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William Alston and Alvin Plantinga on the Rationality of Religious Belief

by

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Abstract

William Alston and Alvin Plantinga have both recently argued that religious belief can be rational by being appropriately based upon religious experience, even without the support of propositional evidence, setting themselves against an influential tradition in philosophy. In my thesis, I consider the philosophical and apologetic merits of this strategy, arguing in general that religious beliefs require support from several different kinds of grounds to be rational. In so doing, I examine the practical rationality argument given by Alston, comparing it the approach taken by Sellars, and I consider Plantinga's approach of justifying religious belief by appeal to an analysis of knowledge in terms of the notion of proper function. I find serious difficulties with Plantinga's approach and the practical rationality argument as given by Alston, although I do consider religious beliefs to derive *some* epistemic support from being based upon religious experience.

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Chapter I - Introduction

"Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient oriental Despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men."[1] This quotation from Bertrand Russell is representative of a fairly recent and influential movement, if we may call it that, which holds that belief in God is irrational or unjustified or in some other way epistemically deleterious. Other influential proponents of this view include W. K.. Clifford, Anthony Flew, Ernest Nagel, Brand Blandshard, and on the psychological and sociological fronts we can certainly add Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx.

Extreme views tend to meet with extreme reactions, and in the past few years a counter-movement has indeed arisen. Following Terence Penelhum I will dub this movement the Basic Belief Apologetic.[2] Beginning with a distinction between those beliefs we accept on the evidential basis of other beliefs, and those beliefs we do not (basic beliefs)[3], this movement can be seen as arguing that beliefs about God are or can be properly basic, in the sense that they are rational or justified (or in some other way epistemically up to par) even if they are not based upon evidence or what we might call external support. The proponents of this view often point out that many secular beliefs (e.g. that sense perception is reliable) are allegedly in no better position [illegible] external support than belief in God.

Spearheading the Basic Belief Apologetic are William P. Alston and Alvin Plantinga, both having developed in the past dozen years or so formidable defences of theistic belief of ever-increasing subtlety and comprehensiveness.[4] I will examine the philosophical and apologetic merits of this movement, focusing on the work of Alston, and to a lesser extent Plantinga, and on the burgeoning secondary literature that has grown up around them.

A brief sketch of the major outlines of what is to come: (1) We need to get a much clearer and deeper understanding of the major contours of the Basic Belief Apologetic and, in particular, Alston's epistemology, and the context in which they are best understood. I try to situate them within the (recent) history of philosophy, as well as provide a brief overview of

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1. Russell, Bertrand, "Why I am Not a Christian", p. 273, reprinted in *Philosophy: The Basic Issues*, ed. Klemke, E. D., Kline, David A., and Hollinger, Robert (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
2. Penelhum, Terence, "Parity is Not Enough", p. 99 in *Faith, Reason and Skepticism*, ed. Hester, Marcus (Philadelphia, U.S.A. : Temple University Press, 1992).
3. Ibid.
4. The most mature expressions of their views are to be found in: Alston, William P., *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, and Plantinga's two-volume work *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function*.

(some of) the main issues and positions in contemporary epistemology. Regarding Alston's epistemological views, I will attempt to make clear what he means by a `perception of God', what his account of epistemic justification is, and the account of doxastic practices (roughly, ways of forming and evaluating beliefs) and the problem of epistemic circularity. I will be focusing on *Perceiving God* (hereafter *PG*) since it is his most comprehensive and systematic approach to the epistemology of religion, but where appropriate I will refer to other of his works as well. (2) Once we understand his general epistemological stance, we will be able to consider Alston's attempted solution to the problem of epistemic circularity - the practical rationality argument - and some of the criticisms of it. I too will add my voice to the chorus dissatisfied with the argument, making some points that have not been made in the literature, although I think that certain parts of the argument can be rehabilitated to yield an argument for the *prima facie* rationality of certain religious beliefs. (3) We will consider the challenges raised by the fact of religious pluralism. Alston's approach will be seen to be rather incomplete and unsatisfactory in this regard (although no more so than any other approaches of which I am aware). We will then try to come to an overall judgment on the rationality or reasonableness of the typical Christian (*qua* Christian) as compared to the situation for the typical non-Christian (*qua* non-Christian). (4) We will compare and contrast Alston's practical rationality argument with the approach taken by Wilfred Sellars, with an eye to whether a simpler approach could be used to support religious practices. (5) We will briefly consider the position of Alvin Plantinga, partly because of its many similarities to Alston - in particular, the aim of trying to provide some epistemic support for Christian beliefs within a very similar epistemological framework - and partly because of its own distinctive character which makes it interesting in itself. We will focus on certain internal difficulties with Plantinga's position *qua* theory of knowledge and also on how well it is able to cope with the problem of religious diversity. Some overall conclusions on this thesis will then be reached.

Turning to the task at hand, we have noted that the main motivator of the Basic Belief Apologetic (at least in terms of the history of philosophy; I don't presume to know what motivates Alston *personally)* is a still prominent view which, following Plantinga, we can dub the "Evidentialist Objection" to religious belief.[5] It will be helpful to investigate this objection further. At a first pass, it goes something like this:

> Belief in God is justified only if there is sufficient evidence that God exists. There is no evidence that God exists, or at any rate, not

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5. What follows is greatly indebted to Plantinga's essay in *Faith and Rationality*, "Reason and Belief in God", and Alston's own essay in the same volume, "Christian Experience and Christian Belief".

sufficient evidence that God exists. Therefore, belief in God is unjustified.

By way of understanding this objection and of situating Alston, we should note the epistemology and meta-epistemology underlying it. Typically, this objection derives its force from a kind of Cartesian or traditional *foundationalism* that views the foundations of knowledge (the basic beliefs, or better, the properly basic beliefs) as requiring certainty, or indubitability, or incorrigibility, or self-evidence, or self-presentingness, or the satisfaction of some such stringent criterion of justification. Moreover, it tends to view the relations by which justification is transferred to be deduction from what is basic or, at least, strong probabilification by what is basic. Since belief in God does not satisfy the criterion for being at the foundations of knowledge (i.e. it is not certain, or indubitable, or self-evident...), if it is to be justified it must be either deductively implied by or made probable by what is foundational. And the antecedent of the aforementioned conditional, says the evidentialist objector, does not obtain. Thus, belief in God is not justified.

There is more yet to the iceberg underlying the evidentialist objection. For one thing, the evidentialist objector typically understands the nature of justification *deontologically*, i.e as involving fulfillment or (aptness for fulfillment) of intellectual duties or obligations. The duty, it is suggested, is that of proportioning one's belief to the evidence.[6] Both Alston and Plantinga reject this deontological view of justification in favour of non-deontological conceptions explicitly linked to truth. Their reasons for doing so vary somewhat[7], but their basic, shared reason stems from their conviction that our basic cognitive aim is the obtaining of truth and the avoidance of falsity. What makes justification valuable is that it is a desirable condition for a belief relative to this aim, for a belief is justified only if it is likely to be true (more on this point later). Alston goes so far as to say: "If a belief's being justified has no implications for the likelihood of its being true, then this is epistemic justification in name only."[8] I have no wish to contest the claim that the maximization of truth and the minimization of falsity is our basic cognitive aim, although we should

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6. Thus Bertrand Russell: "Give to any hypothesis which is worth your while to consider just that degree of credence which the evidence warrants."-*A History of Western Philosophy*, p. 816.

7. It would lead us too far astray to delve into Alston's reasons here (Plantinga espouses almost exactly the same reasons), but let me just say that I tend to agree and I will just briefly cite his own justification for this stance. "...they [deontological conceptions] either make unrealistic assumptions of the voluntary control of belief or they radically fail to provide what we expect of justification." The quote is from "Knowledge of God", p. 10. Alston has argued carefully for this position in "Concepts of Epistemic Justification" and "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification", both reprinted in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge.*

8. Alston, William P., "Knowledge of God", p. 25 in *Faith, Reason, and Skepticism.*

note that this presupposes that truth has a very high *value* for human beings.[9]

Returning to the evidentialist objection, an important distinction should be made between the Jamesian and the Cliffordian understandings of the obligation to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence. Roughly speaking, the Jamesian view is that a belief is justified so long as one does not have sufficient reasons for regarding the belief as false. The Cliffordian view is more stringent; a belief is justified only if there are sufficient reasons for regarding the belief as true. To use an over-worked metaphor, the former view is that beliefs are innocent until proven guilty and the latter view is that they are guilty until proven innocent. In the early "Christian Experience and Christian Belief", Alston distinguishes between two corresponding conceptions of justification: strong justification is Cliffordian, weak justification is Jamesian.[10] Although Alston has since abandoned this terminology, it provides a useful way of clarifying the evidentialist objection. Is the evidentialist objector using a strong or a weak concept of justification?

I suspect a close reading of those who I have lumped into the evidentialist camp would reveal that some use the strong concept of justification, some the weak. Performing this task is beyond the present purpose. What is important here is to note that one important way in which Basic Belief Apologists are reacting to the evidentialist objection is to argue in favour of the weak conception of justification or *something very similar* to it. Both Alston and Plantinga agree that belief in God need not be based upon evidence - in the sense of propositional evidence or argument - in order to be justified (or rational, or something in that neighborhood). To anticipate (and over-simplify) a bit, Alston wants to establish that many theistic beliefs are *prima facie* rational in virtue of being based upon certain experiences of God, which he calls `perceptions of God'. Plantinga wants to establish that theistic beliefs can be *prima facie warranted* (warrant is a somewhat different notion than justification for Plantinga, although it occupies a very similar *role* in his theory of

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9. Not everyone shares this conviction. Stephen P. Stich is a notable dissenter, arguing in *The Fragmentation of Reason* (1990) that we do not value true beliefs nearly as much as is often supposed, thus rejecting what he calls truth-linked epistemologies and arguing instead for a pragmatic account of cognitive evaluation. Goldman (1992) takes issue with Stich, arguing that, of course, true beliefs have more value (for securing our ends) than false ones. Although I don't buy Stich's position, Goldman's criticism misses the mark, for Stich is not denying that true beliefs have more value than false ones, merely that true beliefs have as much value as we often suppose. Stich's argument relies upon a complex analysis of truth and falsity in terms of meaning and reference, and it seems to me the proper response is to say that Stich has showed us something interesting about the meaning of beliefs, not about the high value of truth. Alas, a proper discussion of this would lead us far off topic, so I defer it for another occasion.

10. p. 118 in *Faith and Rationality*. The Cliffordian view is expressed in "The Ethics of Belief" and James' view in a response to Clifford titled "The Will to Believe", both reprinted in *Philosophy: The Basic Issues* (see note # 1).

knowledge) in virtue of being the result of properly functioning cognitive faculties. And though they have different approaches, both are united in their opposition to the strong conception of justification by their adoption of the *prima facie/ultima facie* structure.

What precisely is this structure and what are its implications? It is a two-tiered approach to justification (or warrant, rationality, etc.). The basic idea is that the satisfaction of certain conditions makes a belief *prima facie* justified, i.e. justified on the face of things, and the satisfaction of certain other conditions gives the belief a higher, more valuable status. Epistemologists vary greatly in their opinion of what the conditions for *prima facie* justification are, but almost invariably they are weaker than the criteria proposed by traditional, Cartesian epistemology for what counts as the foundations of knowledge, e.g. certainty or self-evidence. This is quite intentional, for the idea is to *shift the burden of proof* so as to allow that we know more of the things we ordinarily take it that we do know, and perhaps also to avoid other problems with traditional foundationalism. (This is not to imply that all or even most of those who use the *prima facie/ultima facie* structure are foundationalists.) A *prima facie* justified belief, however, can have its status defeated by sufficient reasons to the contrary, which come in two main varieties. To use Alston's terminology, `rebutters' are reasons for believing that not-p, and `underminers' are reasons for thinking that the ground lacks its usual justificatory efficacy.[11] If there are no rebutters or underminers for a *prima facie* justified belief that p, or if all rebutters and underminers have themselves been defeated, then p is *unqualifiedly* justified, or as I have been saying, p is *ultima facie* justified.[12]

This leads to an important point that has already been implicitly made, which is that Alston and his allies have a *different* kind of foundationalism than the traditional, Cartesian foundationalism. Both Alston and Plantinga are arguing, although in different ways, for a kind of moderate or *fallible* foundationalism in which the criterion by which a belief gains entry to the hallowed hall of basicality is less demanding, in a sense, than that of the Cartesian foundationalist. On the Cartesian view, a foundational belief couldn't be mistaken, it couldn't turn out to be false. Precisely this is denied by fallible foundationalism, on grounds I have hinted at above, such as that infallible foundationalism is self-referentially inconsistent (is it really certain or self-evident that only certainty, self-evidence, and so on, are the correct criteria for proper basicality?[13]) or that it results in a undue restriction of the scope of knowledge.[14] It is worth

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11. *PG*, p. 158. The terminology derives from Pollock's discussion of defeaters in *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, pp. 37 - 39. What Alston calls 'underminers' are called 'undercutters' by Pollock, although they both use the same term for reasons for believing that not-p (rebutters).

12. *PG*, p. 159.

13. Cf. Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", pp. 49 - 63.

14. Cf. Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid", p. 168 in *Knowledge in Perspective*.

noting that by making the foundations of knowledge fallible, one has thereby made *all* knowledge fallible, which, according to one's perspective, may be either more realistic than Cartesian foundationalism, or the attempt to shirk or abandon a crucial epistemological project (I tend towards the former view).

We have seen how Alston has reacted to the evidentialist objection and traditional epistemology in several ways: by the rejection of a deontological conception of justification, by moving towards something like a weak conception of justification, and by the adoption of the *prima facie/ultima facie* structure and a kind of fallible foundationalism. In doing so, we have already done most of the work in situating Alston in contemporary epistemology. Several issues still need to be addressed, notably the internalism/externalism debate, but it seems to me that this might best be done by proceeding to the details of Alston's epistemology, to which I now turn.

Chapter II - Alston's Position

According to William Alston, the central thesis of *PG* is "that experiential awareness of God - the `perception of God', as I call it - can provide epistemic justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God."[1] There are several things to note here. First, Alston seems to be focusing on a certain kind of *religious experience* - a `perception' of God.[2] Second, Alston's focus is squarely upon *justification;* the central thesis of *PG* is not directly concerned with knowledge, although the question of whether there is (or could be) religious knowledge is obviously of great interest and may very well receive some treatment in passing . So, the most fundamental question we should ask (at least concerning *PG* and concerning Alston) is whether Alston has succeeded in showing that the 'perception of God' provides justification - or rather, since justification comes in degrees, at least *some* justification - for certain kinds of beliefs about God. I think the answer has to be yes, but as we shall see, I also hold that the degree of justification here is significantly less than Alston seems to think. Accordingly, then, a good place to begin our detailed examination of Alston's epistemology is with his conceptions of justification and knowledge.

A. Justification and Knowledge

A belief is epistemically justified, according to Alston, if and only if it is based upon an adequate ground.[3] What sort of thing is a ground? A ground is that upon which a belief is based. It is a psychological notion and also an epistemic one.

> As for grounds, psychologically a ground of a belief is that on which it is based, that by reliance on which the believer formed the belief, that of which the

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1. Alston, William P., "Precis of *Perceiving God*", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LIV, No.4, December 1994, p.863.
2. We should be clear that although Alston tries to cast the net wide enough to include `perceptions of Ultimate Reality', he is really focusing on the concept of God as found in the major theistic religions - Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Cf. *PG*, p. 2. His examples of mystical experience are drawn solely from within these religious traditions, and it is these traditions he is primarily referring to when he talks about the mystical doxastic practice (MP) - i.e. the practice of forming beliefs about God based upon perceptions of God. Furthermore, Alston narrows his focus to the Christian mystical practice (CMP) by the middle of *PG* (Ch. 5). To be fair, Alston does consider his defence of the rationality of MP to extend to the rationality of non-theistic religions. I don't want to pass judgment on this matter here, but the reader should be aware of Alston's main focus, and I should make it clear that I will also be largely focusing on theistic religions when I discuss the epistemic status of MP, mainly because of my lack of background in non-theistic religions (not because of lack of interest).
3. *PG* , p. 75.

> believer was taking account in forming the belief. A ground can be another belief(s) or an experience: those are the most obvious possibilities.[4]

So all grounds are psychological, but clearly not all grounds are epistemically relevant. Alston makes it clear that he is interested only in those grounds that "provide some significant degree of support or justification for the beliefs they ground."[5] He calls these `supporting' or `justifying' grounds.

Grounds also come in two kinds, mediate and immediate. "Where the justification is mediate this ground will consist in other things one knows or justifiably believes. Where it is immediate it will consist typically of some experience".[6] So a mediate ground is a belief, an immediate ground is an experience, and in both cases a ground is that upon which a belief is based, in the sense of being that which the believer took into account in forming the belief.

Another qualification is in order. In "An Internalist Externalism" [7], Alston argues for an Internalist position on the *existence* of grounds, and an externalist position on the *adequacy* of grounds. I don't want to go too far into the argument here, but a few points are necessary. According to Alston, whether a ground is adequate is an external affair, i.e. something of which a believer need not have any knowledge or beliefs whatsoever. But what the *justifying* ground of a belief *is* is an internal affair, in the sense that what justifies a belief is something which a subject can typically determine just on reflection. Alston puts the rationale for this internalist requirement thus:

> I find widely shared and strong intuitions in favour of some kind of accessibility requirement for justification. We expect that if there is something that justifies my belief that *p*, I will be able to determine what it is. We find something incongruous, or conceptually impossible, in the notion of my being justified in believing that p while totally lacking any capacity to determine what is responsible for that justification.[8]

We now have some idea of what a ground is. But what makes a ground adequate?

> ...justification requires that the ground be adequate in the objective sense that the ground be such as to render it objectively likely that the belief be true. This is an externalist conception, since there is no reason to suppose that these objective probability relations are attainable just on reflection.[9]

Several points are worth noting here. First, if a belief is based upon an adequate ground, and thereby justified, it must be the case that the belief is objectively very likely to be true, given that it was formed upon that

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4. Alston, "The Place of Experience in the Grounds of Religious Belief", in *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology*, ed. Clark, Kelly James (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), p. 87.
5. Ibid, p. 88.
6. Ibid, p. 73.
7. Alston, "An Internalist Externalism", reprinted in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*.
8. Ibid, pp. 234 - 5.
9. *PG*, p. 75.

ground. This is succinctly put by Alvin Plantinga: "if a belief B is justified, then it was formed on the basis of a ground G such that the objective conditional probability of B on G (P(B/G)) is high."[10]

As briefly noted above, Alston is here endorsing an *externalist* conception of the *adequacy* of grounds, as opposed to an internalist one. As he draws the distinction, internalism with respect to the adequacy of grounds requires that "the justificational status of a belief is, at least typically, open to the reflective grasp of the subject...And externalism is simply the denial of this constraint; it holds that justificational status need not be directly accessible to the subject."[11] There are a number of reasons for Alston's rejection of an internalist perspective on the adequacy of grounds, which I can't go into here, so let me just say that for him a ground must just *be* adequate - the subject does not have to know, or justifiably believe, or even be able to determine, that the ground is adequate.

A related point is that Alston clearly distinguishes between *epistemic levels* and the requirements for each level. There is a difference between, say, believing that my car is blue, and beliefs about this belief, say, believing that I am justified in believing that my car is blue. Obviously enough, we can multiply levels in this way to infinity. Now the crucial application of this distinction for Alston is that between the state of simply *being justified* and the activity of *justifying* or *showing* that I am justified. The difference between the two is that while in order to justify a belief I have to give considerations in its support, in order to be justified in a belief I don't have to do anything - I must merely be in a favorable state or condition[12], such as having the belief based on an adequate ground. Alston uses a regress argument to conclude that we must, at some point, simply be justified without having to further show that we are justified, on pain of never being justified in believing anything at all.[13]

The astute reader will probably have noticed that Alston's position bears a strong affinity to the contemporary approach to knowledge and justification known as *reliabilism* (indeed, more than an affinity - he *is* a reliabilist).[14] There are different varieties of reliabilism, but we can see the

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10. Plantinga, Alvin, "What's the Question?", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, p. 24.

11. *PG*, p. 75.

12. Ibid, p. 71.

13. Alston gives this argument in various places, e.g., *PG*, p.71, and "Epistemic Circularity" in *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* , p. 332. Also of note in "Epistemic Circularity" is Alston's discussion of the project of "full reflective assurance", or what he also calls "full reflective justification"(FRJ). This is a Cartesian sort of project that never rests content at some point in merely being justified. "When a belief has FRJ, no questions are left over to whether the subject is justified in accepting some premise that is used at some stage of the justification."(Ibid, p. 342) Needless to say, Alston thinks FRJ is impossible.

14. There is a standard problem with reliabilism that we cannot explore in depth but is important to note. The *generality problem* arises because it will not do simply to talk about

core idea as being that knowledge is *reliably produced true belief* - with an additional condition(s) to overcome Gettier problems.[15] Reliabilism is committed to a strong externalism, at least insofar as it regards the question of whether the process which produced the belief (or in Alston's terms, the ground upon which it is based) is reliable as an objective one that the subject need not know (justifiably believe) the answer to. Where Alston differs from many reliabilists is in refusing to equate reliability with justification, as, for example, Goldman [16] does, and in insisting that the existence of justifying grounds is an internal matter, as we saw above.

