitment."

Principle of Commitment: It is a good thing, from the epistemic point of view, if *S*'s (belief or acceptance) commitment to a proposition *p* is commensurate with the world-ordering power of *p* for *S*.<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the more world-ordering power a belief or acceptance has, the more epistemic justification it has. Thus the beliefs

7. There is also a normative account of the principle of commitment: *S*'s (belief or acceptance) commitment to a proposition *p* ought to be commensurate with the world-ordering power of *p* for *S*. Again, the version one picks depends on other considerations. Just as I elected to work with the evaluative version of the justification maxim, so I elect to work with the evaluative version of the principle of commitment.

or acceptances having the least world-ordering power are those to which the least commitment accrues, and those having the greatest world-ordering power are those with the greatest commitment, at least in a rational noetic framework.<sup>8</sup> This raises the obvious question, what does the world-ordering power of a belief or acceptance have to do with its epistemic justification?

A variety of answers could be given here. I limit my discussion to two, rejecting the first. Return to the sketch in Section 4 where Plantinga's inductive procedure was used to discover a criterion for proper basicity while allowing the widespread belief in induction to be rational. There it was suggested that some property *P* is shared by all the beliefs we intuitively take to be properly basic. Thus *P* is the criterion for proper basicity. My initial answer linking world-ordering power to justification is simply that *P* may be the world-ordering power of the properly basic beliefs in question: *A*, *B*, *C*, and the principles of induction all share the same level of world-ordering power. What level? It seems that it would have to be the greatest level of world-ordering power for *S*, for, according to foundationalism, properly basic beliefs are to play a special role in one's noetic structure.

Traditionally, foundationalists thought that one's properly basic beliefs were beliefs without epistemic fault; in particular, they were thought to carry a guarantee of truth. More recent versions of foundationalism have given up the high goal of truth guarantee. Nevertheless, the assumption that basic beliefs play a special role remains. Plantinga, for example, writes: "From the foundationalist point of view not just any kind of belief can be found in the foundations of a rational noetic structure; a belief to be properly basic (that is, basic in a rational noetic structure) must meet certain conditions. It must be capable of functioning foundationally, capable of bearing its share of the weight of the whole noetic structure."<sup>9</sup>

What is it for a belief to be capable of functioning foundationally, to be able to bear its share of the weight? Well, on the classical model of foundationalism, it was to be self-evident, incorrigible, or evident to the senses. But, as we have seen, these sug-

8. This is contrary to the above quotation from Plantinga in which he indicates that a belief can be firmly held but be on the periphery of one's noetic structure (not greatly world-ordering).

9. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," p. 55.

gestions are problematic vis-à-vis the demands of classical foundationalism itself, as well as in giving an account of the fundamental assumptions of rationality.

One suggestion is that to be foundational, and properly so, is to have the greatest level of world-ordering power. One can see right away, however, that this suggestion is problematic. One of the most obvious difficulties is that beliefs such as "Susan is in pain" and "There is a tree over there" (examples of beliefs that are obviously properly basic in the right conditions) do not have the greatest level of world-ordering power. One can give up one of these idiosyncratic propositions without making much change in one's noetic structure at all. Perhaps one is hallucinating, or perhaps Susan is feigning pain for sympathy.

Recall that the propositions I identified earlier as being of the most significance were not idiosyncratic propositions but rather the fundamental assumptions of rationality. On the account given to this point, only the fundamental assumptions of rationality turn out to have the greatest world-ordering power, whereas other cases of properly basic beliefs (such as "Susan is in pain") do not. It seems clear enough, then, that aligning world-ordering power with the criterion for proper basicity as a means to accounting for commitment will not do.

Since the fundamental assumptions of rationality are the propositions that have the greatest world-ordering power, it is important to provide a theory of rational noetic structures that takes this into account. My second answer linking world-ordering power to justification is that the world-ordering power of a proposition within a noetic structure is one of a number of coherence relations that hold among one's beliefs and acceptances. With this suggestion we leave a foundationalist account of rational noetic structures and move, once again, to holism.

It has been said that foundationalism is the most attractive position vis-à-vis epistemic considerations for the theist. One reason for this suggestion is the supposedly strong justification for properly basic beliefs. When a basic belief is grounded, according to foundationalism, there is a tie to the independently existing world; the belief is justified independently of the system of beliefs. This independent tie is often associated with a realist understanding,

both in metaphysics and epistemology, a view attractive to theists who typically believe that God created the world and that the world therefore exists independently of human thought about it. But if God is who the theist thinks he is, why could one not know about God in the independent way foundationalism suggests? Thus the attractiveness of foundationalism for theists.