Putting the main aspects of Alston's epistemology we have examined thus far together, we can say that he has a hybrid internalist-externalism that leans toward externalism, a non-deontological conception of justification, his position is reliabilist, he distinguishes between epistemic levels, and he holds a kind of fallible foundationalism. Hopefully this will suffice as an explication of Alston's conception of justification. I turn now to his view of knowledge. First off, Alston regards knowledge as *reliably engendered true belief* (with a codicil(s) to mollify Gettier), putting him squarely in the reliabilist camp.[17] Except for Gettier cases, one knows that p just in case p has been produced in a way that generally produces true beliefs, and p is true. But, and this is what is distinctive about Alston, he does *not* regard justification as necessary for knowledge. It is possible for one to know that p without being justified in believing that p. This strange, counter-intuitive result may seem less

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a process (or practice) as reliable *simpliciter*; processes are only reliable in certain circumstances and with respect to certain ranges of issues, and moreover, there are degrees of reliability. Depending upon the description of the circumstances, range of issues, and degree of reliability required adopted, different judgments about reliability can be reached. Which of the apparently infinite variety of descriptions is the right one? I don't think that Alston ever adequately answers this question. A possibly adequate approach is that taken by Ernest Sosa, who claims that the relevant circumstances, range of issues, and degree of reliability required are contextually fixed by the epistemic community to which a person belongs or defers. Cf. "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective" in *Knowledge in Perspective*. Also see chapter VI for a discussion of the generality problem in relation to Plantinga's epistemology.

15. It is standardly acknowledged in contemporary epistemology that Edmund Gettier, in his paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", *Analysis* 23 (1963), pp. 121 - 3, definitively showed through the use of counter-examples (henceforth called Gettier examples) that a belief could be justified and true yet not count as knowledge. A common reaction has been to propose an additional condition(s), that, together with justification and knowledge - or, in the case of reliabilism, together with reliability and truth - is sufficient for knowledge.

16. Goldman has equated justification with reliability since at least "What is Justified Belief?"(1979), reprinted in *NaturalizingEpistemology*, 2nd edition, ed. Kornblith, Hilary (Cambridge, Mass. : The MIT Press, 1994). In some of his most recent work he seems to be recognizing a kind of justification distinct from reliability. Cf. "Strong and Weak Justification", in *Liaisons: Philosophy Meets the Cognitive and Social Sciences* (1992). I'm willing to restrict my remarks to the old, paradigm Goldman.

17. "Knowledge of God", p. 26.

puzzling when we reflect upon just what the difference is between knowledge and justification for Alston.

The first difference that comes to mind is that whereas one can be justified in believing a false belief, one cannot know a false belief. One can be justified in a false belief because even an adequate ground may not (in fact, almost certainly will not) produce true beliefs on every occasion, i.e. the probability of a beliefs being true given that it is based on an adequate ground is very often going to be less than 1. If one knows that p, however, not only is one's belief that p based on an adequate ground, p must also be true. Thus, we can see Alston's conception of knowledge as the combination of his requirement for the adequacy of grounds with the requirement that the belief be true.

So far this does not distinguish Alston from scores of other epistemologists. A more telling difference between knowledge and justification is that a justified belief is one the ground of which is typically reflectively accessible to the subject (the internalist constraint), whereas for knowledge this is not necessarily the case. If the inputs to the process by which a belief was formed are not something a subject could reflectively identify, that belief is not justified, even if the process is highly reliable and the belief is true, although the belief *would* count as knowledge. So in a way, the requirements for justification are *more stringent* than for knowledge, according to Alston. This isn't the way we are normally accustomed to viewing knowledge and justification, but, for better or worse, that is because of the influence the JTB tradition (i.e. the tradition analyzing knowledge as justified true belief) has had over us, and Alston, to a certain extent, rejects that tradition.

Alston is not indifferent to the counter-intuitiveness of his position, and he tries to soften the blow in a couple of ways. First, he claims that while justification is not strictly necessary for knowledge, it will nearly always be true that cases of knowledge will also qualify as cases of justified belief, since, "almost everything our beliefs are based on is a sort of thing that is typically reflectively accessible to its subject; if our beliefs are based almost entirely on other beliefs and on experiences, that thesis will be secured."[18] Second, he makes the plausible claim that the generic difference between mere true belief and knowledge is whether it is just an *accident* that the belief is true.[19] Alston goes on to claim that being produced in a manner that generally yields true beliefs captures the essence of non-accidentability, and this is why true beliefs that are reliably

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18. *PG*, p. 76.

19. Alston, William P., "Knowledge of God", p. 30. I would claim that the focus on accidentability conforms to (and perhaps partly accounts for) our intuitions about the difference between knowledge and true belief, although precisely how to understand accidentability is a very difficult issue.

engendered are cases of knowledge, even though they might not be cases of justified belief.[20]

Even though we know that Alston endorses a form of fallible foundationalism, and thus rejects coherentism[21], it may yet be helpful to say a bit more about his position on the structure of knowledge. It would be easy to suppose that his position bares little or no similarity to coherentism, but the relationship is more subtle than that. Generic coherentism is committed to holding that all immediately justified beliefs are justified in virtue of *cohering* with other beliefs. That is, the only *source* of immediate, direct justification is coherence. Coherentism can be combined with foundationalism in various ways. One can hold, for example, that the only source of immediate justification is coherence, but one might espouse a limited foundationalism insofar as other beliefs could be justified by being based upon immediately justified beliefs (based upon them, not just cohering with them).

We have not looked at thus far the particular form Alston's fallible foundationalism takes. At the foundational level are beliefs that get *prima facie* justification from *experience* and other mediately justified beliefs are built up from them. But the epistemic relationship here is reciprocal. Because the foundations have only *prima facie* justification, they can be overridden by sufficient evidence to the contrary, which means that "inferred beliefs can provide epistemic support and weakening for beliefs on the foundational level."[22] There is a foundational structure, to be sure, but there is mutual, reciprocal support through and through, and it is this in particular which his position shares with coherentism.

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20. Ibid, p. 31. It's not clear to me that Alston's right about this. We can imagine counter-examples in which a person has a bizarre belief-forming process that is reliable and in which the particular belief in question is true, but it does seem that the belief is true only by accident. Plantinga tries to capture the notion of accidentability in proper function; a belief is non-accidental only if it has been produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly. I'm not sure that Plantinga is right either, because of the many difficulties with proper function (see Chapter VI). If proper function *can* be reasonably explained, then we might say with Alston that it explains the achievement of knowledge, although it does not itself figure in the analysis of knowledge. Cf. "Epistemic Warrant as Proper Function", p. 402 in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LV, No. 2, June 1995.

21. There are three basic objections Alston and many others raise against coherentism (this is no more than the barest of sketches here). First, it is argued that coherentism is not sufficiently *discriminating* , allowing into the fold any sort of belief, no matter how patently bizarre or unreasonable, so long as it 'coheres' appropriately with one's belief-system. Second, it is complained that the meaning of 'coherence' is obscure. Third, it is objected that the coherence theory does not allow for the appropriate place of *experience* (e.g. sensory experience) in justifying our beliefs.

22. "Knowledge of God", p. 31.

Thus, there isn't the radical difference between Alston's position and coherentism which many other foundationalists have claimed.[23]

I must largely put aside questions about whether Alston is right about knowledge and justification, for my main purpose here is to see whether Alston's position can do what he says it can for religious beliefs *supposing* (for the sake of argument) that it is correct. To this end, we need to examine Alston's theory of perception and its relations to his views of justification and knowledge.

B. Perception

As we know, Alston's central claim in PG is that `perceptions of God' can provide epistemic justification for certain kinds of belief about God. The kinds of beliefs in question are what he calls M-beliefs (`M' for manifestation), which are "beliefs to the effect that God is doing something vis-a-vis the subject...or to the effect that God has some (allegedly) perceivable property."[24] M-beliefs are typically going to be occasioned by `perceptions of God'. Let us look at this notion of perception in more detail.

> The focus will be on what are taken to be *direct, non-sensory* experiences of God. In calling them "experiences" I am thinking of them as involving a *presentation, givenness, or appearance* of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God. It is this *presentational* character of the experiences that leads me to range them under a generic concept of perception.[25]

Several things stand out from this quotation. First, Alston is focusing on experiences of God that are direct and non-sensory. The non-sensory aspect is fairly straightforward. The experiences of God Alston is concentrating upon are non-sensory in that they do not contain sensory content. "But though mystical perception is like sense perception in the fact of *presentation,* it is frequently utterly unlike it in content, at least in those numerous cases in which no awareness of sensory qualia is involved, no colors, shapes, sounds, smells, and the like."[26]

The directness is a little more complicated. Alston distinguishes direct from indirect perception, and also from indirect perceptual recognition.

> We can distinguish directly seeing someone from seeing her in a mirror or on television....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 vapour trail across the sky as an indication that a jet plane has flown by....We can then say that indirect is distinguished from

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23. A notable example of a kind of synthesis of foundationalism and coherentism, and also of internalism and externalism, is the epistemology of Sosa. See *Knowledge in Perspective* (1991), in particular "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective".
24. *PG*, p. 1.
25. Ibid, p. 5.
26. Ibid, p.16.

> 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.[27]

We should be clear what Alston is doing. He is not claiming that all perceptions of God are direct and non-sensory. On the contrary, he allows that there are or could be cases of indirect perception of God and indirect perceptual recognition of God, and both sensory and non-sensory kinds of these. What Alston is doing is focusing on the direct, non-sensory cases of experience of God, because he believes these constitute the bulk of experiences of God, and because he believes they contribute more to the justification of M-beliefs than the other kinds.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, what seems to be characteristic of a perception of God is that the subject has an experience that involves a presentation, givenness, or appearance of God. The *phenomenological* aspects of the experience seem paramount, and indeed this fits in with Alston's generic theory of perception, which he calls the Theory of Appearing.

> According to this theory, what perception *is* is the awareness of something's appearing to one *as such-and-such*, where this is a basic, unanalyzable relationship, not reducible to conceptualizing an object as such-and-such, or to judging or believing the object to be such-and-such.[28]

Alston also says: "...the analysis of the concept of object perception given by the Theory of Appearing is of breathtaking simplicity. For S to perceive X is simply for X to *appear* [my italics] to S as so-and-so."[29]

This brings us to another point. Alston is quite clear that he does not mean to use `perception' as a success term. No doubt there is a difference between genuine and illusory perception, or in other words, between veridical and non-veridical perception. But Alston has divorced the term `perception' from any implications of veridicality; for S to perceive X does *not* imply that X actually exists, only that S has had a particular experience which she would take to be of X. Thus, if S perceives God, that means that S has had a (putative) experience of God, i.e., S has taken herself to be presented with God, but not that God exists.

One last facet of Alston's theory of perception deserves some attention. In both sensory and mystical perception, beliefs about what is perceived are based on the experience itself, but also on what Alston calls `background beliefs'. If my experience is such that I take myself to be seeing a maple tree in front of me, and I form the belief that there is a maple tree in front of me, obviously a belief about what a maple tree is is involved in forming this experience, and also in identifying the object of this experience. The same thing occurs in mystical perception. Background beliefs about who God is, what He is like, and so forth, figure importantly in both identifying God as the subject of perception, and in forming beliefs about God (M-beliefs) based on such perceptions.

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27. Ibid, p.21.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid, p.55.

Perhaps the kind of mystical experiences Alston is focusing on, and how his theory (allegedly) applies to them, can best be seen with an example that he considers to be one of a number of paradigm cases of perceiving God.

> One day when I was at prayer...I saw Christ at my side - or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul [the imagination]. He seemed quite close to me and I saw that it was He. As I thought, He was speaking to me. Being completely ignorant that such visions were possible, I was very much afraid at first, and could do nothing but weep, though as soon as He spoke His first word of assurance to me, I regained my usual calm, and became cheerful and free from fear. All the time, Jesus Christ seemed to be at my side, but as this was not an imaginary vision [i.e., a vision seen by the "eyes of the soul"] I could not see in what form. But I most clearly felt that he was all the time on my right, and was as witness of everything I was doing.[30]

By way of warning, we should be clear that Alston is not taking perceptions of God to be restricted to the kind of 'earth-shattering' experiences in which the awareness of God occupies one's attention to the exclusion of all else. Rather, Alston wants to include "background" experiences of God that are analogous to sensorily perceiving an object on the edge of our awareness, such as the following: "God surrounds me like the physical atmosphere. He is closer to me than my own breath. In him literally I live and move and have my being."[31]

Much more could be said about Alston's account of perception. Two kinds of questions loom large: (1) Do the traditional reports of mystical experience, such as the one from St. Teresa quoted above, count as perceptions of God on Alston's account? (2) Is Alston's generic theory of perception satisfactory? But since I have other fish to fry in this chapter, I will move on to other topics.[32]

Earlier we examined Alston's conception of justification and knowledge. Putting Alston's theory of perception together with his conception of justification, then, the main issue to be examined becomes: Do perceptions of God constitute an adequate ground for M-beliefs? In other words, are M-beliefs likely to be true given that they are based upon perceptions of God?

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30. The quote and the comments in square brackets are taken from Norman Kretzmann's article "St. Teresa, William Alston, and the Broadminded Atheist", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, p.45. Kretzmann is quoting from St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila by Herself*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin Books, 1957), pp. 187 - 9. The same passage is quoted at greater length and claimed to be a paradigm case of perceiving God on pp. 12 - 13 of Alston's *PG* .

31. Alston, William P., *PG*, p. 32. The quote is taken from William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902), p. 71.

32. There is a growing body of literature focusing of Alston's theory of perception. Among the best are George S. Pappas, "Perception and Mystical Experience", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LIV, No.4, December 1994, pp. 877 - 883; Richard Gale, "Why Alston's Mystical Doxastic Practice is Subjective", in the same volume, pp. 869 - 875; and, Robert Audi, "Perceptual Experience, Doxastic Practice, and the Rationality of Religious Committment", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, pp. 1 - 18.

Having said this, the issue immediately becomes more complicated because of the fact that perceptual beliefs are based upon not only experiences, but also background beliefs. In other words, perceptual beliefs have mediate and immediate grounds. But, Alston contends, "there is no way of giving a general formulation of the ways in which other justified beliefs have to be related to a perceptual belief in order to contribute to its justification. Hence we are forced to formulate the issue in less specific terms."[33] Where do we go from here? "My choice is to appeal to the idea that there are `standard', `accepted', `normal' ways of forming perceptual beliefs - both sense perceptual and mystical perceptual."[34] Thus, we are lead to *doxastic practices,* and the suggestion is, as we shall see, that we consider doxastic practices as (one of) the grounds of perceptual beliefs.[35]

C. Doxastic Practices

Roughly speaking, a doxastic practice is a way of forming and evaluating beliefs. Sense perception (SP), memory, introspection, induction are all doxastic practices, and says Alston, so are mystical practices (MP's) - i.e., the practices of forming beliefs about God based on perceptions of God. But it will be helpful to get a little sharper view of these doxastic practices.

> A doxastic practice can be thought of as a system or constellation of dispositions or habits, or to use a currently fashionable term, "mechanisms", each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an "input". SP, for example, is a constellation of habits of forming beliefs in certain ways on the basis of inputs that consist of sense experiences.[36]

Also:

> I think of a doxastic practice as the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type.[37]

The output of a doxastic practice is a belief (hence the name `doxastic'), the input will be either another belief or an experience, what

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33. *PG*, p. 100.
34. Ibid.
35. It is important to realize that Alston is proceeding on a worst-case scenario, in which the *only* positive epistemic ground for religious beliefs is perceptual experience. In fact, he does *not* believe that this is the case Responding to a criticism by Terence Tilley (in the same volume) that his approach fails to identify one form of MP as more reliable than others, he says: "Tilley ignores the fact that the discussion of religious diversity in Chapter 7 [of *PG*] was carried on in terms of a `worst case scenario', according to which there are no other sufficient grounds for taking one form of MP to be more reliable than its rivals. I do not believe that to be the case." The quote is from *Religious Studies 30* (1994), p. 178. In other places (e.g. *PG*, pp. 7-8), Alston *suggests* that natural theology and the "traditional evidences" of Christianity may have some value in showing CMP to be epistemically superior to other forms of MP, although I do not know of any place where he actually gives such an argument.
36. *PG*, p. 153.
37. Ibid, p. 155.

relates the input to the output is a mechanism, and a doxastic practice is a `system' or `constellation' of such mechanisms. We should note the similarity to what other epistemologists (particularly reliabilists) often call *processes*. Thus Alvin Goldman: "Let us mean by a `process' a *functional operation* or procedure, i.e. something that generates a *mapping* from certain states - `inputs' - into other states - `outputs'. The outputs in the present case are states of believing this or that proposition at a given moment"[38] It may be that there is only a difference of name here, and that a doxastic practice could just as easily be seen as a system of belief-forming processes. In any case, nothing much seems to hinge on this matter, so I will continue.

What unifies these mechanisms into a doxastic practice? "Since mechanisms are defined by their constituent functions, the most basic ground for such groupings will be similarities in their constituent functions. These similarites may be more or less strong."[39] If this seems disconcerting, it fits with Alston's insistence that there is no uniquely right way to individuate doxastic practices. In a rather Wittgensteinian tone, he says, "There is no one right answer as to how much difference is compatible with sharing the same practice. We can draw the boundaries in the way that best serves one or another theoretical purpose."[40] It may be comforting to know that Alston sees all direct perceptual belief formation as exhibiting a single function, from an experience of X's appearing F to S to the belief that X is F.[41]

Alston gets around the situation of it being strongly arbitrary how one individuates doxastic practices by the introduction of another factor: the overrider system. Doxastic practices have overrider systems which help to individuate them.[42] What is an overrider system and what does it do? The overrider system is a background system of beliefs and procedures that a subject uses to check whether a *prima facie* justified belief is in fact unqualifiedly justified. The overrider system is as much a part of the doxastic practice as the habits of belief-formation.

Within SP, for example, there are many situations in which we call upon our overrider system. If someone reports seeing a U.F.O. hovering above his house last night, we have some idea of how to go about seeing whether this belief is true (or justified) - i.e., check to see if any other

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38. Goldman, Alvin, "What is Justified Belief", p. 116 in *Naturalizing Epistemology* (2nd ed).
39. *PG*, p. 156.
40. "Response to Critics", *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), p.176.
41. *PG*, p. 156.
42. Rather, typically only *generational* doxastic practices have distinctive overrider systems. Alston distinguishes generational doxastic practices from transformational ones; the former produce beliefs from nondoxastic inputs (experiences, I presume), the latter produce beliefs from other beliefs (see *PG*, pp. 157 -8). On the whole, Alston is much more concerned with generational practices than transformational ones because, I presume, the former are epistemologically more basic.

people saw a U.F.O. last night, assess his condition as an observer, check with the weather office, and so on. The same applies to mystical perception, claims Alston. Within mystical practices, there are distinctive overrider systems that function (among other things) to rule out certain (putative) mystical experiences as being genuine. If, for example, someone reports an experience in which God told him to kill all philosophers, this would get ruled out by all mystical practices (I hope!) on the grounds that God would convey no such message.

It is clear that doxastic practices are intimately related and mutually involved. The outputs from one practice are often used by another, and perhaps more significantly, the epistemic status of one practice sometimes partially depends on the epistemic status of another practice. To use one of Alston' s examples, reasoning relies upon other practices for its premises, e.g. beliefs derived from memory and sense perception. It also works in reverse: beliefs derived from perceptual experience sometimes get overridden because of what we know from reason or memory (e.g. it looks like an oasis but likely isn't; it's likely a mirage). An example of the kind of epistemic dependence I have in mind is the relationship between SP and MP; SP is the epistemically more basic practice because MP presupposes a competence in SP, and moreover, if SP is not justified (or rational, reasonable - whatever the relevant epistemic concept is), MP cannot be. Just think of how one *learns* the conceptual scheme associated with a religion - one is told about it, one might read about it in various holy documents, and so on. I'll have occasion to say more about this epistemic dependence when I discuss the problem of religious pluralism.

Doxastic practices are thoroughly social. They are socially learned, socially shared, socially organized and reinforced. There are few, if any, completely idiosyncratic doxastic practices, and, as we shall see later, Alston takes a dim view of them if there are any.

Two very important tenets of Alston's epistemology are the *autonomy* and irreducible *plurality* of doxastic practices. There is a plurality of doxastic practices that cannot be reduced to one basic practice, so he claims. What's more, the standards appropriate to one doxastic practice cannot be used to judge another doxastic practice (or its outputs). Historically, philosophers have tended to exalt one doxastic practice as epistemically privileged, as the one by which the others should be judged. He sees Thomas Reid as his inspiration for this point, and provides this quote from him:

> The skeptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason, says the skeptic is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception? - they came both out of the same shop, and

> were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false are into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another.[43]

Commenting on this, Alston says:

> Reid's point is that the only (external) basis we have for trusting rational intuition and introspection is that they are firmly established doxastic practices, so firmly established that we cannot help it; and we have exactly the same basis for trusting sense perception, memory, non deductive reasoning, and other sources of belief for which Descartes and Hume were demanding an external validation.[44]

The lesson Alston draws from this is that there is no appeal beyond the doxastic practices we find ourselves with. To borrow a Quinean metaphor, we are all in Neurath's boat. Now, one might object that we *do* have an external basis for trusting one doxastic practice over another, because we can demonstrate that certain doxastic practices are reliable. This brings us to the main reason for Alston's thesis of the autonomy and plurality of doxastic practices, namely, *epistemic circularity*. It is epistemic circularity in our arguments for the reliability of any of our doxastic practices that renders us unable to priviledge one doxastic practice over another. Moreover, to reduce our doxastic practices to an underlying unity would require reducing the various modes of justification inherent in doxastic practices to some deeper mode of justification,[45] and epistemic circularity shows this to be impossible. How and why epistemic circularity has these drastic effects we will see in a moment.

Before we move on, let us take a moment to take stock of where we are. Connecting Alston's view of doxastic practices with his concept of justification and his theory of perception, we get the following question: Do mystical doxastic practices constitute adequate grounds for M-beliefs? In other words, are M-beliefs objectively likely to be true given that they are the outputs of a mystical doxastic practice (MP)? Yet another formulation: Are mystical practices (MP's) reliable?

One might have expected that Alston would set about tackling this issue directly, adducing reasons to believe that at least some (e.g. the Christian one) MP is reliable. But Alston is forced to take an indirect route - the practical rationality argument - and the reason has to do with epistemic circularity .

D. The Problem of Epistemic Circularity

Alston defines epistemic circularity thus: epistemic circularity "involves a committment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be *justified* in holding the premises".[46] We can see how epistemic circularity arises by considering what Alston calls a

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43. Reid, Thomas, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind* , ed. T. Duggan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 207. Quoted by Alston on p. 151 of *PG*.
44. *PG* , p. 151.
45. Ibid, pp. 162 - 3.
46. Ibid, p. 108.

ument, in its simplest form, would go something like this:

1. Belief p produced by sense perception is true.
2. Belief q produced by sense perception is true.
3. Belief r produced by sense perception is true.
4. Belief s produced by sense perception is true.
5. Sense perception is reliable.

ere is, of course, no upper limit on the number of such premises that ıld be adduced (except, who would want to write them all down?). This ument does not suffer from logical circularity - the conclusion does not ure as one of the premises. But it does suffer from epistemic circularity, s Alston, because if we ask ourselves how we are justified in believing y of the premises, it soon becomes apparent that we are actually relying SP in order to know that the premises are true. We have to *use* SP as source of these premises, thereby already assuming that SP *is* reliable. u might think that we could get some of these premises from some ırce other than SP, but Alston's reply to that is that we would have ison to trust this other source only if we *already* had reason to trust .[47]

Chapter 3 of *Perceiving God* is devoted to a consideration of a ttery of arguments for the reliability of SP.[48] Alston's considered lgment on all of them is that they suffer from epistemic circularity. Inless and until someone comes up with a more successful alternative will have to conclude that we are unable to give a non circular monstration, or even strong supporting argument, for the reliability of ."[49] Alston then extends this result to all of our doxastic practices - emory, induction, deduction, introspection, and so on - as well as to MP. Rather than argue for each of our doxastic practices that no non-istemically circular argument for its reliability is available (a gargantuan sk), Alston makes use of a regress argument.

> Whatever the possibilities of a non circular proof of reliability for one or another source, if we pursue the question far enough we will either (a) encounter one or

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Ibid, p. 107.

Alston's monograph *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell iversity Press, 1993) also contains an extensive consideration of arguments for the iability of SP, but as far as I can tell, it is substantially the same as Ch. 3 of *PG* . rtainly no startling new directions are taken.

PG, p. 143.

For those who are curious, the way in which Alston makes the case that MP cannot be own to be reliable in a non-epistemically circular way goes like this. The most obvious ndidates for a non-circular support for the reliability of MP are natural theology and velation. The trouble is that there doesn't seem to be a way to use natural theology or velation that doesn't appeal to MP. In fact, revelation just seems to be kind of perception God. With regards to revelation, even if we could appeal to it non-circularly, it is ubtful that any of its conclusions would imply that MP is reliable because it operates at o high a level of abstraction. My summary here is taken from pp. 144 -5 of *PG* .

> more sources for which a non circular proof cannot be given or (b) we will be caught up in circularity, or (c) we will be involved in a infinite regress. Since the number of basic sources is quite small for human beings, we can ignore (c), and for that same reason any circle involved will be a small one. Thus in practice we can say...either there are some doxastic practices for which we cannot give a non circular demonstration of reliability, or in giving such demonstrations we involve ourselves in a very small circle.[51]

At this point, I have no wish to contest this conclusion regarding SP or any of our doxastic practices - Alston has presented a very impressive argument.[52] My only critical contributions will be to carely scrutinize (in the next section) Alston's 'solution' to the problem epistemic circularity creates, and to defend his estimation of the severity of epistemic circularity against a possible objection from within the reliabilist camp.

Even if one accepts Alston's criticism of various arguments to show that SP or some other doxastic practices is reliable, one might be inclined to view epistemic circularity as something that can be overcome. In particular I think of the positions taken by some other philosophers who hold epistemological theories quite similar to Alston's, namely Alvin Goldman and James Van Cleve.[53] Goldman and Van Cleve address epistemic circularity in connection with the 'problem of induction', but their positions can easily be extended to the justification of other doxastic practices.

What is the problem of induction? There is in fact some disagreement among philosophers on this point, but a digression on this subject does not seem prudent here. I will simply adopt the view expressed by Van Cleve and Goldman for the purposes of discussion. Thus Van Cleve: "The problem of induction is the problem of showing that [some] inductive inferences are justified."[54] Goldman goes further to make explicit a distinction between two problems: "The first is: Can we have justified beliefs based on inductive inference? The second is the problem of second-order justifiedness: Can we have a justified belief that we can have justified beliefs based on inductive inference?"[55] Thus, the first plank of the Van Cleve-Goldman `solution' is to divide the problem

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51. *PG*, p. 147.

52. It might be thought that I ought to give some considerations to support my acceptance of Alston's stance on epistemic circularity. Ideally, I suppose it would, but it is simply not possible for me to examine each or even most of the arguments Alston considers (there are at least nine separate ones in Ch. 3 of *PG*) within a reasonable amount of space or time. To do so would lead me too far afield when my main objective lies elsewhere. I do take some comfort in the fact that not one single author of whom I am aware has challenged Alston's arguments on this point, hopefully indicating that they have some cogency. I am also quite happy to construe my work on Alston as having something of a hypothetical nature: *if* he were right about epistemic circularity, would his solution work?

53. Cf. Goldman, Alvin, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 393 - 4, n. 21; Van Cleve, James, "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, IX* (1984), pp. 555 - 567.

54. Van Cleve, James, "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction", p. 555.

55. Goldman, Alvin, *Epistemology and Cognition*, p. 393, n. 21.

of induction into two problems, a first-order one and a second-order one. We shall soon see that the essence of their solution is to argue that solving the first-order problem allows us to solve the second-order one.

The second plank of Goldman and Van Cleve's solution to the problem of induction has been hinted at already, namely, a distinction between simply *being justified* and *justifying*. As this applies to beliefs, it means that there are beliefs that are justified for a subject *whether or not* she is aware of the justificational status of these beliefs. The reason they give for this distinction is the same one Alston gives, namely that if a higher-level justified belief were required for every (lower-level) belief to be justified, that would lead us to an infinite regress, implying that we have no justified beliefs. As reliabilists, Van Cleve and Goldman basically hold that a belief is justified just in virtue of being produced (with perhaps a no-underminers clause or something else to mollify Gettier) by a reliable process. This means that it is *sufficient* (ignoring Gettier problems) for a belief to be justified that it has been reliably produced, which (to belabour the obvious) means that *nothing further* is required, i.e. no higher-level justified belief is required.

The next plank in their solution is to argue, quite correctly, that the first-order problem of induction is not too serious. If reliabilism is correct, one can have a justified belief based on induction just if induction is reliable. This is simply an application of the general principle noted above, i.e. that the reliability of a process is sufficient to confer justification upon the beliefs it produces. *If* induction *is* reliable, beliefs based upon inductive inference will be justified.

The final plank in the Goldman-Van Cleve solution is actually quite ingenious. Goldman says:

> ...there is no reason why a belief in the justification-conferring power of induction could not be justified as a result of the self-same inductive process! If the indicated inductive process *is* permitted by a right rule system, then one might apply that same permitted process to beliefs in the process's past successes, and draw the conclusion that the process is successful (reliable) *in general*. From this one could permissibly infer that the process is permitted by right rules [and is thus justified].[56]

Van Cleve actually gives and defends such an argument, which he says is implicit in the lay person's response to why he/she believes in induction.

> *Argument A*
> Most of the inductive inferences I have drawn in the past from true premises have had true conclusions.
> Hence,
> The majority of all inductive inferences with true premises have true conclusions.[57]

Van Cleve's explication of Argument A goes as follows. If induction is reliable, then the premise of Argument A is justified, for it is based on an inductive inference itself. But if the premise is justified, then the

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56. Ibid, pp. 393 - 4, n. 21.
57. "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction", p. 557.

conclusion is also, for we have already seen that there are no higher-level requirements for justification. The conclusion of Argument A tells us that induction is reliable, so (according to the reliability theory and ignoring Gettier problems), it follows that induction is justified. Thus, we have solved the problem of induction.

One might be less than impressed with the Goldman-Van Cleve solution, and the most likely objection is that it is viciously circular. Goldman responds to the charge thus:

> The familiar charge is one of circularity. But how would this charge be formulated in terms of my general theory? It would have to be couched as a further restriction on justifiedness, to be incorporated into a new framework principle. It might run: 'No belief about the permissibility of a process is justified if the belief results from that selfsame process'. But does this restriction have any plausibility? Surely not. It seems quite arbitrary. Would one say that a person could not be justified in believing in the validity of modus ponens if he used modus ponens to arrive at this belief?...If a process deserves to be permitted, then its permission should extend to all subject matter, including its own performance and its own permissibility.[58]

Van Cleve's response is that circularity is a vice only if it is epistemic circularity, and he distinguishes between premise circularity and rule circularity, arguing that Argument A does not suffer from premise circularity and that rule circularity is not really a source of epistemic circularity. Let's take a moment to get clear on these definitions. Van Cleve defines an epistemically circular argument as one in which "a necessary condition of using it to gain knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion is that one *already have* knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion."[59] Obvious examples of epistemic circularity occur when the conclusion occurs among the premises. A more subtle kind is premise circularity, in which "the conclusion...is epistemically prior to one of the premises, in the sense that one could arrive at knowledge of the premise only via an epistemic route that passed through the conclusion first."[60] Rule circularity, on the other hand, occurs when an argument is sanctioned by a rule of inference one could know to be correct only if one already knew that the conclusion of the argument were true.[61]

Van Cleve argues that Argument A does not suffer from premise circularity on these grounds. He admits that one could know (justifiably believe) the premise only by using induction, but denies that *justified belief in the reliability of induction* was required for this purpose.[62] All that is required is that one be justified in the premise, which one is (supposing induction is reliable). However, Van Cleve does admit that Argument A is rule circular, but he denies that rule circularity is epistemic circularity, because one does not have to know or justifiably believe that

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58. *Epistemology and Cognition* , p. 394, n. 21.
59. "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction", p. 558.
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.

the rule (in this case, inductive inference) is correct in order to use the argument sanctioned by it to gain knowledge (justified belief).

Alston's position on epistemic circularity has some strong affinities with Goldman and Van Cleve's, but there are also some important differences. The main similarities are that Alston accepts the level-distinction between being justified and justifying, and the division of the problem of induction into two problems corresponding to the former distinction.[63] But Alston's reaction to the Goldman-Van Cleve type of approach shows that he regards it as severely limited. His basic reaction to their position is that the most they show is that *if* a source of belief is reliable, it can be shown by its record to be reliable (and thus justified). In colloquial terms, that's a big "if".

> We can say the same of any belief-forming practice whatever, no matter how disreputable. We can just as well say of crystal-ball gazing that if it is reliable, we can use a track record argument to show that it is reliable. But when we ask whether one or another source of belief is reliable, we are interested in *discriminating* those that can reasonably be trusted from those that cannot. Hence merely showing that if a given source is reliable it can be shown by its record to be reliable, does nothing to ndicate that the source belongs with the sheep rather than with the goats.[64]

The main difference between Alston and Van Cleve and Goldman on epistemic circularity is *not* that Alston is more concerned to discriminate between sources of belief or doxastic practices (or there is at most a difference of degree here, since Alston is more concerned with more controversial practices (religious ones) than Goldman and Van Cleve). Goldman, at least, in his more recent writings has wanted to appeal to cognitive science to not only determine what the belief-forming processes are, but also to determine whether they are reliable (and also how reliable they are, under what conditions they are reliable, etc.)[65] The main difference is that Alston does not regard the 'conditional' solution, if I may call it that, of Goldman and Van Cleve to be adequate because, on the one hand, it only establishes a conditional truth (if the source is reliable, it can be shown to be reliable), and on the other hand, to really establish the antecedent of the conditional would clearly involve epistemic circularity. This is a problem because in philosophy, at least, it is generally not sufficient merely to assert something; one has to adduce some reasons for it as well.

Thus the motive for the practical rationality argument, and Alston's rationale for calling the approaches of Goldman and other `naturalistic' epistemologists purely *internal* ones.[66] Goldman-Van Cleve type

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63. To give credit where credit is due, the stress on level distinctions is originally due to Alston, and people like Goldman and Van Cleve have picked it up from him. Cf. Alston's "Level Confusions in Epistemology" in *Epistemic Justification*.
64. Alston, William P., *PG*, p. 148.
65. See, for example, "Epistemic Folkways and Scientific Epistemology" in *Naturalizing Epistemology* (2nd ed).
66. *PG*, p. 149.

approaches are purely internal, from Alston's point of view, because they provide no *non-epistemically circular* grounds for discriminating between doxastic practices, i.e. for the comparative epistemic evaluation of doxastic practices. The essence of the approach is to take one's stand *within* the doxastic practice, denying the need for any kind of external support. Alston wants to do something more. He denies that "nothing significant can be said about the epistemic status of SP and other basic doxastic practices without relying on their outputs." [67] The practical rationality argument is to fill this void, providing a way of going about the comparative epistemic evaluation of doxastic practices that is neither purely internal nor pretends to be purely external. [68]

I think we can dig a little deeper and note that while Van Cleve holds that Argument A is not premise circular because justified belief in the reliability of induction is not required to be justified in the premise, and thus for him Argument A is not epistemically circular, Alston *would* consider Argument A to be epistemically circular. The difference is traceable to a difference in their definitions of epistemic circularity, Alston having the broader notion. To recap, Van Cleve defines an epistemically circular argument as one in which, "a necessary condition of using it to gain knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion is that one *already have* knowledge of (or justified belief in) its conclusion."[69] Alston's definition of an epistemically circular argument is one which "involves a commitment to the conclusion as a presupposition of our supposing ourselves to be *justified* in holding the premises"[70]. Using Argument A may not require any knowledge of or justified belief in its conclusion, but Alston presumably would say that it does require a kind of *commitment* to the conclusion, a *practical* commitment. Regarding a track-record argument for the reliability of SP like the one Van Cleve gives for the reliability of induction, Alston says: "The argument would still be *epistemically circular*, for I am still assuming *in practice* the reliability of SP in forming normal perceptual beliefs....the epistemic circularity does not prevent justification from being transmitted from the premises to a conclusion that would have been unjustified except for this argument."[71]

At this point, the reader may be excused for being a bit baffled. Alston holds that Argument A is epistemically circular, but it is not vicious? This way of putting it is a little misleading. The argument is not vicious in the sense that if belief in the premise is justified, belief in the conclusion is as well. But the argument is vicious in the sense that the argument only establishes that if induction (or whatever source) is reliable, then it can be shown by its record to be reliable. And as we saw above, Alston regards this kind of `solution' as very limited.

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67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. "Reliability, Justification, and the Problem of Induction", p. 558.
70. *PG*, p. 108.
71. Ibid, p. 148.

It seems that epistemic circularity is as pervasive and vicious as Alston thinks. What, exactly, *is* the problem created by this fact? For a reliabilist like Alston, it is easy enough to see. Alston's original formulation of the main thesis of *PG* - that perceptions of God provide epistemic justification for M-beliefs - has transformed into the thesis that MP is reliable. And because of epistemic circularity, it is impossible to show that MP (or any other doxastic practice) is reliable. Thus, it is impossible to show that the beliefs generated by MP or any other doxastic practice are epistemically justified. Why, then, should we suppose ourselves to be rational in engaging in these practices or in believing their outputs? We are thus caught in what Alston calls `a crisis of rationality' that demands some sort of solution.

It should be noted that Alston is not entirely horrified by this result. He takes some pleasure in using it to argue against those people who think that SP is superior to MP because SP can be shown to be reliable. "Thus, even if mystical perception cannot be shown, without epistemic circularity, to be reliable, it can't be judged epistemically inferior to sense perception on those grounds. To suppose it can, in the face of these results, is to apply a `double standard.' "[72]

We have already seen that the purely internal reaction to the problem of epistemic circularity is lacking, and we know that Alston favours the practical rationality argument (though we don't yet know what it is except that whatever support it gives to the claim that our practices are reliable will be of a *weaker* kind than epistemic justification), but there is at least one other possibility. One might "weaken the concept of justification, disembowel it of its implications of likelihood of truth."[73] Apart from his attachment to his theory of justification, Alston also makes the sound point that the question of the reliability of our doxastic practices is itself an extremely important one, given our basic goal of getting truth and avoiding error.[74] To this I would add that one can certainly reject Alston's concept of justification and acknowledge the importance of the question of the reliability of our doxastic practices, in which case one would regard Alston as investigating some other important epistemic desideratum (whatever its label) besides "justification". In either case, it seems we have good reason to go on to examine the practical rationality argument.

E. Rationality and Practical Arguments

Before we delve into Alston's practical rationality approach, it may be helpful to lay out some more of the relevant epistemological terrain. In particular, it will be helpful to have some understanding of what

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72. "Precis of *Perceiving God* ", p. 865.
73. *PG*, p. 148.
74. Ibid.

rationality is and of what a practical argument is so we can situate Alston's practical rationality argument. I don't pretend to have fully answered the very difficult and multifaceted question of what rationality is, nor the somewhat more tractable question of what a practical argument is. But I will draw on my own considerations and some recent work by Richard Foley that I think are promising.[75]

To begin with, intuitively there seem to be two main senses in which an argument can be practical. An argument is practical if it has a practical *end*, in the sense that the argument aims at getting you to *do* something. An argument may also be practical in a different sense if it makes an appeal to a practical *goal*, in that this is the goal supposed to be apparently satisfied by the practical end of the argument. The latter sense is closely connected to Foley's understanding of rationality, to which I now turn.

Foley's basic suggestion is that rationality, whether it be beliefs, actions, decisions, or whatever is being evaluated, is a *goal-oriented* notion.[76] To say that something is rational is to say that it will apparently satisfy your goals. But to whom is this apparent? The question is what is the appropriate perspective for making judgments of rationality. Thus, judgments or claims of rationality are relative to some goal or goals, and are made from some perspective. There is also a third main component to rationality: the relevant resources that are being considered. Foley summarizes his main contention in this way:

> A claim about the rationality of your beliefs, when made fully explicit, has the following form: It is rational for you to believe __ because you have resources R and because from perspective P it seems that, given R, believing __ is an effective way to satisfy goal G.[77]

Foley points out that judgments or claims of rationality are usually elliptical with respect to the perspective, goal(s), and resources that are being considered, and thus to properly understand them we must make these variables explicit.[78] Furthermore, there are three main perspectives for making judgments of rationality. First, there is the *egocentric* perspective, which concerns whether our beliefs (actions, decisions,

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75. Foley, Richard, *Working without a Net* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
76. Ibid, p. 3. Foley anticipates and, to a certain extent, answers the following sort of objection: his account is insufficiently discriminating among goals, i.e. it has no way of separating worthwhile goals from insignificant ones. His answer is that some goals get ruled out because they are self-contradictory, and, more importantly, goals which make it impossible or more difficult to pursue other goals get ruled out (Cf. pp. 4 - 8). This seems to me to be only a partial answer, but unfortunately it is beyond the present purpose to investigate the matter properly. I derive some comfort from Foley's plausible (to me, at least) suggestion that other accounts of rationality get their plausibility from the fact that what is deemed rational by them tends to satisfy one's goals, and from the fact that Foley's account is such a powerful taxonomy for many different epistemologies.
77. Ibid, p. 34. The quotation only explicitly mentions beliefs, but Foley has already made it clear that he is trying to develop a general theory of rationality.
78. Ibid, pp. 36 - 7.

whatever) satisfy our own deep intellectual standards, i.e. whether there is any "internal motivation for either retraction or supplementation of our beliefs."[79] Judgments of rationality from this kind of perspective are, of course, intensely personal and are almost a kind of self-knowledge.