With holism, however, one has no tie (or at least less of one) to the independent world. Holist models of epistemic justification tend to give little or minimal justification for a given belief. Rather, a belief is only justified within a given noetic structure. In fact, it is the structure that is justified rather than individual propositions. The system relativity of holism and the lack of (or weakened) tie to the supposedly independently existing world are two reasons for the theist to balk at holism.

Nevertheless, realism in metaphysics may have little to do with epistemology. Some things may be real, and independently so, and yet our access to them be limited. We may be, as finite humans, trapped within our systems of beliefs. They may not reflect reality. But if to give a holist account is the best we can do, so be it. Being a theist does not clearly, or even naturally, lead to being a foundationalist.

Furthermore, I believe the present discussion gives some reason to move to holism. Foundationalism, even Plantinga's relatively weak version, does not provide much potential for providing an account of passionate commitment or, for that matter, levels of commitment that match our experience of how religious people act vis-à-vis their religious beliefs. The account of the criterion for proper basicity Plantinga provides may give us nondiscursive justification for single, individual beliefs such as "I see a tree," but it does little to account for the fundamental assumptions of rationality. What is really important are not Plantinga's widespread beliefs understood as individual beliefs but the fundamental assumptions of rationality underlying them. These propositions, and our attitudes toward them, are what are truly central for rationality. A holist account of rationality that provides a means of accounting for levels of commitment must include some principle of rationality connecting commitment to something like world-ordering power.

## 7. The Justification Maxim and Theistic Belief

I have suggested that the justification maxim demands commitment commensurate with epistemic justification and that one potential principle that might provide a link between the two is the principle of commitment. By way of conclusion, I wish to make some observations about religious belief and its world-ordering power.

I have said that the fundamental assumptions of rationality are not in the typical case beliefs, but rather that they are closer to acceptances. Most people do not explicitly believe that there is an external world, or that there are other minds, and so forth. They simply accept (often unconsciously) such propositions; the propositions are fundamental assumptions of rationality. Nevertheless, the commitment people have toward these propositions is great indeed, a fact illustrated by the difficulties teachers of philosophy have in convincing their students that the problem of the external world is a real problem. Such assumptions are deeply embedded.

If this is true, then it may appear that my suggestions do not apply to religion, or at least not to Christianity, and that the central goal I set for this chapter—explaining how a theist can be firmly and passionately committed to her beliefs in the face of what appears to be insufficient evidence—are not met. Theism, after all, involves beliefs. Christianity in particular calls for belief. One is to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” to be saved. But if belief is fundamental to theism, and yet the fundamental assumptions of rationality qua acceptances have the greatest world-ordering power, then how is it that radical, heartfelt theistic commitment can be justified vis-à-vis the justification maxim and the argument of the previous several sections?

This question can be more easily handled if broken down into two questions. First, does religion involve fundamental assumptions of rationality? The theist, and in particular the Christian theist, responds from within his or her system of belief. The answer, given the truth of Christianity, is that yes, theistic beliefs and acceptances are part and parcel of what it is to be rational. What rational person would refuse the call and demands of God, the Creator, in his or her life? The Christian may not be so bold as to suggest that someone is irrational in not being a Christian, but it

seems quite consistent to say that one is not fully rational if one lacks Christian faith.

The second question is this. The fundamental assumptions of rationality are closer to acceptances than they (typically) are to beliefs. But theistic faith involves belief, not mere acceptance. How can theistic belief then involve the great level of world-ordering power that the other fundamental assumptions of rationality do, but in particular those involving other human persons? A complete answer to this question would take another long essay. Perhaps the following suffices.

It is often noted that the nature of theistic belief is far more complicated than our more ordinary beliefs in propositions. Theistic belief is much closer to trusting one's spouse or best friend than it is merely to believing that there is a tree in the front yard. But theistic faith is complicated in another way as well. It functions, at least for the mature believer, as a grid through which other competitors for belief and acceptance are sifted.<sup>10</sup> I think these two points are intimately connected. The following analogy aims our thinking in the right direction.

I believe in my wife, much in the same way as I believe in God. I love her, I react to her wants and desires, I listen to her, and so forth. I do likewise with God. I love him, I move on (what I take to be) his wants and desires, I listen to him, and so forth. But with my wife I also evaluate my actions and thoughts through her concerns. This is not always conscious. Neither is it always done with passionate *belief*. There are things, for example, that I simply *accept* about my wife, and that I do not necessarily believe, at least currently. I accept that she will act in certain ways toward me, I accept that her character will be more or less consistent over a period of time, and so forth.