The second main perspective for rationality is the *sociocentric one,* which we typically adopt when we are trying to judge the rationality of some person removed from us in time or place. We try to evaluate the decision, action, belief, or whatever of the person in terms of some standard that is relative to the community of the person (or a community the person defers to).[80]

The third main perspective is the *objective* one, which Foley characterizes as the perspective of the knowledgeable observer. "A decision of yours is rational in an objective sense only if a knowledgeable observer would take it to be an effective means to your goals."[81] The knowledgeable observer need not be considered to be omniscient; regarding the evaluation of a decision, for example, "we need to imagine `only' that the observer has access to the objective probabilities of the various options yielding various outcomes."[82]

Besides involving a perspective, claims about rationality concern one's goals.[83] The goals which Foley focuses on he calls *purely epistemic* ones, and defines thus: "Purely epistemic goals are concerned soley with the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our current belief systems."[84] By accuracy, he means the ratio of true beliefs to false ones in one's belief system, and by comprehensiveness he means the range of decisions one's beliefs are able to provide useful information for. It is typically desirable to maximize both accuracy and comprehensiveness, and epistemic goals - or as he sometimes speaks, *the* epistemic goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs - are the primary ones in Foley's theory of rationality. Combining any of the three perspectives and the epistemic goal generates one of the main kinds of rationality within Foley's taxonomy.[85]

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79. Ibid, pp. 78 - 9.
80. Ibid, pp. 10 - 11.
81. Ibid, p. 11.
82. Ibid.
83. More precisely, sometimes we are interested in all of our goals and sometimes only some of them.
84. Ibid, p. 19. A minor point: It is a peculiarity of Foley's position that he defines purely epistemic goals in reference to our *current* belief systems. He thus categories the long-term goal of having comprehensive and accurate beliefs as an intellectual one (p. 20), rather than an epistemic one. There is indeed a noteworthy difference between one's current truth-linked goal and one's long-term truth-linked goal, but it seems to me that they would more naturally both be called epistemic.
85. There are also, of course, the resources, which Foley says rather little about. He does suggest some interesting interpretations of reliabilism and foundationalism, for example, such that the resources for the former are "the collection of cognitive processes and methods that are available for you to use", and those for the latter are "the collection of your current

What we get from Foley is a useful way of interpreting and classifying claims about rationality and other closely related concepts. For example, we can describe Alston's conception of epistemic justification as involving a judgment of whether, from the objective perspective, a belief is likely to satisfy one's epistemic goal (by being likely to be true), given as resources the grounds of the belief and the processes that produced it. It's of little concern that this conception of "justification" is now being called a kind of "rationality", for the main content of the conception is preserved, or so I claim. In fact, extending Foley's account somewhat, I want to define *epistemic rationality* as an normative concept involving judgments from the objective perspective and concerning the epistemic goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs (leaving the temporal aspect of the goal and the resources relatively open).[86] *Practical rationality*, on the other hand, is a normative concept typically involving judgments from either the objective or egocentric perspectives, and concerning practical or prudential goals (again constraining the resources and temporal aspects minimally as with epistemic rationality).[87] Last but not least, there is *egocentric rationality* (not to be confused with egocentric perspectives), which, following Foley, is a matter of whether the belief (action, decision, etc.) satisfies our epistemic goals as seen from our own, deepest perspective. This is an essentially *personal* kind of rationality and is almost an ethical notion for Foley. "To be egocentrically rational is thus to be invulnerable to a certain kind of self-condemnation."[88]

These three concepts are not thought of as exhausting the epistemological terrain, though I do think they cover much of it.[89]

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psychological states - all your beliefs, experiences, thoughts, memories, and so on."(p.34) All he says in general about acceptable resources is that they must be important ones and we must in fact be apt to have them, which he also says about perspectives and goals.(p.34)

86. Roughly speaking, the temporal aspect will normally be constrained to the duration of a human lifetime, and will ordinary be spelled out as either the current moment or in the long-run. The resources I only want to constrain to those we are ordinarily apt to have.

87. The reason I have constrained epistemic rationality to the objective perspective is to distinguish it from egocentric rationality, which Foley also sees as having the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs.(Cf. p. 94) Since he defines it this way, there will be room for two kinds of practical rationality, one from an egocentric perspective but concerned with practical goals, and one concerned with practical goals from an objective perspective. We shall see that the latter is the kind of practical rationality Alston and Sellars are concerned with.

88. Ibid, p. 79.

89. There may also be something like *existential rationality*, which would concern how well something satisfies our existential goal of leading meaningful, purposeful lives. This is surely an important notion, although I will be largely placing it aside, partly because it does not seem to be a particularly *epistemic* notion - and I am primarily concerned with the epistemic evaluation of practices - and partly because its addition could readily be accommodated by my position. (I hope!) See footnote 61 in chapter VI for more detail. (I want to thank Alex Rueger for suggesting an article by Stephen Wykstra - "Reasons, Redemption, and Realism: The Axiological Roots of Rationality in Science and Religion" - that brought existential considerations to my attention.)

Alston's conception of epistemic justification, and reliabilist conceptions in general, can be subsumed under epistemic rationality. As I hope to show, Alston's conception of practical rationality and Sellars' notion of vindication (practical justification) can be seen as forms of practical rationality, in Foley's sense. And, what are typically seen as deontological notions of justification can be interpreted as egocentric rationality.[90] With this framework in hand, then, we will hopefully be able to understand and evaluate Alston's practical rationality argument and build a bridge from it to the rather different practical approach of Sellars.[91]

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90. Foley defends this claim on pp. 40 - 44 and 102 - 117 of *Working Without a Net*. Believing responsibly is a matter of being egocentrically rational, of living up to one's deepest standards with respect to the goal of having accurate and comprehensive beliefs. Compare with Goldman's notion of weak justification in "Strong and Weak Justification", reprinted in *Liaisons*.

The only objection to Foley's claim I can foresee is that even if one is egocentrically rational, one might still not be living up to one's epistemic obligations. This is true, but any deontological notion of justification will face this problem of the possibility of objective and subjective duty coming apart, and perhaps the reasonable response is to say that one fulfills one's epistemic obligations just if one does one's subjective duty, and in some cases one *cannot* non-culpably be mistaken. It is only by switching to the objective perspective and *away* from the deontological notion that this becomes a problem. Cf. Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate*, ch. 1.

91. Are Alston's or Sellars' arguments practical in the sense that they aim to get us to do something? I cannot say too much before actually examining them in detail, but I can say that practical aims do not appear to be their focus. Alston wants to establish a general rationale for epistemically assessing standard doxastic practices and then apply it to religious practices. His ultimate aim seems to be to show that religious practices (or the CMP, at least) are in some sense epistemically up to par. Sellars' ultimate aim seems to be to show that the framework or practice of epistemic evaluation is reasonable. Neither one seems to be trying to get us to do anything in particular, since we already engage in our standard practices and we already are in the framework of epistemic evaluation. This isn't to say that there aren't an important class of arguments that do have practical aims as their focus, however.

Chapter III - The Practical Rationality Argument

Because it is so important, I want to stress again why Alston makes the move towards practical rationality (since we are going to be using the phrase `practical rationality' so often in this chapter, let's abbreviate it as PR). Simply put, because of the inevitability of epistemic circularity, he cannot show that our doxastic practices are reliable, and hence, he cannot show that they are epistemically justified. For Alston, this is not the best-of-all-possible-worlds. If a (not otherwise disqualified) non-epistemically circular argument for the reliability of SP or some other doxastic practice could be found, then he could apply his reliabilist theory of justification more directly. As it is, he is forced to take a more indirect route in the epistemic assessment of our doxastic practices.

We should also be aware of Alston's strategy in employing the PR argument. The ultimate aim is to show that certain beliefs about God - and on a larger scale, the Christian religion as a whole - are justified, or rational, or in some other way epistemically up to par. The PR argument is first introduced as a *general* rationale for thinking that our standard, socially and psychologically established, doxastic practices are rational. With this in hand, Alston wants to apply this general rationale to the specific case - religious doxastic practices, and CMP in particular. Whether this strategy succeeds depends upon such matters as whether the general rationale is sound, and whether it is capable of overcoming the special difficulties facing religious practices. With sufficient help, Alston may be able to leap the first hurdle, but I have serious doubts about the second.

One more caveat. I want to emphasize that while Alston changes gears and begins to concentrate on PR, he has *not* abandoned his concept of justification, and he has *not* changed his main thesis (noted at the very beginning of this chapter). Several authors have accused him of doing just that. Thus Alvin Plantinga:

> ...the fact is, as Alston's book proceeds, *justification* tends to recede into the wings and *rationality* moves to center stage. The conclusion of the book, as it seems to me, is really that it is *rational - practically* rational - for at least many of us to engage in CMP (Christian Mystical Practice) and thus form and hold Christian beliefs.[1]

Plantinga cites as his justification this quote from*PG* :

> My [Alston's] main thesis in this chapter, and indeed in the whole book, is that CMP is rationally engaged in since it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance.[2]

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1. Plantinga, Alvin, "What's the Question?", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, p. 27. Norman Kretzmann, in "St. Teresa and the Broadminded Atheist", printed in the same volume as Plantinga's paper, argues a similar point, but stressing that Alston is in fact adopting a deontological concept in practical rationality. I'll say more about this later.

2. *PG*, p. 194. Plantinga provides this quote on p. 26 of "What's the Question?".

Given just this quote, it does look like Alston has changed his thesis. But, Plantinga is guilty of being overly selective in his choice of quotations. Other parts of *PG* show that Alston means to go from the claim of rational engagement to the claim of it being rational to suppose our doxastic practices are reliable, and finally to the claim of it being rational to suppose their outputs to be *justified*.

> But, then, if have shown, by my practical argument, that it is rational to engage in SP, I have thereby shown that it is rational to take SP to be reliable.[3]

Also:

> ...I have shown that it is rational to take SP and other established doxastic practices to be reliable, and hence rational to suppose that standard perceptual beliefs are justified in the stronger, truth-conducive sense. It is crucial for the argument of this book not to omit that further step. That is the final conclusion I want to take from this chapter for use in the rest of the book - *for any established doxastic practice it is rational to suppose that it is reliable, and hence rational to suppose that its doxastic outputs are prima facie justified* [Alston's emphasis]. [4]

So we should be aware that Alston intends to return to justification after the long and tortuous route through PR.

A. The First Stage of the Practical Rationality Argument

I have already indicated that the PR argument has three important stages or steps. Although one can challenge the argument at many places, it is easiest, and dialectically most effective, to object to the first stage. Represented informally, the first stage of the argument is as follows.[5]

> 1. Our familiar doxastic practices, such as SP, memory, and introspection, are firmly entrenched in our psyche and as such would be very difficult, if not impossible, to change or abandon.[6]
> 2. Any alternative doxastic practices would be in no better position to provide a non-epistemically circular argument for their reliability than the doxastic practices we already have.[7]
> 3. A firmly socially established doxastic practice has a presumption of rational acceptability in its favour. [8]

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3. *PG*, p. 180.
4. Ibid, p. 183.
5. I am doing a bit of abstraction in laying out the argument this way, for Alston doesn't make the structure of his argument quite this explicit. However, the text of *PG* does support such a reconstruction, and I will indicate the relevant pages in the next few citations.
6. See p. 169 of *PG* for textual support for my interpretation of this first premise.
7. Alston explicitly says as much on p. 150 of *PG*: "It's not as if we would be in a better position to provide a non-epistemically circular support for the reliability of these newcomers."
8. See pp. 169 - 170 of *PG*.

4. It is *prima facie* rational to engage in the doxastic practices that are socially established and firmly entrenched in our psyche.[9]

I have presented the premises of this argument, but Alston also gives various considerations in their support. Before we get into them, however, we should note that the same structure of a first stage of *prima facie* acceptability, together with various overriders and a final stage of unqualified acceptability (provided there are no sufficient overriders), is being applied to doxastic practices as was applied to particular beliefs. The PR argument has this two step structure, where Alston argues that the MP is *prima facie* rational and then considers possible overriders, concluding that it is unqualifiedly rational.[10] Last but not least, we should also note that *prima facie* rationality, as Alston uses the concept, admits of degrees , so two *prima facie* rational beliefs or doxastic practices could possibly be of different epistemic statuses, and this would transfer over to their statuses as unqualifiedly rational (supposing they pass the overriders test).

Since it is the most straightforward, let us take the second premise first. This premise is a direct consequence of Alston's thesis of the inevitability of epistemic circularity. If it is impossible to give a non-epistemically circular demonstration of the reliability of any doxastic practice, this will obviously apply to practices we don't actually accept. Now, one might not think that Alston has in fact shown epistemic circularity to be inevitable, but at least Alston's reasoning on this point is valid, and since I do think that Alston has established this claim, I accept his second premise. The second premise is quite compatible with the claim that none of our doxastic practices are rational just because of the problem of epistemic circularity, however, and thus the other premises are needed.

It seems hard to doubt the truth of the first premise. Our `standard' doxastic practices do seem to be very firmly entrenched in our psyches. For example, we form beliefs based on memory all of the time, often without any reflection upon what we are doing. Someone asks me "Did you go to the concert last night?" and I consult my memory; if I remember going to the concert last night I form the belief that I did go, and say so, and exactly the reverse happens if I do not remember going. It would be a very *radical* change to stop forming beliefs on the basis of memory. The same can be said for beliefs based upon sensory experience, induction, deduction, testimony, and so on, and the radicality of ceasing to engage in

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9. See p. 175 of *PG*: "To summarize, it is *prima facie* rational to engage in established doxastic practices."

10. I have outlined the PR argument as having three main stages plus the step of considering possible overriders to the *prima facie* status allegedly conferred by the argument. I have no desire to become embroiled in debates over counting stages, and am quite willing to conceive of the PR argument as having four stages if that is a better approach.

such practices is compounded by the intimate connection between them. We couldn't just cease to form beliefs - or even drastically change how we form beliefs - on the basis of memory without radical changes in the way we form beliefs on the basis of sensory experience, for example. Nor can we doubt that, besides being very radical, it would be very *difficult* to either drastically change our standard doxastic practices or cease to use them. I can't just stop forming beliefs on the basis of sensory experience merely by deciding to do so. It may be possible that I could change or abandon a basic doxastic practice by undertaking a severe, lengthy program of counter-conditioning, although even this is debatable. Alston's point is, however, that "in the absence of extremely good reason to do so [abandon or alter our basic doxastic practice(s)], the effort would be ill advised"[11], and I heartily agree.

The real question concerning the first premise is not its truth, but rather its *relevance*. Granted it would be ill advised to abandon or significantly alter our basic doxastic practices, how is this relevant to the epistemic evaluation of our doxastic practices and the beliefs they issue? The basic cognitive aim, Alston says over and over again, is the attainment of truth and the avoidance of falsity. But, and on this point he is not sufficiently clear, the goal being appealed to by the first premise is not this goal but something different. I would suggest that the goal or value being appealed to by the first premise is a practical or *prudential* one, something that has to do with the desirability of living a life with a minimal amount of unnecessary hardship. But it might be, for all we know, that the only way to truly achieve one's cognitive goal is by sacrificing this prudential goal, i.e. by living a very difficult life. What is the relative priority of these goals, which one wins out if they conflict? This issue Alston never adequately addresses. Moreover, the ambiguity of Alston's position on the relative priority of these two goals recurs in the conclusion of this stage of the PR argument. It is (allegedly) *prima facie* rational to engage in the doxastic practices we find socially established and firmly entrenched in our psyche. What kind of rationality is this? Is it *prima facie* rational from the epistemic/cognitive point of view? Or is it *prima facie* rational from the prudential/practical point of view? Is it *prima facie* rational from some other point of view? In Foleyan terms, are we dealing with *epistemic* rationality here or *practical* rationality? We may be able to aid and augment Alston's argument, but for the moment I just want to point out that Alston himself has left the job largely undone.[12]

Perhaps the crucial flaw in the PR argument thus far considered is the ambiguity of what `practical rationality' is. It is quite clear that it is *not*

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11. *PG*, p. 169.

12. My point in this paragraph is not to deny that prudential considerations are epistemically relevant, i.e. that they have epistemic significance, but rather to show that Alston has not even begun to make clear *how* these prudential considerations are relevant.

epistemic justification. Nothing about PR entails reliability,[13] and nowhere has Alston claimed that it does. The notion does have a practical side: "given that there are no non circular ways of distinguishing between reliable and unreliable basic doxastic practices, it would be foolish to abstain from established practices, even if we could." [14] This practical side is evident in the first premise of the first stage of the argument, as we have already seen. I have suggested that `practical rationality' is particularly ambiguous with respect to its epistemic dimensions (whether it has any and what they are). Other philosophers have responded to the notion in different ways, and a consideration of their position and Alston's subsequent reaction (where he *has* reacted) may be informative.

Plantinga presents an ingenious reconstruction of the PR argument. He sees it as being a Rawlsian-decision theory type of argument. He sees the rationality at issue in `practical rationality' as being *means-ends* rationality, the rationality of certain actions insofar as they contribute to certain goals.[15] PR is also concerned with what to do, with "the rationality or lack thereof of *taking a course of action*, of *doing* something or other, or *acting* in a certain way. (We're talking *practical rationality*.)"[16] So far at least, this interpretation has some plausibility, although we shall soon see that the matter is complicated by the fact that Plantinga's understanding of Rawls is rather limited (for the moment, let's play along). Plantinga notes that the question of the PR of forming beliefs in our `standard' ways "has about it a certain air of unreality...it isn't really up to me whether I will form beliefs in accord with SP."[17] He answers with Alston's answer - the interesting question is whether it would be rational to continue to engage in our doxastic practices if I had a choice, if it were within my power to refrain. From this Plantinga makes a striking interpretive move: Alston's question is what it would be rational for me to do if I were in a certain hypothetical situation in which I had a choice to continue using my doxastic practices, or to use others, or to stop forming beliefs of those sorts at all. With a nod to Rawls, he calls this the "Original Position".[18]

Plantinga takes it that the relevant goal, according to Alston, is the maximization of truth and the minimization of error. Given this, the question of what to do in the Original Position becomes what to do in order to put myself in the best position to attain truth and avoid error.

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13. Alston is quite clear on this point. Cf. *PG*, p. 178.
14. *PG*, p. 6. It is interesting to note that exactly the same words are used by Alston in his "Précis of *Perceiving God* " , p. 863 (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LIV, No. 4, Dec. 1994) to make it clear that the rationality of doxastic practices is in part practical. This isn't particularly informative except to indicate that, four years or so after *PG* (published in 1991), Alston still regards this as an important point.
15. "What's the Question?", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, p. 30.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid, p. 31.
18. Ibid. The source for Plantinga's remarks on Rawls is undoubtedly the influential *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

Now, we have already seen that this is an over-simplification because of Alston's introduction of the prudential goal of leading a life with a minimal amount of unnecessary hardship in the first premise of the first stage of the PR argument.[19] For the time being, I'm willing to go along with Plantinga's reconstruction, on the understanding that what he presents can be at best an approximation to Alston's intended argument.

Plantinga argues that Alston's PR argument suffers from a crucial problem that has to do with *what beliefs* I am supposed to have in the Original Position, or to borrow from Rawls again, what I am allowed to have behind the Veil of Ignorance. [20] Presumably, I am allowed to believe that no doxastic practice can be noncircularly shown to be reliable, for that's what got us into this mess in the first place. But in particular, what am I to believe about the reliability of my already established doxastic practices (let's continue to use the doxastic practices in our 'standard package', and in particular SP, as an example)? If in the Original Position I am allowed to believe that SP is reliable, then the answer is obvious but *trivial;* I should continue to engage in SP because I believe that it puts me in the best position to attain truth. Also, what about beliefs that arise from SP? It seems that we must not be allowed these either, for if we accepted them we would know that they were delivered by SP, and we would then have good reason to believe that SP is reliable, thus putting us back in the condition of triviality.[21] So, we cannot believe that SP is reliable, nor believe anything that arises from SP in the Original Position on pain of triviality. The last step in Plantinga's criticism is to argue that what we are left with in the Original Position may not allow us enough to make a decision, and even if we can make a decision, it is *not relevant* to the epistemological status of engaging in SP or any other doxastic practice.[22] So Alston's PR is either trivial, on one interpretation of what we believe in the Original Position, or (likely) inconclusive and definitely irrelevant on the other interpretation. Thus, it cannot be the case that Alston has

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19. Its not a far-fetched over-simplification, because Alston is quite unclear about the relationship between these two goals, and he does stress the truth-conducive one much more than the other - but it is still an over-simplification. So any type of Rawlsian reconstruction will have to take into account the prudential goal, and the question of what one is to do will become much more complicated, for we now have two goals (and their relative priority) that must be considered in determining the most rational course of action in the Original Position. Alston does not tell us what the relative priority of these goals is, however, and so it would seem that the best we could do is to make an educated guess about his position(s) on this matter and proceed from there. I'm not sure there would be a conclusive result, and this certainly would lead us far astray, which gives some support to the idea that a Rawlsian type of argument is not what Alston intended (it is interesting, however, to note the similarity to priority problems with Rawls' variety of primary goods). Perhaps this is why Plantinga ignores Alston's talk about the prudential goal.

20. "What's the Question?", p. 33.

21. Ibid, p. 35.

22. Ibid, p. 27.

isolated the right normative, epistemological question about doxastic practices.[23]

Let's look at Plantinga's reasoning a bit more closely. What we are left with in the Original position is our faculties of reason, introspection, and some fragment of memory (all the memory that does not depend upon perceptual belief), and their outputs that do not entail that SP is reliable. Plantinga makes the reasonable claim that if we can conclude anything on such a slim basis, it is that we should be agnostic about the outputs of SP.[24] Furthermore, to decide whether it is rational to engage in SP on the basis of what we conclude in the Original Position by relying on reason, introspection, and some fragment of memory, is to be guilty of the "undue partiality" of which Reid speaks. Plantinga asks, "why is it rational (in the relevant sense of `rational' whatever precisely that is) for me to form belief in the SP way only if it is more likely than not *from the perspective just of reason, that fragment of memory, and introspection* that SP is reliable?"[25] There doesn't seem to be any reason to think that the answer one gets from the Original position is at all relevant to the actual status of SP, and thus Alston is quite off-target with respect to the proper *de jure* (normative, epistemological) question about doxastic practices.[26]

Alston's response to Plantinga is instructive. Of Plantinga's Rawlsian reconstruction he says, "This is an ingenious argument, but I find that it makes no contact with what I was doing in the book [*PG*]."[27] He further admits that he was ambiguous about the concept of rationality he was employing in *PG*, and sets about to make clear what he does and does not endorse.

> I never had any idea of working with a conception of rationality so subjective that the rationality of an action is a function of the subject's beliefs and goals, whatever their provenance or epistemic status....Mine is much more objective and normative....According to my linguistic-conceptual phenomenology, the central

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23. Plantinga distinguishes between *de facto* questions about religious beliefs, which concern the truth or falsity of such beliefs, and the *de jure* question about religious beliefs, which concerns "the *sensibility*, or *reasonability*, or *justification* or *rationality*, or to combine those last two, the *rational justification* of Christian beliefs."("What's the Question?", p. 19.) Throughout this otherwise excellent essay, Plantinga speaks as if there were only *one* de jure question, something Alston quite properly upbraids him for in his response ("Reply to Critics", same volume, p. 69).

24. "What's the Question?", p. 37.

25. Ibid.

26. Plantinga also considers the situation for CMP, with the same results. One the one hand, if I am allowed to believe that CMP is reliable in the Original Position, then the answer of what to do is trivial; on the other hand, if all I have to go on are introspection, memory (without anything that relies upon beliefs derived from CMP), and reason (Plantinga also adds perception and `sympathy'), the answer is likely that there is no answer, or if there is one it is agnosticism, as with SP, and in any case the answer is irrelevant. So the same options of triviality or irrelevance await Alston for CMP, claims Plantinga. Cf. "What's the Question?", pp. 37 - 9.

27. "Reply to Critics", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, p. 69.

> weight of emphasis in assessments of rational action is on how well the agent reasons in determining what to do. (The reasoning need not be conscious or otherwise explicit.) The action is rational or not, depending on the soundness of the reasoning that issued in it. We suppose ourselves to be using objective standards of soundness here. But doesn't it matter what the agent reasons from? If not, we are back with Plantinga's subjective conception....There are principles by which we distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable premises for practical reasoning. The conception I was employing fits somewhere in this thicket.[28]

There's quite a bit in this long quotation, and I'll try to extract the most salient points. First, Alston sees Plantinga's conception of rationality in his interpretation of Alston's PR argument as being subjective, whereas he wants to embrace an objective and normative conception. There's a certain amount of justification in this claim, since Plantinga did not make it clear that it mattered what the subject's beliefs and goals were to the rationality of an action, although, of course, Plantinga himself might not (indeed does not) endorse such a conception of rationality.[29] The second point is that Alston's conception of the rationality of action is centrally concerned with the *reasoning* that issued (or will issue, is issuing) in an action, and the reasoning must satisfy objective standards of soundness and objective principles of what counts as acceptable premises.

Not only does Alston object to Plantinga's interpretation of his conception of rationality, he opts to characterize the PR argument in a much simpler fashion than Plantinga, indeed much simpler than how he characterized it in *PG*. "The one argument, as I see it, is that given the impossibility of showing the reliability of a basic doxastic practice without epistemic circularity, there is no rational alternative to engaging in the undefeated practices we find ourselves socially and psychologically firmly committed to."[30] No such simple argument is given in *PG*, and so either Alston has changed his mind or he hasn't made up his mind on the PR argument. There is another yet way in which he may be of two minds in the characterization of his position. He admits that Plantinga is right on these points: (1) "I am, as Plantinga says, thinking of the chief goal as being the maximization of the proportion of true to false beliefs."[31]; (2) The subject is aware that he/she is unable to show that any basic doxastic practice is reliable; (3) The subject realizes that "s/he is unable to use beliefs in that [illegible]ability [of the doxastic practice(s) in question], or beliefs that presuppose that reliability, to determine the most rational course to take *vis-a-vis* belief formation."[32] If all of this is admitted, isn't the subject in the Original Position of which Plantinga speaks?

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28. Ibid, pp. 69 - 70.
29. Plantinga's understanding of rationality centers on *rationality as proper function*, as one would expect in his proper functioning analysis of knowledge. Cf. *Warrant: The Current Debate* and *Warrant and Proper Function* and Chapter VI of this thesis.
30. "Reply to Critics", p. 69.
31. Ibid, p. 70.
32. Ibid.

The matter is complicated because Plantinga's characterization of Rawls is incomplete in some crucial respects. The procedure used in *A Theory of Justice* - that of describing a hypothetical initial situation in which a group of rational agents would, under selective conditions of ignorance, choose fundamental principles of justice to order their society - only works for persons *in a tradition,* where tradition is at least minimally understood as a set of shared intuitions or "considered convictions".[33] Moreover, there is a reflective equilibrium ultimate constraint within which the procedure just described (let us call it the OP device or argument) is *itself* justified. Rawls' conception of justification may be different than Alston's (or at least operating at a different level) in that for Rawls there isn't any ultimate *independent* justification for a theory of justice. What justification there is comes from the fact that the theory is in a state of reflective equilibrium with our intuitions about what implications principles of justice should have and about what constraints should be built into the Original Position.[34] So, for the PR argument to really be a kind of Rawlsian, OP argument, we will have to try to find something that plays the role of tradition, and examine more carefully the kind of "justification" that might be gleaned from such an argument.

How would Alston's argument fare in this regard (insofar as we have examined it)? One question is, just exactly what would Alston be trying to establish with an OP argument? The aim isn't to convince us to engage in our standard doxastic practices, since we are already deeply committed to them. The aim seems to be to show that we are rational, in some sense, in being so committed, and this would presumably be done by showing that rational agents in an Original Position of relative ignorance would choose to engage in our standard doxastic practices, over such other options as radically revising them, ceasing to engage in them altogether, or engaging in completely different practices. We are allowed to use our faculties of reason, introspection, and memory, and their deliverances that do not presuppose or entail that SP (for example) is reliable in making our choice. But, as Plantinga rightly stresses, what are we allowed to believe? And a related concern: what are our considered judgments in such a situation? How these questions are answered greatly affects the outcome.

In Rawls' case, the decision making agents are allowed to have general beliefs about human beings and the world and their interactions, such as the knowledge delivered by the social sciences.[35] The considered judgment operating here is that particular information that would bias the principles of justice reached need to be excluded. In Alston's case, a similar considered judgment seems to be at work: we should exclude information that entails or presupposes that the doxastic practice(s) in question is reliable. With this in mind, could we be allowed general

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33. *A Theory of Justice,* p. 47.
34. Ibid, p. 21.
35. Ibid, pp. 137 - 8.

beliefs about the ways and conditions SP does lead to truth? For Rawls, what's at issue *aren't* general beliefs about human beings and the world - that will presumably stay the same no matter what conception of justice is chosen. But for Alston, general beliefs about the ways and conditions SP is reliable *are* at issue. I can't see this as escaping a narrow circularity. It would be an epistemically circular argument, at best, and it would seem to be open to Plantinga's criticism of being trivial - *of course*, we'll engage in SP if we're allowed to build into the OP general beliefs about how it works. This holds for any practice. How does this help show that engaging in SP is rational?

Alternative Rawlsian interpretations of Alston don't seem to yield a better argument for engaging in SP. If we exclude from the OP general beliefs about the ways and conditions in which SP is reliable then there does not seem to be enough to reach a conclusion, as Plantinga suggests. If we make the belief that SP is reliable (in certain circumstances, over certain issues, etc.) into a considered judgment (as opposed to general information available to make a decision), then we seem to be back at triviality. There is one significant possibility left.

Nowhere in "Reply to Critics" does Alston mention the prudential or practical goal to which he is appealing in his argument, although we have seen that he must appeal to this goal, for if he leaves it out, then there is nothing (or at least a lot less) to prevent the claim that we are in fact irrational in engaging in any doxastic practice for we cannot show that any doxastic practice is reliable.[36] Now, if we interpret Alston as giving an OP argument where the agents are allowed to know what doxastic practices they are engaged in, and they also know that no ultimately non-circular argument for the reliability of these practices is available, and, finally, they know that changing or abandoning these practices will frustrate their prudential value of leading a life with a minimum of unnecessary hardship, then we have an argument that seems forceful, at least at first glance. It will be rational, in a practical sense, for the agents in the OP to stay with what they have in terms of doxastic practices, since changing will almost certainly cause hardship.

The above argument would seemingly confer Foleyan practical rationality on the decision to stay with one's firmly established doxastic practices, since, from an objective perspective, the prudential goal will be best satisfied (among the alternative decisions) by sticking with what one has. The decision also seems to be a rational one on Alston's account of rational action, since the reasoning behind it seems sound. On second glance, however, the argument suffers from a recurring flaw: epistemic

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36. One possibility for what's left to argue that we are rational to engage in (at least some) doxastic practices is that it is rational to engage in that which we cannot help but engage in. A counter argument might be to describe certain cases in which we regard a person as being very mentally disturbed (hence irrational) but nonetheless he/she can't help being that way. Perhaps the best position is that the categories of rational/irrational don't apply in such cases.

circularity. The only way we could know that changing or ceasing to engage in our doxastic practices will cause hardship is by using (at least some of) the very doxastic practices whose usage is in question (e.g. induction). In other words, we would have to *already* be rational or justified (epistemically up to par) in engaging in our doxastic practices in order to use the preceding argument to justify the conclusion, which is the very definition of epistemic circularity.

I want to suggest that we are lead to the conclusion that it is impossible to avoid epistemically circular arguments when it comes to the epistemic status of our basic doxastic practices. We saw this with regard to reliability claims about doxastic practices and it has also arisen with regard to trying to establish the rationality of engaging in doxastic practices. Can anything of significant epistemic merit be said in favour of our standard doxastic practices?

There may be a two-pronged answer. On the one hand, we should take to heart Alston's distinction between the activity of justifying and the state of being justified. So long as we have our sights set on showing that our most fundamental epistemic practices and principles are justified (rational, etc.), we can never be satisfied. The project of full reflective justification (FRJ) is impossible.[37] This amounts to giving up the quest of showing that our basic doxastic practices are rational or justified, at least insofar as we have not been content to accept a (not otherwise disqualified) epistemically circular argument. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't even try to give arguments, only that perhaps, in the end, we must be satisfied with the best we can do.[38]

Still, there are circular arguments and there are circular arguments. Are not some better than others? Of course. Whatever argument or arguments we do accept must meet the standards for good deductive or inductive arguments (whichever is appropriate) and the intuitions to which they appeal must be sufficiently deep. This is where the second prong of the solution to our dilemma comes in. There seems to be a place in epistemology for "considered judgments" after all. This is not the place to go deeply into the matter, but let me suggest that the proper meta-epistemological approach is the "wide reflective equilibrium" discussed by Sosa and inspired by Rawls (and further back in our history of philosophy, Goodman).[39] Roughly, this means that our epistemological theories should be in reflective equilibrium with our considered judgments (and also with judgments we initially consider implausible - hence a "wide" equilibrium), and part of what this means is that judgments like "Ceasing to engage in or changing our established doxastic practices will cause

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37. Alston, William P., "Epistemic Circularity" in *Epistemic Justification*. See also footnote 13 in chapter 2.

38. Here we can cite the well-trodden intuition that it is not reasonable to expect more than what is possible.

39. Cf. Sosa, *Knowledge in Perspective*, especially chapter 15, pp. 260 -1; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; and Goodman, *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*.

hardship" *may* occupy the role of considered judgments. If a belief like this can occupy such a role, then it will be possible to give a forceful argument for the (*prima facie*) rationality of engaging in our established doxastic practices. Thus:

> From the objective perspective, continuing in our established doxastic practices will best further the prudential goal of living a life with a minimum amount of unnecessary hardship.

This is the argument Alston seems to be giving in the first premise of the first stage of the PR argument. Earlier I questioned what was particularly epistemic about this practical argument. It must be admitted that the notion of rationality employed here is primarily practical, since it appeals to a practical goal. However, the argument does have epistemic significance because what we are supporting with it are *epistemic* practices, in the sense that they are concerned with truth and falsity; moreover, these practices carry with them overrider systems, which are used in the epistemic evaluation of beliefs issuing from them. So while the kind of practical argument given here may not be ideal, it is not without epistemic significance either.

I should note one further plausible restriction on the sort of epistemically circular argument that may be acceptable. Not only should it satisfy the demands of logic, and the intuitions involved be sufficiently deep, but the standard it uses to judge the epistemic status of what it is considering (doxastic practices, epistemic principles, etc.) should be sufficiently discriminating. In other words, the standard employed should at least potentially do some sifting among its testees; not everything should automatically pass or fail. Otherwise, the standard will likely strike us as arbitrary and its results trivial. Concerning the practical argument given above, we may have to use some of our standard doxastic practices to reach the judgment that abandoning them would incur great hardship (if possible at all), but it is conceivable that some doxastic practices would not even support themselves in this way.[40]

So much for the first and second premises of the first stage of the PR argument. What about the third? If Alston's argument for the first premise is fraught with ambiguities and other difficulties, the argument for the third is disastrous. Alston claims that a doxastic practice's being socially established over a considerable period of time and in a significant number of people confers a presumption of acceptability upon it, because "a practice would not have persisted over large segments of the population unless it was putting people into effective touch with some aspects of reality and proving itself by its fruits."[41] Alston also adds that "there are no such grounds for presumption in the case of idiosyncratic

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40. This is analogous to Alston's notion of significant self-support, which we shall examine in the next section.

41. *PG*, p. 170.

practices."[42] My first point is that this is an *inference to the best explanation;* the persistence of a doxastic practice in a significant number of people is, we are to believe, best explained by the supposition that this doxastic practice is putting people into "effective touch with reality". Now my first critical question pertains to this phrase "effective touch with reality" -what does it mean? In the one brief paragraph in which Alston gives this argument[43], he does not clarify its meaning. However, there seem to be two main alternatives. First, a doxastic practice being in "effective touch with reality" might just mean that the practice is reliable, for the deliverance of mostly true beliefs about reality is certainly an effective way of dealing with it. This interpretation also has the advantage of fitting nicely with Alston's reliabilist epistemology, in which the question of the reliability of doxastic practices looms so large.[44] The second interpretation gives "effective touch with reality" a pragmatic reading, where it means something in the neighbourhood of the doxastic practice "working", or being "useful". This interpretation has less initial plausibility than the first, but we shall have to see how Alston's argument fares according to each one.

If we take the first reading, the existence of naturalistic explanations of religious experience and belief will tend to undercut the argument. I don't mean to claim that all (or even most) religious practices can be adequately explained - or rather, explained away - by naturalistic approaches, although I don't want to rule this out *a priori* either. Without taking a stand on this issue here, we can say that the case for the best explanation of a doxastic practice's social persistence being its reliability will be substantially complicated and threatened by naturalistic counter-explanations. The same holds in reverse, of course. So, to have a chance at making his argument work, Alston will have to show naturalistic explanations to be inadequate. In Ch. 6 of *PG*, Alston tries to do this, and we will have opportunity to examine whether he succeeds later on (I have mixed reviews), but for now I simply want to point out the need for Alston to undertake such a task.

Suppose we adopt the second, pragmatic interpretation instead. Then, naturalistic explanations of religious experience will not be as troublesome, although they won't be entirely innocuous either. Take the famous (infamous) Freudian explanation of religion, which basically claims that religious belief and experience are the result of neurosis, in particular wish-fulfillment.[45] If this were true, would it make it

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42. Ibid.

43. This entire argument is given in one paragraph on pages 169 - 170 of *PG*. For such an important argument, one would have expected a much fuller and less ambiguous effort.

44. Lest one fear that this argument tries to give Alston a direct argument for the reliability of a socially established doxastic practice, which epistemic circularity ruled out, remember that the conclusion here (on this interpretation) is merely that there is a presumption in favour of the acceptability of such practices.

45. Cf. Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion.*

impossible or unlikely that people with religious beliefs would have a certain kind of usefulness in these beliefs? I think the answer to former is no, but the answer to the latter - whether it makes it unlikely - is less clear. Something is useful only relative to a particular goal, and it is not clear what we should allow as goals in this case. If we allow the religious believer to determine what counts as a goal, then presumably his/her beliefs will always have some pragmatic value. This seems overly permissive, and so we must restrict the acceptable range or set of goals. But how so to restrict? Whatever the acceptable goals, they must be such as to support a presumption of acceptability for a socially established doxastic practice. Which ones are those? I've gone about as far along this train of thought as seems fruitful, and will merely stop with the observation that there is a lot of work that Alston has left undone.[46]

Returning to the first interpretation of "effective touch with reality", it must be pointed out that even if Alston could defeat naturalistic explanations of religious experience, that would not suffice to show that his preferred explanation is correct. Alston's argument here is analogous to ones which have previously been given for the proposition that the probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable is high given that they have been produced by evolutionary processes.[47] Unfortunately for Alston, his argument is subject to objections analogous to the crippling ones leveled against such evolutionary arguments. I'm not going to rehearse such objections here, but will merely highlight a few important points and give an (hopefully) illuminating example.[48]

The most basic point is that evolution cares about survival value, i.e. the value for surviving and reproducing, and not directly about truth at all. What is most important for surviving and reproducing are certain ways of behaving, and so truth will be of value only if it contributes to the requisite kinds of behaviour. It is quite possible, however, that a cognitive

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46. Perhaps we ought to say that the pragmatic value in the religious case concerns the prudential goal of avoiding unnecessary hardship. In fact, I am willing to accept such an argument (see Chapter IV), and thus I do regard established secular and religious doxastic practices to have some sort of *prima facie* rationality or presumption of acceptability going for them. However, the practical argument alluded to does not seem to be a proper interpretation of being in "effective touch with reality", since the latter seems to require more than the negative value of not frustrating one's prudential goal.

47. Perhaps this argument has never been fully and explicitly worked out, but at least hints of it can be found in the writings of Quine, Popper, Fodor, and others. Probably the most famous/infamous suggestive quote is from Quine's essay "Natural Kinds": "There is some encouragement in Darwin...Creatures inveterately wrong in their inductions have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind.", from *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969),p. 126.

48. Trenchant critics of the Quinean-evolutionary argument include Stephen Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*, particularly chapter 3; Philip Kitcher "Knowledge, Society and History", pp. 175 -6; and Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, particularly chapters 11 and 12.

system S_1 that is more reliable than another cognitive system S_2 could have less survival value, because it uses too much energy or takes too much time. In fact, an organism might thrive even though its cognitive system is unreliable, if its false beliefs are not very harmful, or not harmful at all. Stephen Stich gives the following example:

> Consider for example, the question of whether a certain type of food is poisonous. For an omnivore living in a gastronomically heterogeneous environment, a false positive on such a question would be relatively cheap. If the organism comes to believe that something is poisonous when it is not, it will avoid that food unnecessarily. This may have a small negative impact on its chances of survival and reproduction. False negatives, on the other hand, are much more costly in such situations. If the organism comes to believe that a given kind of food is not poisonous when it is, it will not avoid the food and will run a substantial risk of illness or death.[49]

Stich also makes the general point that, "And from the point of view of reproductive success, it is often better to be safe (and wrong) than sorry."[50]

At the risk of belabouring the obvious, the analogous objection to Alston is that there are plenty of ways for a doxastic practice to persist over time in a sizable number of people besides the practice being in "effective touch with reality". To name one, the practice might actually produce many false beliefs but these beliefs are mostly harmless, and so the practice is never disturbed. If all we know about a practice is that it is socially established and has persisted for a considerable period of time, we are not warranted in concluding that there is a "presumption" in favour of that practice being reliable.[51] Hence, Alston's argument for the third premise of the first stage of the PR argument fails. An interesting corollary of this is that Alston now lacks a reason for excluding idiosyncratic practices.[52]

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[49]. *The Fragmentation of Reason* , Ch. 3, pp. 61 - 2. Stich follows standard practice in distinguishing between false positives and false negatives. A false positive occurs when one infers that p is the case when p is not the case. A false negative occurs when one infers that p is not the case when in fact p is the case.

[50]. Ibid, p. 62.

[51]. Compare with Laurence Bonjour's consideration of whether a belief-system could be stable over time and coherent yet still systematically false. His conclusion seems to be that this may be possible for certain relatively isolated beliefs (i.e. beliefs about color and secondary qualities in general) but is *a priori* unlikely for less isolated beliefs or an entire belief-system. Cf. *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, pp. 172 - 9. My analogous claim is that it is possible for a relatively isolated doxastic practice to be unreliable (*not* in "effective touch with reality") with few (or no) significant ill effects, although I am more hesitant to make the same claim with regard to more integrated doxastic practices or a complex of them.