It seems to me that I have not always accepted these things. Before my having come to accept them, I believed them. It was much more important for me, in the relative immaturity of our early relationship, to have these things before my mind's eye as things to which I was attracted, as things that I found warm. But it was when I moved from explicitly believing these things to accept-

10. Nicholas Wolterstorff develops this theme in some detail in *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976).

ing them that the beginnings of real maturity in my marriage became possible. It was by my very acceptance of them that I began to recognize my deep commitment to them and, by extension, to her. This is not to say that I never have the propositional attitude of belief toward these things. It is only to say that often I do not and that the lack of belief does not adversely affect the good relationship I have with my wife and, in fact, sometimes allows for an increase in the maturity of the relationship.

Likewise with belief in God. The mature believer accepts certain things about God, his nature, his character, and so forth. He or she need not believe them in the explicit, conscious sense to which I have made reference. This is why in Plantinga's example of the doubting Christian the doubter has not lost his faith. He accepts the problematic proposition; he has thrown in his lot with it. Thus there are several important parallels between theistic belief and beliefs about other individual human persons, that is, between CP and unique person practice.

Be that as it may, there is an aspect of acceptance that was overlooked in the earlier description of the distinctions between belief and acceptance. Some might think of acceptance as a less important propositional attitude than belief. This, I suggest, is not the case, at least not for all acceptances. That there is a material world, that there are other persons, that we have some principles by which knowledge can advance, are acceptances of which we are largely not conscious; our propositional attitude toward them is not as explicit as belief is. Yet we do not treat them lightly when they are challenged. The religious believer in Plantinga's example still accepts, although doubts, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Belief may come and go; it waxes and wanes with the times. But acceptance is something we do more out of a sense of necessity—the necessity of making sense of our experience of reality.

Religious faith does involve acceptances, and thus propositions involved in such faith can be members of the fundamental assumptions of rationality. As such, deep commitment given to theistic propositions is justified, at least potentially, by the great level of world-ordering power the propositions have for theists.

## 8. Summary and Conclusion

My objective in this book has been to explain, evaluate, and defend what I have called the parity thesis. I conclude with a brief summary of the points argued. First I explained and criticized  $PT_A$ ,  $PT_{AS}$ , and  $PT_A^*$ . The first and last of these founder on Alston's failure to take into account a special role for background beliefs in the generation and justification of Christian beliefs.  $PT_{AS}$ , on the other hand, fails to be true since it does not take into account the special place for induction in the justifying argument for PP. Plantinga's basic parity thesis is  $PT_{Pl}$ , but the more narrow thesis,  $PT_{Pl}'$ , is the focus of my discussion, since showing the latter to be false shows the former to be false.  $PT_{Pl}'$  is criticized by what I have called the universality challenge. In defending Plantinga against this challenge, I argued that Plantinga is committed to a kind of arbitrariness because of, once again, a special role for background beliefs in the generation and justification of theistic beliefs. I then argued that Alston and Plantinga are more or less in the same epistemic boat vis-à-vis background beliefs.

In the course of these analyses, I introduced a distinction between conceptual-reading and noninferential mediated practices. The latter require, according to the position taken here, background beliefs that need themselves to have justification. Thus I introduced the notion of a holist aspect to the justification for both unique person practice and CP, since both are noninferential mediated practices. In the process, I introduced a new parity thesis. Finally, I developed the notion of comportment/nonpredictive confirmation as one aspect of the holism, and, in response to what I have called the problem of commitment I suggested a holist principle connecting world-ordering power to epistemic commitment.

My initial goals were three. The first of these was to contribute to the ongoing discussion of the rationality of belief in God. I hope to have at least clarified some of the issues surrounding the parity thesis and Reformed epistemology. The second was to provide an account and analysis of various versions of the parity thesis. I have considered several such accounts and found them all wanting, more or less for the same reason—the role for background beliefs in the justification of religious beliefs. The third and final was to

introduce a new parity thesis that does not fall prey to the difficulty of the others. I have sketched some of the parallels between CP and unique person practice and attempted to argue that  $PT_N$  does not fall prey to the background belief challenge. To defend  $PT_N$  fully would require a complete and general account of holist epistemic justification. I cannot embark on that discussion here. Perhaps, however, we have now before us a few places from which to launch the raft.

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