[52]. A number of authors have objected to Alston's exclusion of idiosyncratic practices as being overly conservative. Cf. Robert Adams, "Religious Disagreements and Doxastic Practices", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* , Vol. LIV, No.4, Dec. 1994, pp. 885 - 890. There may actually be a good reason for excluding idiosyncratic non-religious practices, i.e. as Adams points out, "a considerable measure of cognitive conservatism is necessary for sanity."(p. 886 of aforementioned article) However, Adams' point is that with regard to practices like religion, ethics, and philosophy (if it is a doxastic practice), there may be a greater tolerance for disagreement and idiosyncracy because to be a full-

Let's return to the stages of the PR argument (at least as Alston presents it in *PG*). Is there reason to accept the conclusion of the first stage of the argument? There seems to be, by quite liberally interpreting Alston and supplementing his position in this ways done above. (Of course, part of my project is to see whether Alston's strategy would work for mystical practices supposing for the sake of argument that it works for standard practices, so the admission just made may not be essential.) If the first stage is successful,[53] what is the next stage? Before we get there, we should remember Alston's two-tiered system of rationality and justification. After giving his argument for engaging in established doxastic practices (the first stage), Alston presents two main ways in which the *prima facie* rationality of a practice can be weakened (overriders), and one way in which it can be strengthened (I'll call such entities `underwriters'). A doxastic practice's *prima facie* rational status can be weakened by (1) internal inconsistencies, (2) external inconsistencies, and strengthened by (3) significant self-support.[54]

Internal inconsistencies occur when a practice yields mutually inconsistent beliefs. Now, all (or less controversially, nearly all) of our doxastic practices have some degree of internal inconsistency, and unless we are prepared to reject them all, this seems tolerable. This leads Alston to the reasonable supposition that only, "sufficiently extensive and persistent internal contradictions in the output of a practice would give us a conclusive case for regarding it as unreliable."[55]

External inconsistencies occur when the outputs of two practices are incompatible. Again, this is tolerable to some degree, and only becomes a problem when there is "massive and persistent" conflict. This by itself doesn't tell us which doxastic practice has to go, however, and Alston's suggestion is that in such cases the more firmly established doxastic practice has precedence.[56] Alston doesn't have a precise definition of "being more firmly established", but he says it involves, "(a) being more widely accepted, (b) having a more definite structure, (c) being more important in our lives, (d) having more of an innate basis, (e) being more difficult to abstain from, (f) its principles seeming more obviously true."[57]

The notion of `significant self-support' is less obvious than the previous two. The essence of it is that it is a kind of epistemically circular support that is not trivial because it is not equally available to all doxastic practices. In determining whether practices have significant self-support, we must consider "whether these practices yield fruits that are appropriate

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fledged rational participant in such practices one must develop and defend one's own perspective. I'll return to Adams later, in the overall assessment of the rationality of CMP.

53. The first stage is successful in the sense that the conclusion is acceptable, but Alston's reasoning for it is rather weak.

54. *PG*, p. 7.

55. Ibid, p. 171.

56. Ibid.

57. Ibid.

to their character and aims."[58] Alston gives this characterization of the self-support SP enjoys:

> (1) By engaging in SP 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, to some considerable extent, control the course of events. (2) By relying on SP and associated practices we are able to establish facts about the operation of sense perception that show both that it is a reliable source of belief and why it is reliable. Our scientific account of perceptual processes shows how it is that sense experience serves as a sensitive indicator of certain kinds of facts about the environment of the perceiver.[59]

Practices other than SP presumably do not exhibit self-support (e.g. crystal ball gazing), and it is quite conceivable that SP might not have exhibited it either, e.g. if by engaging in SP we were simply unable to make accurate predictions ,or to understand why we make the successful predictions we do make.[60] So this kind of epistemic circularity is a virtue, not a vice (although it furnishes no non-circular argument for the reliability of a practice, and is in that sense vicious). We can already expect that Alston will argue that the CMP exhibits significant self-support, and we will have opportunity to examine his argument for that proposition later on.[61]

So far I've just listed and explained these overriders and underwriters, not considered how they apply to MP or the CMP. For organizational reasons, I'll examine most of them after we've considered the other stages of the practical rationality argument, and one of them - inconsistencies between mystical practices, i.e. the problem of religious diversity - is so important as to deserve a chapter all of its own.

B. The Second Stage of the Practical Rationality Argument

The conclusion of the first stage of the PR argument is that it is *prima facie* (practically) rational to engage in the doxastic practices that are firmly established socially and psychologically. The conclusion of the second stage of the PR argument is that (to continue with SP as an example) it is practically rational to `take' or `suppose' that SP is reliable, given that it is practically rational to engage in SP.[62] The second stage of the PR argument is thus designed to relate the engagement of a practice to the reliability of the practice, and thus to Alston's conception of justification. As a cautionary note, however, we have to be quite clear that Alston is *not* arguing that the practical rationality of engaging in a practice implies that the practice is reliable. Rather, the key to understanding

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58. Ibid, p. 174.
59. Ibid, p. 173.
60. Ibid.
61. Alston does so most thoroughly in Ch. 6 of *PG*, pp. 250 - 4.
62. *PG*, p. 180. Alston alternates between "take" and "suppose", using them synonymously. That isn't a problem; what is a problem, and shall be discussed shortly, is that Alston is *ambiguous* about what he means by these words.

Alston's argument is that the claim about reliability operates at a *higher level* than a simple first-level claim that doxastic practice X is reliable.

We have seen what the conclusion of the second stage is, but how does Alston get there? Informally, the structure of the second stage is as follows:

1. The rationality of a practice extends to whatever that practice commits me to.[63]
2. In judging SP to be (practically) rational I am thereby committing myself to the (practical) rationality of judging SP to be reliable.[64]

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3. It is (practically) rational to take or suppose SP to be reliable.

It seems to me that there are good grounds for accepting the first premise, at least if we understand what I am committed to as, minimally, that which I cannot coherently reject. This implies that whatever is necessary for engaging in a practice (or an action, for that matter) is rational if the practice is rational. To say to someone, "it is rational for you to engage in x but y is not rational for you, even though y is required for you to engage in x" seems to me to be incoherent. Anyone who accepted that x is rational but denied the rationality of whatever is necessary for x would seem to be disingenuous, as not really accepting that x is rational.

Even if the first premise is correct, however, it does not tell us what cannot be coherently rejected, and on this point there is likely to be some disagreement. Alston argues that I cannot coherently engage in a doxastic practice and refrain from acknowledging the practice as reliable, if the question arises.[65] Alston reminds us of the nature of a doxastic practice. "But to engage in a doxastic practice is to form beliefs in a certain way. And to believe that p is to be committed to its being true that p. But what is true of individual beliefs is also true of a general practice of belief formation."[66] It's unclear just what the argument is for this position, and I don't want explore this matter here (we will do so shortly), so for the moment I will just say that I think there are two main options for the reasoning that might be going on here: (1) we have the materials for an argument much like a track-record argument for the reliability of a practice, except this one operates at a higher-level; and (2) engaging in a doxastic practice commits one to defending the doxastic practice if challenged. Alston concludes with the following comments.

> Hence our argument from practical rationality, though it does not show that SP is reliable, does show that it is rational to take it to be reliable. No doubt, it would be much more satisfying to produce a direct demonstration of the truth of the

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63. Ibid, p. 179.
64. Ibid, p. 178.
65. Ibid, pp. 178 - 180.
66. Ibid, p. 179.

> proposition that SP *is reliable*. But since that is impossible, we should not sneer at a successful argument for the rationality of supposing SP to be reliable.[67]

Since the first premise of this second stage of the PR argument seems true, if we are to challenge Alston it must be on his second premise. What is at issue is whether one can coherently engage in a doxastic practice yet not be committed to believing that the practice is reliable. A comparison with ancient skepticism suggests itself. The analogous issue is whether the skeptic can coherently conform to the customs and practices of her day yet not believe that these customs and practices are indicative of the nature of reality. I will draw upon a discussion between Terence Penelhum and Eleonore Stump on the possibility of a coherent skepticism for some insight into this matter.

Penelhum characterizes skepticism in this manner:

> We have to see Scepticism in Hellenistic times as a competitor with Epicureanism and Stoicism in the enterprise of helping the thinker attain a state of inner tranquillity.... Far from being, as is commonly said, an unlivable position, it [skepticism] is a position that is thought by its practitioners to be livable easily. For what the Sceptic does, or says he does, is to live as he did before, but without commitment, undogmatically (*adoxastos*). The rendering I like best for this is "belieflessly". Roughly, the Sceptic conforms to the ways of his own day, age, and culture, without any inner commitment to their being in conformity with some reality.[68]

Penelhum also claims that skepticism can be understood in a way in which it is not patently incoherent (the way characterized above), and in which it can be practically tenable, and he tries to generate a moral from this skeptical ancestry that will apply to contemporary philosophy of religion. So far as I can discern, the moral is that purely negative or defensive apologetics for religion can be used equally well for any number of incompatible positions, and thus we need to engage in positive apologetics as well, e.g. natural theology.[69]

Stump takes Penelhum head on, arguing that his characterization of ancient skepticism is in fact incoherent and unlivable. She distinguishes between a strong form of skepticism and a weak one, based on Penelhum's characterization. The strong form is one in which "we take literally the claim that the skeptics conform to the lifestyle of their age but without any commitment to moral, metaphysical, or perceptual beliefs", and the weak form is one "in which we understand the skeptic as a philosopher who wants to give up just firm commitments to any particular set of *philosophical* beliefs and to philosophy as a methodology designed to uncover and defend such firm commitments."[70] Both forms

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67. Ibid, p. 180. Before we move beyond the explication of this part of the PR argument, we should note that Alston compares the situation to Moore's paradox: one cannot consistently say "My car is in the garage but I don't believe it". Cf. *PG* , p. 180, n. 52.

68. Penelhum, Terence, "Sceptics, Believers, and Historical Mistakes", *Synthese* 67 (1986), p. 134.

69. Ibid, p. 145.

70. Stump, Eleonore, "Penelhum on Skeptics and Fideists", *Sythese* 67 (1986), p. 148.

of skepticism are incoherent and untenable, argues Stump, and it seems to me that she has decisively shown this, although it may be possible to find an analog of the weak form that will work for Alston's argument.

Stump's criticisms of skepticism basically consist in pointing out ways in which the skeptic *must* have certain beliefs if she is to try to live her skepticism. With regard to the strong form, it seems that the skeptic must believe that tranquillity is valuable - why else seek it? But, "[i]f we do value tranquillity, then it is no longer true that we have suspended judgment about all beliefs."[71] Stump also trots out a number of examples in which it seems clear that the skeptic cannot act without belief. "Consider his [the skeptic's] behaviour at the first red light at a busy intersection. Should he stop? Why should he? ...he cannot commit himself to the beliefs that the red light is really there, that failure to stop will in all likelihood result in pain or death, and that we should value avoiding pain or death."[72] The general point is, "We do typically read beliefs from actions, and it is proverbial that deeds speak louder than words."[73]

There is also the weak from of skepticism which Stump also thinks is incoherent and untenable .

> As far as I can see, it [the weak form] consists essentially in three positions: first, an agnosticism not with regard to any and all beliefs but just with regard to major philosophical questions, including ethical and theological issues; secondly, a repudiation of philosophical inquiry, understood as an attempt to reach a determinate conclusion about philosophical issues; and thirdly, conformity to the practical, moral, and religious conventions of one's own age.[74]

The weak form recommends agnosticism regarding major philosophical issues, but Stump points out that this assertion is either itself a philosophical assertion or rests on philosophical assertions, and the same must be said for the repudiation of philosophical inquiry. The recommendation of conformity seems to presuppose a claim that conformity or something entailed by it [presumably tranquillity] is of value, so this version also is committed to this belief. There is also the problem of determining what counts as the practices of the day, and this is a problem for both forms of skepticism.[75]

I am not going to try to defend skepticism, for it seems to me that Stump is entirely right. The interesting question is whether an analog of skepticism with respect to Alston's position is possible, and if possible, rational. The problems with strong skepticism indicate that the strongest analog of skepticism with regard to Alston's argument - the position that one does not engage in any doxastic practice, i.e. one refrains from forming beliefs at all - is untenable. I don't suppose that any critic of Alston

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71. Ibid.
72. Ibid, p. 149.
73. Ibid, p. 150.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid, p. 151.

seriously entertains this position. A much more interesting and difficult question is whether some other analog of skepticism is possible and rational with regard to the PR argument. What could such an position be? A *relatively* strong position is that the rationality of engaging in a doxastic practice implies no commitment whatsoever to the rationality of believing in the practice's reliability. According to this position, it is rational for one to rationally engage in a practice, believe its outputs, be committed to its outputs being true, but not be committed to believing that the practice is reliable.

This very view is expressed by Robert Pasnau in an exchange with Alston.[76] Pasnau argues that there is an ambiguity in Alston's talk of "taking" or "supposing" a doxastic practice to be reliable (i.e. the conclusion of the second stage of the PR argument). This ambiguity can be resolved in two ways. (1) "Taking" or "supposing" a practice to be reliable is to *act as if* the practice is reliable. (2) "Taking" or "supposing" a practice to be reliable is to *believe* that the practice is reliable. Pasnau quite correctly points out that Alston needs to have "take" and "suppose" disambiguated as "believe", for the other option lacks "epistemological interest" (for Alston).[77] To spell this out more fully, the final conclusion Alston wants to draw from the PR argument is that one is PR in believing the outputs of a doxastic practice to be epistemically justified. On the 'act as if' interpretation, this conclusion would not follow; the most he could get would be that one is PR in acting as if the outputs of a doxastic practice are justified. And, Pasnau argues that Alston is not entitled to claim that engaging in a doxastic practice commits us to believing that the practice is reliable.

Pasnau's arguments for this last point deserve some attention. His first argument is that it is quite *consistent* (hence, coherent, in the sense relevant to Alston's concerns) to engage in a doxastic practice without believing that the practice is reliable. Referring to Alston's comparison of the situation with Moore's paradox,[78] Pasnau says:

> But *Alston's* paradox is not so paradoxical. I *can* , for instance, consistently accept most of the beliefs generated by my senses while neither affirming nor denying that the practice of sense perception is reliable. Consider this for yourself. Imagine engaging in SP but being unwilling to claim that it is reliable. There is so far as I can see, no inconsistency in doing so....A more clear example, for me at least, is the case of ethics. There is some practice, although I would be hard pressed to give it a name or description, by which I form my ethical beliefs, but I would by no means assert that my ethical doxastic practice is a reliable one...I take these examples to show that in general it is consistent to have doubts about

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76. Pasnau, Robert, "Justified Until Proven Guilty: Alston's New Epistemology", *Philosophical Studies* 72 (1993), pp. 1 - 33; Alston, William P., "Reply to Pasnau", same volume, pp. 35 - 45.
77. Ibid, n. 12, pp. 30 - 1.
78. See footnote 65 above.

the reliability of a doxastic practice and still continue to engage in the practice.[79]

Pasnau's second argument is that Alston's position only derives its force from the assumption that "one who engages in a doxastic practice must believe that most of the beliefs generated by the practice are true...But it seems to me that one can engage in a practice on a day-to-day basis without ever believing that most of the beliefs generated by the practice are true."[80]

Pasnau's last argument is that it is Alston's position that has the air of paradox. According to Alston, it is practically rational to believe that a doxastic practice in which I am engaged is reliable. But, because of epistemic circularity it is impossible to give a satisfactory argument for the reliability of any doxastic practice, and impossible to show that the outputs of a doxastic practice are epistemically justified. Thus, we are supposed to believe that which we cannot successfully defend![81]

In reply, Alston concedes that there is no logical inconsistency or psychological impossibility in engaging in a doxastic practice while neither affirming nor denying that the practice is reliable, but he still wants to claim that this is *not* rational. His tentative analysis of the situation is that he and Pasnau have a "rock bottom clash of intuitions".[82] In support of his intuitions he says: "It seems clear to me that if I confidently form beliefs in a certain way, and continue to do so over a long period of time, where this (naturally) involves taking those beliefs to be true, I thereby evince my confidence that that way of forming beliefs can be relied on to yield mostly true beliefs."[83] Unfortunately, these comments are not very helpful in deciding which intuitions to side with, since Alston does not bother to make clear what he means by "taking" and "evince my confidence", rather serious omissions in the context of this discussion.

Before we make a judgment about Alston's analysis of his disagreement with Pasnau, let's examine Pasnau's other arguments. The last argument establishes less than Pasnau seems to think. It would be straightforwardly paradoxical to assert that it is rational to believe that a doxastic practice is reliable and its outputs epistemically justified even though no non-epistemically circular argument for the practice's reliability is available, if Alston gave no reasons for this claim, or if he were claiming that one has truth-conducive epistemic justification for believing that the doxastic practice is reliable. But Alston does give reasons aimed at showing why we ought to believe that a practice we are engaged in is reliable, and he only claims a practical rationality for this belief. In fairness to Pasnau, however, Alston's position may be paradoxical in a not-so-

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79. "Justified Until Proven Guilty", pp. 10 - 11.
80. Ibid, p. 11.
81. Ibid.
82. "Reply to Pasnau", p. 38.
83. Ibid.

straightforward sense, and perhaps Pasnau's only point was that strong reasons are needed to accept an even somewhat paradoxical position.

Pasnau's second argument raises difficult problems. He claims that there is no reason why someone engaged in a doxastic practice would be irrational in not accepting that the practice has generated mostly true beliefs. This brings us to Alston's argument that is analogous to a track-record argument for the reliability of a practice. This is one possibility for the argument Alston has in mind in that passage quoted above.[84]

1. I believe p, q, r, s....beliefs that issue from doxastic practice x.
2. I am committed to it being true that p, q, r, s....
3. The criterion for being committed to its being true that most of the beliefs that issue from x are true is being committed to its being true that a (large?) number of beliefs that issue from x are true.

Sub. 4. I am committed to its being true that most of the beliefs that issue from x are true. Conc.

5. The criterion for being committed to its being true that a doxastic practice is reliable is being committed to its being true that most of the beliefs that issue from the doxastic practice are true.

Main Conc. 6. I am committed to its being true that x is reliable.

Pasnau can be seen as objecting to the (sub) argument for the sub-conclusion, as claiming that the argument is unsound. I don't think Pasnau is claiming that the argument is invalid, for he admits that if Alston is right that one who engages in a practice must believe that most of its outputs are true, then "there would be no resisting Alston's argument."[85] He certainly accepts premise one, so he must think that some other premise is false. A good question to ask is, what does being "committed to" mean? Once more, Alston is rather elusive on the matter. The best interpretation I can arrive at is that Alston means that if I am committed to p, I will assert that p if the question arises (on pain of irrationality), and I act as if p is true.[86] Pasnau does not want to deny that if I believe that p, I must assert that p is true if the question arises, and I will act as if p is true. What he does deny is that premise three is true. He doesn't say just what the criterion for being committed to its being true that most of the beliefs issuing from a doxastic practice are true is, but

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84. See footnote 64 above.

85. Pasnau, "Justified Until Proven Guilty: Alston's New Epistemology", p. 11.

86. The key to this interpretation is a footnote in *PG*, footnote 31, p. 179: "Again, this 'is to be committed to' rather than 'is to believe that', for the very reason brought out in the last paragraph: one could believe that the sun is shining without ever having raised the question of truth, and even without having the concept of truth. But if one does raise the question it is irrational to assert that p and abstain from asserting that it is true that p."

perhaps a suggestion in the spirit of his position is that one would need a sound, non-epistemically circular argument for the reliability of the doxastic practice in question.

It's hard to know what to say on this matter. For any doxastic practice, I have a large number of beliefs derived from it, and thus a large number of beliefs each of which I am committed to its being true that that particular belief is true. There is something intuitively compelling about thinking this commits me to its being true that most of my beliefs are true, but on the other hand there is also something compelling about Pasnau's examples of engaging in a practice without being committed to it's being reliable.[87] One possible conclusion is that Alston's analysis is correct; there are clashing intuitions here with apparently no good way to choose between them.

If this is the correct analysis, the effect is to significantly weaken the second stage of the PR argument. The argument is only persuasive if one shares Alston's intuitions, but if one shares Pasnau's then it has little or no force. So even if the first stage of the argument is correct, which it is not, the entire PR is weakened by the second stage, and to a considerable degree, since Alston's hope was to appeal to intuitions shared by a general audience in his defense of religious beliefs.[88]

However, Alston's analysis may be a little too easy. An alternative approach could go something like this.[89] There is another dimension to practical rationality that is not sufficiently emphasized by Alston but is by theorists such as Sellars.[90] Someone who has beliefs but isn't prepared to defend them when challenged may be violating social concerns of rationality. A person who has perceptual beliefs - that is, he or she engages in SP - but isn't prepared, when challenged, to claim that sense perception is reliable, at least in certain circumstances, is someone who we have good practical reason for dismissing as an authority. Thus, part of being an authority within a doxastic practice is being willing and able to defend that practice if challenged.

This brief sketch raises many questions. How does this social dimension arise? Is defending one's practice actually part of engaging in the practice or does it constitute a distinct meta-practice? How good must the defence of the practice be? Is there a difference between being an authority in a practice and being a competent practitioner? I'll try to

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87. An argument could go in reverse of Alston's argument, if Pasnau is correct. It is rational to engage in a doxastic practice but not believe, nor disbelieve, that the practice is reliable. Since the alleged criterion for believing that a practice is reliable is that one believe that most of the beliefs derived from the practice are true, one need not believe that most of the beliefs derived from a practice one is engaged in are true.

88. *PG*, p. 1.

89. This alternative approach was brought to my attention by Bruce Hunter.

90. Cf. "Empiricism and the Philosophy of the Mind" and "More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence".

provide at least the beginnings of answers to these questions in what follows.

Perhaps the most important question is how this social dimension arises. First, it would not be outrageous for there to be aspects of the rationality of a doxastic practice that are motivated by social concerns, since doxastic practices are, by Alston's own insistence, essentially social in nature. What would the social goal be that might be satisfied by participants being capable of defending their doxastic practice? Perhaps it is the goal of having authorities who are reliable sources of information about the practice; that is, if you cannot defend your practice by citing reasons in its favour, then perhaps you are not likely to be a reliable source of information about the practice. Perhaps the goal is of having participants who enjoy a certain kind of high-grade rationality or reasonableness in engaging in the practice.[91] Or, perhaps the goal is that of having an effective overrider system. This last option deserves some fleshing out.

My suggestion is that the concern for being capable of defending one's doxastic practices fills out or supplements the account of the overrider system. Alston characterizes the overrider system as basically a system of beliefs and procedures a subject can use in testing *prima facie* justified beliefs when the need arises. He does not go into much detail about how this is actually done. It can be done individually, but often it will be done in groups, on a communal level. For example, if someone reports to me that they clearly saw a boa constrictor in the bushes in northern Alberta (and if it seems important to check), we can consult experts on boa constrictors and on wildlife normally found in northern Alberta (as well as the Police, etc.) to see how likely it is that this belief is true. In defence of this belief, it would be appropriate for the person to claim that she is very unlikely to be wrong since she saw it in favourable conditions, and it would be appropriate for the other experts to defend their practices and procedures in similar ways if challenged. Hopefully this example illustrates that defending one's practice can play a crucial role in evaluating beliefs, i.e. in applying an overrider system.

I have already answered the second of the questions raised above, namely, being capable of defending one's practice is plausibly seen as part

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91. Foley does not distinguish between grades of rationality. Rather, he views rationality as an all-or-nothing notion, and assigns grades to *reasonableness* instead. This seems to be mainly a terminological issue, so for convenience I will adopt Foley's framework. I will suggest this kind of rationale: Not being able to defend one's practice reduces one's reasonableness in engaging in the practice, though not generally below the threshold of rational acceptance. My main reason for thinking that one can be rational in engaging in a practice even if one cannot defend it is that accepting the contrary implies that children, the mental challenged, and persons in similar situations are not rational in engaging in the practices they do, and this seems too harsh. On the other hand, this should not encourage a complacency among those capable of defending their practices, since it is generally desirable to be as reasonable as possible (this may be intrinsically valuable and/or it may promote our epistemic or practical goals).

of engaging in the practice itself. This social dimension of rationality seems to fit into Alston's account of doxastic practices well, as an extension or fleshing out of the overrider system. To regard this dimension as a separate practice would only seem to lead to more confusion and complexity, since we would now have two practices to explain and relate. Perhaps it could be done, but in the interests of simplicity I will not take that route.

I have no detailed answer to how good the defence of the practice must be, nor to what the nature of the defence must be. My suggestion is that the standard is contextually determined, by the nature of the practice in question, the inclinations of the disputants, the importance of the practice, and other such variables. For example, it would not be reasonable to expect a layperson to give a decent philosophical argument in defence of a practice, although it might be (in certain circumstances) reasonable to expect such from someone trained in philosophy. As for the nature of the defence offered, a position that might initially seem plausible is that a person must respond that the practice is reliable, if challenged. This has some plausibility since epistemic goals are extremely important. Certainly, saying "well, engaging in practice X makes me feel good" will generally not be as valuable. However, we should be careful not to try to mold all defences too closely to this epistemic model, since there are circumstances in which a mere reliability claim seems rather weak.[92]

As for the last of the questions raised above, there is a difference between being a competent practitioner and being an authority within a practice. Additional requirements may be necessary depending upon the nature of the practice, but minimally one should, in general, be able to form and evaluate beliefs in the ways distinctive of the practice. Being an authority minimally requires also being able to defend the practice to others when challenged. In some practices, such as SP, many of the practitioners are authorities, and even more are potentially capable of being authorities. In other practices, such as CMP, the ratio of authorities to practitioners is relatively small.

Returning to the PR argument, we have examined a line of thought that provides some support for the second-stage of the argument.[93] We have to amend the argument somewhat, however, to make it acceptable. Instead of " In judging SP to be (practically) rational I am thereby committing myself to the (practical) rationality of judging SP to be

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92. An obvious candidate is situations in which the reliability claim is itself likely to need support, such as when the practice is a controversial one or when especially stringent standards of reasonableness are being employed. Religious practices are excellent examples of the former case, and philosophy itself is an excellent example of the latter. In both situations, it can hardly be enough to simply say, "practice X is reliable". If it were, Alston would have no need for the practical rationality argument.

93. An additional benefit of this line of thought is that it allows us to make sense of Alston's enigmatic claim that certain beliefs, such as that SP is reliable, are foundational *presuppositions* of practices, in this case, obviously, the practice of SP. Cf. *PG*, p. 164.

reliable.", the second premise should be: "In judging SP to be (practically) rational I am thereby committing myself to defending the practice if challenged." Thus:

1. The rationality of a practice extends to whatever that practice commits me to.
2. In judging SP to be (practically) rational I am thereby committing myself to defending the practice if challenged.

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3. It is (practically) rational to take or suppose SP to be reliable.

With this in mind, the premises do support the conclusion. However, the support here is not deductive, since there are situations in which an appeal to or argument for the reliability of the practice is not a very effective defence. How strong the inductive support is is very difficult to say without a much more fully developed account than I am currently capable of providing. In the interests of charity, I will suppose that the inductive support is somewhat greater than one-half. Thus, the amended second stage of the PR argument is an acceptable inductive argument. We earlier examined reasons for supposing that the conclusion of the first stage of the PR argument is acceptable (even if Alston's argument for it requires substantial amendment), so the PR argument as a whole is thus far acceptable.

C. The Third Stage of the Practical Rationality Argument

This section shall be quite brief. The third stage of the PR argument is the only one to which I do not have objections. The third stage of the argument goes as follows:

1. It is practically rational to suppose that a socially and psychologically established doxastic practice is reliable.
2. The outputs of a doxastic practice are epistemically justified iff the doxastic practice is reliable.

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3. It is practically rational to suppose that the outputs of a socially and psychologically established doxastic practice are epistemically justified.[94]

I have included the conclusion of stage two in the third stage (as premise one) only to make the structure clearer, although of course the conclusion of stage one also figures as a premise in stage two (the stages *are* linked). The second premise simply follows from (or is) Alston's theory of

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94. *PG*, p. 181 - 3.

epistemic justification. The argument is valid, so the final conclusion follows if the premises are true.[95]

It remains to point out that Alston is not claiming to be able to show with the PR argument that the outputs of a doxastic practice *are* epistemically justified. At least one critic of Alston has apparently been confused about this matter.[96] Alston is only making a second-order claim, that it is practically rational to suppose the outputs of SP to be justified. To interpret Alston otherwise is to confuse the two levels. Similarly, one would be guilty of a level confusion if one argued that perceptual beliefs cannot be justified because the proposition that SP is reliable only enjoys a practical rationality status. Whether perceptual beliefs are justified, on Alston's account, is determined by whether SP *is* reliable, not by the status of any second-order belief.[97]

D. Overriders and Underwriters

The last part of the PR argument to be considered is Alston's treatment of the overriders and underwriters of the *prima facie* rational status allegedly conferred on a socially and psychologically established doxastic practice by the PR argument. You will recall that Alston presents two main ways in which the *prima facie* rationality of a practice can be weakened (overriders), and one way in which it can be strengthened (underwriters). A doxastic practice's *prima facie* rational status can be weakened by (1) internal inconsistencies, (2) external inconsistencies, and strengthened by (3) significant self-support. There is also a fourth way more specific to mystical practices that a doxastic practice can be undermined, namely (4) *naturalistic* explanations of mystical experience. Of these, I am only concerned to closely examine internal inconsistencies and external inconsistencies, and for the rest I shall have to be brief and dogmatic (where I offer any critical considerations at all). I want to start in reverse order, beginning with naturalistic explanations of mystical experience.

According to Alston, "it is plausible to hold that an experience can be an experience of an objective reality only if that reality is among the causes of that experience".[98] Now, many people believe that mystical experience can be adequately explained naturalistically (as opposed to supernaturalistically), i.e. only this-worldly factors need be mentioned in an adequate explanation. The famous (infamous) theories of Freud and

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95. There is an implicit premise to the effect that supposing a practice to be reliable is the criterion for supposing it outputs to be epistemically justified. But I don't think that Pasnauian objections can get started here.

96. Cf. Gale, Richard, "The Overall Argument of Alston's Perceiving God", *Religious Studies* 30 (1994) and Alston's reply in the same volume, "Response to Critics".

97. Alston is quite explicit about this, e.g. *PG*, pp. 181 - 2.

98. Ibid, p. 228.

Marx are examples of such attempted explanation.[99] Alston completes the line of argument, "God need never be mentioned in an adequate explanation. Nous n'avon pas besoin de cette hypothese. Hence we have no justification for supposing that God is causally involved in the generation of the experience and thus no justification for supposing that the experience is a perception of God."[100]

Alston advances substantially two objections to naturalistic explanations of religious experience. (1) Mystical experience *can* be adequately explained purely naturalistically, in the sense that the *proximate* causes are purely this worldly (neurons firing in the brain, or some such thing), as are the proximate causes of sensory experience. But the causal requirement should not be read as referring to proximate causes only, but also to distant ones. And nothing we know disqualifies God from figuring somewhere further back in the causal chain.[101] (2) Even if religious experience were generated in the way Freud or Marx , that would do nothing to rule out the perceptual status of mystical experience. "Why suppose that this [Freud's neurosis] is not the mechanism God uses to reveal Himself to our experience? Because it seems very odd that God would choose such a means? But much of what happens in the world seems to us to be not the sort of thing the Christian God would chooses."[102]

I have nothing to say about the first objection except that it seems to be a rather cogent one. It is the second objection that has me worried. The fundamental problem is that for Christians (or other religious believers) to accept that something like Freud's or Marx's explanation of religious experience could be the mechanism by which God reveals Himself, would be to make a fundamental change in *values*, and not for the better. It is an essential part (though perhaps mostly implicit) of Freud and Marx's theories that being produced by neurosis or a perverted social order is a *bad* thing. After all, that's part of their objection to religious belief. Alston would have religious people not only give up the belief that these kind of mechanisms are a bad thing, but go one further to hold that they are a good thing![103]

The next overrider I will briefly consider is inconsistencies between religious practices and other secular practices, or for more precision,

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99. At the risk of gross oversimplification, Freud holds that religion is the product of a kind of neurosis (wish-fulfillment), and Marx holds that religion is the product of a perverted social order. Much more could be said about both of their theories, of course, but nothing more sophisticated is necessary for my purposes.

100. *PG*, p. 228.

101. *PG*, pp. 231 - 2. Alston also notes that "it is an essential part of the Christian scheme that God figures among the causes of any occurrence whatsoever."(*PG*, p. 232)

102. *PG*, p. 233.

103. I suspect that a careful examination of the holy texts of many religions would reveal that the values endorsed therein are *incompatible* with accepting that Freud's neurosis or Marx's perverted social order are good things. Being no expert on such matters, this remains no more than a suspicion for me.

between CMP and other secular practices. Alston begins by reiterating what we have seen before, that only massive inconsistency will be disqualifying for CMP, and that only if the other practice is more firmly socially established. His next point is to distinguish between the irrationality of individuals whose religious beliefs are in massive contradiction with more firmly established beliefs (perhaps from an overly literal interpretation of the Bible), and the rationality of the practice as a whole.[104] Then Alston considers whether CMP is massively incompatible with natural science, history, and naturalistic metaphysics, which he takes to be the main contenders. With regard to natural science and history, Alston concludes that there is no massive conflict, and with regard to naturalistic metaphysics he concludes that there is conflict but there is not much reason to accept such metaphysics. Therefore, he concludes that the status of CMP is not in danger from conflict with other (secular) practices.[105]

The next overrider to be examined is inconsistencies *within* doxastic practices (internal inconsistencies), in particular CMP and SP (since they're Alston's favourite examples).[106] On this topic I do have something more to say, and when we turn to inconsistencies between religious doxastic practices I'll have a lot to say. A few preliminaries. The first point to reinforce is that for Alston internal inconsistencies count most directly against the supposition of reliability for a doxastic practice, and only indirectly against the claim to rational acceptance. It is sometimes easier for Alston (and myself) to speak as if inconsistencies count directly against rational acceptability, when that is not quite what he means. Another important point is that a certain amount of internal inconsistency is acceptable; only massive inconsistency is disqualifying, although Alston does admit that some inconsistencies are more serious than others due to the importance of the issues involved.[107] How much inconsistency is acceptable cannot be precisely determined beyond saying that the limit is the maximum the overrider system can handle.[108]

The basic claim Alston wants to establish is that CMP does have a considerable amount of internal inconsistency, significantly more than SP for example, but not enough to override the *prima facie* claim to rational acceptance. It does partly depend upon how one individuates mystical practices, and to revive a previous point Alston made, there is no unique

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104. *PG*, p. 239.

105. I can't say that I entirely agree with Alston's position but that issue is beyond the scope of this thesis. I commend the interested reader to pp. 238 - 48 of *PG*.

106. The internal inconsistency can't be understood as just involving MP, but must be within it plus (at least) something like induction. This appears to be what Alston has in mind though he doesn't make it explicit.

107. Ibid, p. 237.

108. Ibid, p. 235. The notion of what can be handled is not very precise, but Alston insists "it is precise enough to be usable."(Ibid, p. 236)

way of doing so.[109] Alston's choice is to individuate doxastic practices along broad lines such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and so on, in conformity with what one would expect in an introductory text in the comparative study of religion. If one were to lump all religions into one mystical practice, there would certainly be "massive and persistent" inconsistency, but doing so does not seem to be a fair procedure. I have no real objections to Alston's taxonomy of mystical practices, and since my critical points are not effected by it, I will simply adopt it for the sake of discussion.[110]

What kind of inconsistencies are to be found if one accepts Alston's way of cutting up the pie, so to speak? Alston mentions perceptions of communications from God as displaying a "wild diversity, many mutually inconsistent."[111] The inconsistencies often concern reports people give as to what God told them about His plans, reports as to what assignments He gave them, and reports as to His attributes.[112] Alston is quite realistic in this regard; he admits there are problems, he is not trying to pull the wool over our eyes. "Thus it cannot be claimed that the inconsistencies in CMP's output are merely minor ripples in a placid sea...it cannot even be claimed that the overrider system suffices to resolve all incompatibilities, though it will knock out many."[113] Alston's overall judgment, however, is that while the *prima facie* rational status of CMP is diminished by internal inconsistencies, and to a degree that it is *less* than the status enjoyed by SP, it is *not* reduced to such a degree that it is not rational to engage in it.[114]

There is, however, another kind of internal inconsistency which Alston barely discusses - inconsistency in the background conceptual scheme associated with a doxastic practice. I say `barely discusses' because in *PG* Alston does not consider whether such inconsistencies are present in CMP, but in other places he makes a partial attempt to do so.[115] One

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109. Alston, William P., "Response to Critics", p.176.

110. Terence Tilley argues that Alston's taxonomy is too crude, introducing a number of dimensions along which further distinctions can be made, e.g. the role of mechanisms, procedures, and authorities in doxastic practices. Alston's response is to admit that further distinctions can be made, but to insist that his way of cutting up the pie is suitable for his purposes. See pp. 161 - 9, *Religious Studies* 30 (1994) for Tilley's position and pp. 171 - 80 of the same volume for Alston's reaction.

111. *PG*, p. 236.

112. Ibid.

113. Ibid, p. 237.

114. Alston claims that nothing very definitive can be said about whether CMP is rationally engaged in, for "we have no usable metric for degrees of reliability...and because there is no determinate answer to how much reliability is required for rational participation."(*PG*, p. 238)

115. I am thinking primarily of "The Inductive Argument from Evil and the Human Cognitive Condition" in Tomberlin, James E. (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 5, Philosophy of Religion 1991* (Atascadero, Calif.: Ridgeview Pub. Co., 1991). There Alston argues that the inductive or probabilistic argument from evil is not really a problem, and

obvious candidate for a conceptual inconsistency in CMP is the problem of evil, and there has been much discussion about whether it really is a problem and if it involves a logical inconsistency. I don't want to get too involved in that fray, and will settle for advancing a *suggestion* that there is another kind of (related) conceptual inconsistency in CMP.

E. Conceptual Inconsistencies: The Problem of Hell

It is widely believed among atheists and agnostics (and perhaps among some who would call themselves Christians as well) that the concept of hell constitutes, if not a more than sufficient reason for not believing in Christianity, at least a very serious problem for Christianity. But while this belief is widespread, it is seldom articulated with much clarity or vigor. The purpose of this section is to argue that there is indeed a problem here, which I shall call the *problem of hell*, and to explicate its nature.[116]

The problem of hell is a logical problem. It is a problem in the 'broadly logical sense' which Plantinga is fond of talking about. As a first approximation, we can state the nature of the problem in this way. I take it that many Christians believe that hell is just punishment for sin and also that God is morally perfect.[117] The problem of hell is that there is a logical contradiction between these beliefs such that it is not logically possible to consistently hold both of them. One might inconsistently believe both but that route has the unfortunate consequence of leaving one vulnerable to the charge of irrationality.

Now, of course, the contradiction is not immediately obvious in the way it is in the case of someone asserting (at the same time) p and not-p. Unearthing this particular beast requires some digging. To begin with, properly speaking, a logical contradiction does not arise between beliefs, but only between propositions, i.e. the propositional content of beliefs. I imagine many Christians will not object to me interpreting their position as including these propositions.

(1) Hell is just punishment for sin.

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he cites Plantinga's well-known Free Will Defence as a solution to the deductive or logical problem of evil (See *The Nature of Necessity* and Chapter VI of this thesis.)

116. It could be claimed that my 'problem of hell' is in fact just another facet of the 'problem of evil'. It is not a matter of much concern to me how this problem is ultimately categorized. If it is included in the problem of evil, then the problem of evil will gain a new sense of urgency. The important point is that what I am pointing out *is* a problem.

117. Apparently, many Christians believe in hell and that it is punishment for sin. However, they differ in their conceptions of hell and the afterlife. I am approaching this issue from a primarily Protestant understanding of hell, in which hell tends to be viewed as an all-or-nothing affair. The traditional Catholic view, with different degrees of hell and with Purgatory, will not be as affected by my objections because it is not as obviously in conflict with the proportionality principle (though it *may* still be). This is fine by me, since the problem of hell really is an artifact of one's theology.

(2) God is morally perfect or wholly good.[118]

(1) involves the concept of just punishment. One of the principles of just punishment, enshrined in Canada's criminal code (and other liberal democracies as well), is, roughly, that the punishment should fit the crime. The term `fit' here means that the punishment should be proportional to the crime. But proportional in what way(s)? One answer immediately suggests itself: the severity of the punishment should be proportional to the severity of the crime. We have thus another proposition: (3) The severity of the punishment should be proportional to the severity of the crime (or sin). Let us call this the proportionality principle. Two essential components of the severity of punishment also immediately suggest themselves: intensity and duration. (There may be other components but for the present purpose they may be ignored.) Thus according to this principle, the crime of stealing a loaf of bread is less severe than the crime of murder, and the criminal justice system metes out, and on this principle ought to mete out, less severe punishments for the former than for the latter.

Before I proceed with the main argument, a few explanations and caveats. I am not arguing for this principle of just punishment. The reader is free to abandon this principle and thereby try to free herself from my ultimate conclusion. However, I think many people will not want to abandon this principle. It has a lot of intuitive appeal. It, our something very similar to it, is one of the axioms of our justice system. If the reader really wants to abandon this principle, she will have to radically revise our justice system as well. This principle also seems essentially involved in any explanation of why we make the judgments about what punishments people deserve that we do.

Also, I do not have anything like an analysis of what constitutes the severity of a crime and only the beginnings of one about the severity of punishments. We do, intuitively, make judgments about the relative severity of criminal acts, and much (but not all) of the time we seem to have no problem in doing so. Murder is worse than kidnapping, which is worse than stealing a car, etc. I suspect that the consequences of criminal acts figure prominently in our judgments of their severity. But the important point for my purpose is not to try to figure out how such judgments are and ought to be made, but rather that we do make such judgments and we do espouse the principle of proportionality.

The important question is, is the concept of hell as just punishment consistent with the principle of proportionality? The answer is clearly `Hell No!'. Hell, conceived as eternal, infinite, excruciating punishment is not something which could be deserved by any human being. Human actions occur in space and time and are finite. No finite act or sum of finite acts (which is itself finite) could possibly be of sufficient severity to merit infinite punishment. The problem is exacerbated when we consider

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118. I use the terms `morally perfect' and `wholly good' as synonyms.

that hell is often described as being not only infinite in duration, but also infinite, or at the least, extremely great, in intensity. The pain experienced there, be it mental, physical, or both, is terrible enough to cause weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Sometimes Christians claim that although the number of sins a person has committed are necessarily finite in number, sin is by nature of infinite significance. Thus John Walvoord: "The problem here is the obvious lack of understanding of the infinite nature of sin as contrasted to the infinite righteousness of God. If the slightest sin is infinite in its significance, then it also demands infinite punishment as a divine judgment."[119] The grievous difficulty with this claim is that the antecedent of the conditional expressed seems "obviously" false rather than obviously true. How can a finite act have infinite significance? A response might be along these lines: sin results from character which is potentially infinite in its sinful products, and thus it deserves infinite punishment.[120] I don't see this as making matters any clearer or easier for the Christian. Even if the sinner's character is *potentially* infinite in its sinful products, it is hard to see why this would deserve *actual* infinite punishment. And a lot of work would need to be done to spell out in what sense a sinner's character is potentially infinite in its sinful products, if this is true at all. In some possible world in which the sinner lived forever and had ample resources and sufficient motivation, the sinner could/would commit an infinite number of sins? How is this relevant to how a real-world sinner should be punished? This whole line of thought strikes me as a dead end.

Not all Christians, however, are oblivious to these difficulties. In reference to the quotation reproduced above, Clark H. Pinnock says: "What kind of rationale is this? What kind of God is this? Is He an unjust judge? Is it not plain that sins committed in time and space cannot deserve limitless retribution?"[121]

We are almost in a position to formulate the problem of hell clearly. It remains to point out that if hell conceived as just punishment is not consistent with the principle of proportionality, and one is convinced of the truth of the principle of proportionality (or something very similar), then one is forced to deny that hell is just punishment. If one rejects that, one is also forced to deny that God is wholly just, since any God who could inflict such incredibly disproportionately severe punishment - or should we call it torture? - cannot be wholly just. In fact, it would seem that such a God would be positively unjust. If God is positively unjust, He is therefore not wholly good. (I assume that being perfectly good implies being perfectly just.)

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119. Walvoord, John F. "The Literal View" in *Four Views On Hell* (Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), p. 27.

120. This possible response was suggested to me by Bruce Hunter.

121. Pinnock, Clark H. "Response to John F. Walvoord" in *Four Views On Hell* , p.39.

To review, the propositions we have enumerated thus far are: (1) Hell is just punishment for sin; (2) God is wholly or perfectly good; and, (3) The severity of punishment should be proportional to the severity of crime (or sin). The last proposition needed to formulate the problem is: (4) God is wholly or perfectly just. Informally stated, the argument goes thus.

1. If (3) then not (1).
2. (3).
3. If (4) then (1).
4. If (2) then (4).

Conclusion: Therefore, not (2).

Proof:

5. Not (1). 1, 2 *Modus Ponens.*
6. Not (4). 5, 3 *Modus Tolens.*
7. Not (2). 6, 4 *Modus Tolens.*

The argument is almost embarrassingly simple, yet powerful, since it is deductively correct and (so I believe) sound. Before I point out its consequences, I will reply to some possible objections.

It might be objected that even if it is true that hell is not just punishment for sin, that does not necessarily imply that God is not wholly just. It is often said that God does not want us to go to hell but that we send ourselves there by our own choice to reject Him. Hell is not punishment, it is merely the logical consequence of our actions, of our freedom to choose.

Thus is it pretended that God has no culpability in this matter. But this is merely a subtle sophism. Who set up the rules of the game, so to speak, such that the consequence of rejecting God is eternal fiery punishment? Certainly not I. It also must be admitted that many, if not most sinners, once they found themselves in hell, would be more than willing to repent. Extreme pain is very convincing. Why would God not be willing to give us a second chance? Moreover, it can plausibly be held that even if hell does really exist, many people do not know this (until they allegedly get there). The earthly realm is a confusing place and it is not easy to know what is true and what is false. Could not God have provided us with less ambiguous `evidence' (if there is indeed any such evidence) about the rules of the game? God is culpable, therefore, in at least two respects: for setting up the game the way in which He did, and for not making it clear to the players what the rules of the game are and what the penalties are for violating the rules. This objection, therefore, is weak and it follows that if hell is conceived as just punishment then God is not wholly just and good.

The weakest point of my argument is (3), which could be rejected as a principle of just punishment. But as indicated earlier, the implications of rejecting (3) are enormous and, for most people, undesirable. So even the argument's weakest point is relatively strong.

On the other hand, the argument can be reformulated using not the principle of proportionality, but instead the Old Testament standard of justice: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Exodus 21:24). Pinnock notes:

> Did the sinner visit upon God everlasting torment? Did he cause God or his neighbours everlasting pain and loss? Of course not; no human has the power to do such harm. Under the Old Testament standard, no finite set of deeds that individual sinners have done could justify the infinite sentence.[122]

Pinnock also argues that in the Gospels Jesus invoked a higher standard of justice, under which the traditional view of hell is "inconceivable."[123]

We have, then, two more propositions either of which could be used instead of the principle of proportionality in the above argument. Proposition (8) - The Old Testament standard of strict equivalence (an eye for an eye) is a principle of just punishment - can be substituted for (3) in every instance in which it occurs in premises 1 and 2, and the validity of the argument is preserved. Proposition (9), which I will only spell out vaguely as the claim that the Gospels' standard of justice applies to (or is) just punishment, can similarly be substituted for every instance of (3) in premises 1 and 2, and the argument remains valid. Therefore, my argument holds whether one accepts (3), a proposition with much intuitive appeal and that permeates our criminal justice system, or propositions perhaps more internal to Christianity such as (8) or (9).[124]

What are the implications of my argument? The argument establishes that hell cannot be fruitfully conceived of as eternal punishment. To avoid the conclusion that God is not wholly good, Christians will have to have some other conception of hell, perhaps as a kind of device for purging souls who will eventually find their way to heaven. Or, one can simply ignore my argument and embrace the inconsistency of (1) and (2). But this is surely irrational.

For non-Christians, the problem of hell constitutes strong support for not believing in those forms of Christianity which hold both (1) and (2). Since every or virtually every theology (or Christian conceptual scheme) clings tenaciously to (2), the main difference among theologies in this respect will be whether they accept (1). Thus, as a general rule, the problem of hell constitutes a formidable objection to all those theologies that accept (1). It is quite possible, of course, that those theologies will reformulate their concept of hell and thereby circumvent the problem of hell. But until (and if) they do so, they will be maintaining an explicit contradiction, and can be justifiably not accepted by non-Christians.

There is one more possible implication of my argument. For those theologies (conceptual schemes) that accept (1) and also accept this further

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122. Ibid, p. 152.
123. Ibid.
124. I say perhaps more internal because it is possible that (3) has some explicit or implicit support in the Bible. I leave this question to those more competent in Biblical exegesis and hermeneutics than I.

proposition, (10) God is perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient, it will follow that God (defined in this way) does not exist. For, if hell is regarded as just punishment then it follows from the above argument that God is not perfectly good, and if one of the essential attributes of God is his moral perfection, then it follows that God, understood in this way, does not exist. This conclusion can be avoided, of course, but only by sacrificing either (1) or (10). And, rather than having proved that God does not exist, I would say that the problem of hell provides a clear impetus for Christians to develop more rational theologies.

So much for our little excursion into the philosophy of religion. I don't claim to have developed the problem of hell in sufficient detail or with sufficient force to *show* that the conceptual scheme of CMP suffers from an inconsistency of debilitating significance (because of the central issues involved), but I do claim to have made a *prima facie* case for this. Thus, I take the problem of hell to significantly lower the *prima facie* rational status of CMP. By itself it may not be sufficient to lower the status of CMP below rational acceptability, but we shall soon examine other considerations that, together with the problem of hell, are sufficient to do so (at least on a fairly narrow construal of the relevant considerations).[125]

There is only one main kind of overrider we have yet to examine, that of inconsistencies between religious practices, or what I earlier called the fact of religious pluralism or diversity. This is a vast and varied topic, and deserves a whole chapter for its consideration.

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125. There may be other inconsistencies in the Christian conceptual scheme as well. I am one of those who find the conception of justice utilized by those who claim that Christ took my punishment for me on the Cross as puzzling, if not outright unjust. How can it be satisfying the demands of justice to punish someone else for my sins? If I have two children, Susan and Cathy, is justice done by punishing Susan for Cathy's wrongdoings? Should I beat my cat when the dog urinates on the carpet? (I'm not suggesting that one should beat animals at all.) There is something bizarre about a God who doesn't care who is punished so long as someone (or something; the Israelites used to sacrifice animals) is punished.

Chapter IV - The Problem of Religious Diversity

A. The Problem Characterized

We have already seen how internal inconsistencies can damage the epistemic credentials of doxastic practices. This chapter is devoted to exploring how *external* inconsistencies between mystical doxastic practices can damage the credentials of such practices. Alston is very careful in his setup of the problem and in his response to it, and I shall have to be just as careful in my exegesis of its main contours.

A crucial distinction for Alston is between *interpractice* inconsistencies and *intrapractice* inconsistencies. Interpractice inconsistencies occur, in some sense, between doxastic practices, and intrapractice inconsistencies occur within doxastic practices, and Alston warns that the epistemic implications of one may not necessarily be the same as the epistemic implications of the other.[1] The inconsistencies we are here concerned with are interpractice ones, and we need to get a clear view of just what this inconsistency consists in to understand its significance.

As a first pass, Alston considers this formulation of the incompatibility: "The most obvious suggestion would be that the outputs of the practices contradict each other, not just here and there but in massive fashion, so as to make it impossible that both are reliable modes of belief formation."[2] Alston rejects this formulation as overlooking the role of the background system. To simplify matters, Alston supposes that the outputs of mystical practices are all of the singular subject-predicate form, and that they all attribute to God some "putatively perceivable property or putatively perceivable activity".[3] The most obvious way for the outputs of different doxastic practices to be incompatible is that they attribute to the same subject incompatible predicates. This divides into two questions. (1) Is the subject the same? (2) Are the predicates incompatible? Alston considers each in turn.[4]

We have at least initial reason to regard the subjects of the outputs of different mystical doxastic practices as different, Alston claims, if the religions to which they belong do not share common roots.[5] Thus, Christianity and Judaism, and to a lesser extent Islam, can be considered to be referring to the same subject, whereas religions that developed independently, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, cannot. Another reason which reinforces this is that the conceptual schemes of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam have much more in common with each other than they do with Buddhism and Hinduism. But if this is so, then the

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1. *PG*, p. 256.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid, pp. 256 -7.

"problem of religious pluralism" is in danger of evaporating before our very eyes, for there will be no incompatibility between religions such as Christianity and Buddhism.

Alston does not rest content with this easy way out, for he suggests, as I hinted at earlier, that we view all mystical perception as referring to "what is taken to be Ultimate, the ultimate determiner of one's existence, condition, salvation, destiny, or whatever."[6] In this way, the outputs of different mystical practices will be incompatible if they attribute incompatible predicates to the Ultimate.

But do the outputs of different mystical practices typically attribute incompatible predicates to the Ultimate? Alston considers reasons for denying that the incidence is as great as commonly supposed. If we strictly examine the positive content of many outputs of various religious practices, we shall find that they are not logically inconsistent. He gives some examples.

> If Vendanta or Yoga mystics report that they are aware of an undifferentiated unity, that attribution in itself is not incompatible with characterizing the same being as a personal agent, unless a denial of the latter is read into the former. Acquinas and many other theologians take the two to be compatible. Again, attributing to God the message that Jesus is His Son is not, so far as positive content is concerned, incompatible with attributing to God the message that Mohammed is His prophet, unless the former message also contains the stipulation that the life and work of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation. And the more common reports of God as loving or powerful, comforting or sustaining, are mostly quite compatible with perceived features of the deity in other religions.[7]

At this point one wants to object, "But surely there is something incompatible between the typical outputs of many mystical doxastic practices!" The second last sentence in the above quotation provides a clue: "unless the former message also contains the stipulation that the life and work of Jesus Christ is the only way to salvation." Taken in an isolated fashion, the outputs of a Christian mystical practice would not typically contain such information, but the information is there in a *implicit* form because of the leakage, so to speak, of the background conceptual scheme into the perceptual beliefs.[8] Indeed, in considering Alston's theory of perception we saw that he holds that the perceiving subject typically makes use of background beliefs in the identification of the perceptual object. Even in religions in which the broad outlines of the conceptual schemes are the same (e.g. Judaism and Christianity), the details will differ significantly. And, we should not forget that the background system of beliefs also intrudes in another way, by providing the overrider system.[9] And so, we can view the *total content* of the

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6. Ibid, p. 258.
7. Ibid, p. 257.
8. Ibid, p. 259.
9. Ibid, p. 261.

outputs of mystical practices as incompatible, provided the associated belief systems or conceptual schemes are incompatible.[10]

Alston briefly considers attempts to construe the belief systems of the major world religions as compatible. And he says, the simplest way to do this is to trim each religion of its 'exclusivist' claims, "so that it presents only one possible way to salvation, only one part of the story as to what the Ultimate is like and how we are and should be related to it."[11] The only objection Alston brings against such an approach is that it would be in fact a *revision* of each of the major world religions instead of a description of the actual situation. "In my chosen terms, there are no doxastic practices of a nonexclusivist sort that are actually engaged in by any significant community."[12] Given that one's purpose is to describe the actual situation, Alston's reply makes perfect sense; but as an objection to such nonexclusivist doxastic practices it is rather weak, especially in light of the collapse of his reason for rejecting idiosyncratic doxastic practices (which we saw in the section on the first stage of the PR argument).

We have reached Alston's considered view of the incompatibility of mystical doxastic practices, namely that they are incompatible in virtue of their total content. He considers two arguments for why this should pose a problem for the rationality of engaging in CMP. The stronger argument goes something like this.

> ...there is no objective reality with which the practitioners of such practices are in effective contact. The best explanation for the fact of the persisting incompatibility is that the whole thing is internally generated, generated by psychological needs and other pressures, structured by the distinctive conceptual resources and prevailing modes of thought of one or another culture. For if there were some objective reality with which the various contender are in cognitive contact, there would not be such persistent disagreements as to what it is like and how we are related to it.[13]

Alston objects that this argument has a dubious assumption. "The assumption presumably is that if any person or group enjoys a certain kind of cognitive contact with a sphere of reality, then any other person or group that takes itself to cognize that reality in that way would come up with the same, or similar, results."[14] Alston rejects this assumption because it only applies to those spheres of reality which are ideally suited to our cognitive powers, "and there is no reason to expect such agreement in areas not so amenable to human cognition even if we do achieve veridical cognition there...It is a familiar fact that the more difficult the

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10. Ibid, p. 262.
11. Ibid, p. 263.
12. Ibid, p. 264. Alston also briefly considers the approach of John Hick (*The Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989) and raises a similar objection to it, namely "it will have to be viewed as a proposal for a reconception of religious doxastic practices, rather than as a description and evaluation of those practices as they are."(*PG* , p. 265)
13. *PG*, p. 267.
14. Ibid.

task, the more widely dispersed the attempts to carry it out."[15] Alston cites mathematics as an example, and even though he did not cite it, he could have also mentioned philosophy.

> The weaker form of argument that Alston accepts goes as follows. Since each form of MP is, to a considerable extent, incompatible with all the others, not more than one such form can be (sufficiently) reliable as a way of forming beliefs about the Ultimate. For if one is reliable, then most of the beliefs that issue from it are true; and hence, because of the incompatibility, a large proportion of the beliefs issuing from each of the others will be false; and so none of those others is a reliable practice. Now why should I suppose that CMP is the one that is reliable (if any are)?....Hence, if it is rational for me to take CMP to be reliable, I will have to have sufficient *independent* reasons for supposing that CMP is reliable, or more reliable or more likely to be reliable, than its alternatives. But no such reasons are forthcoming....How can it be rational for me to form beliefs in a certain way if I have strong reasons for doubting that this way is reliable?[16]

Alston's main response[17] to this difficulty is to stress the importance of the fact that the incompatibilities at issue are *interpractice* ones as opposed to intrapractice ones. In the case of an intrapractice incompatibility, there is common ground to adjudicate such conflicts; "it is clear what would constitute non-circular grounds for supposing one of the contestants to be superior to the others, even if we do not have such grounds."[18] But in the case of interpractice incompatibility, such a common procedure to settle disputes is precisely what is lacking. Without such common ground, the problem of incompatibility is a less serious challenge to the rationality of the practices. Why exactly is this so? Alston doesn't explicitly say, but he makes some suggestive remarks:

> Since, as we are assuming, each of the major world religions involves (at least one) distinct perceptual doxastic practice, with its own way of going from experiential input to beliefs formulated in terms of that scheme, and its own system of overriders, the competitors lack the kind of common procedure for settling disputes that is available to the participants in a shared practice. Here, in contrast to the interpractice cases, my religious adversary and I do not lack something that we know perfectly well how to get. Hence the sting is taken out of the inability of each of us to show that he is in an epistemically superior position. The lack does not have the deleterious consequences found in the intra-practice case. Or, at the very least, it is not clear that it has those consequences.[19]

The idea seems to be that if two disputants lack something required for settling their dispute they do not know how to get, then each of them

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15. Ibid.
16. Ibid, pp. 268 - 9.
17. Alston also hints that he thinks that there *are* some independent reasons for epistemically preferring one form of MP over another, such as natural theology (*PG*, p. 270). But he doesn't show that natural theology actually succeeds as an independent reason in *PG* (or anywhere else), and proceeds on the "worst case scenario" that "there are no significant independent reasons for epistemically preferring it to its rivals."(Ibid.)
18. *PG*, p. 271.
19. Ibid, pp. 271 - 2.

is more rational in sticking by his guns then they would be if they actually had what they lacked. This is analogous to the situation in which two philosophical adversaries have reached an impasse - and are thus rational, at least for the moment, in sticking by their positions - because they no longer share relevant premises to argue from. What kind of rationality is being applied to situations such as this? It seems to be just that the presence of other incompatible beliefs in such a situation is not a defeater, or at least, is not a very strong defeater, whereas in the case of where there is common ground, the defeater is significantly stronger. This seems to be Alston's rationale for concluding that interpractice incompatibilities are less serious than intrapractice ones, and that the epistemic status of the outputs of mystical practices is diminished less than is commonly thought. I'm inclined to accept something like this rationale, although obviously it deserves a much fuller investigation than is possible here.

A recent exchange with Richard Gale on this very issue is instructive. Gale argues that interpractice conflicts are more serious than Alston supposes.

> Certainly persons holding rival beliefs would be more seriously divided if they could not agree on a method for resolving their disagreement than if they did; for in the latter case they can at least argue with each other, unlike the former in which they can resort only to non-epistemic means to resolve their difference. Furthermore, someone impugns my epistemic soundness far more if they question the very method by which I arrive at and warrant my beliefs than if they only question some of my beliefs.[20]

Alston's reply is somewhat less than satisfying.

> These [Gale's] points do imply that interpractice conflicts are in some ways more extreme than their intrapractice cousins. Nevertheless, I stick by my claim that the dimunition of positive epistemic status is less for the former than for the latter. Since I don't have anything to add to what I said in the book [*PG*] on this score, I will just repeat it. If there is no neutral procedure for settling the dispute, each party is in a better position to stick by its guns than they would be if there were such a procedure.[21]

The problem with Alston's reply is that he seems to want to have his cake and eat it too. He recognizes that Gale makes some sound points and that interpractice conflicts are in some ways more "extreme" than intrapractice ones, yet he doesn't change his position. It seems to me that we must try to make some overall judgment about the relative strengths of Gale's and Alston's points. I doubt there is any precise way of doing so, but this strikes me as fair: interpractice conflicts are not in general as serious as intrapractice ones (they are not as strong defeaters), but they are more serious than Alston imagines. People are more seriously divided by interpractice conflicts, and one is more seriously impugned by a rival of this sort, but one is also in a better position to "stick by your guns" than in the case of an intrapractice conflict. So interpractice incompatibility is a

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20. Gale, Richard, "The Overall Argument of Alston's *Perceiving God* ", *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), p. 146.

21. Alston, William P., "Response to Critics", *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), p. 174.

more serious problem than Alston realizes, though perhaps not quite as serious as Gale thinks.

There are only a couple of lines of defense Alston has left to mobilize, one rather strong and the other rather weak, almost sheepish. The latter form of defense is to argue that if it were actually a diversity of sense perceptual practices parallel to the (actual) diversity of mystical perceptual practices, then SP would be in the same situation as CMP. Alston even somewhat disingenuously suggests that the mere possibility of such sense perceptual diversity might pose the same problem.[22] But, he discounts this because "it is not really clear that the alleged possibilities are indeed possible."[23] This whole line of thought is rather sheepish because Alston raises it only to retract it, or at least only to seriously undermine it. We do not actually face a diversity of sense perceptual practices, and he admits that it is not clear that such a diversity is even possible. So why even raise the point? How does it help Alston's position?

The final line of defense is the significant self-support that CMP allegedly enjoys. According to Alston, this is one of the ways in which a doxastic practice's *prima facie* claim to rational acceptability can be strengthened. It is not part of my project to deny that CMP exhibits significant self-support, nor to deny that significant self-support strengthens the *prima facie* claim to rationality. Accordingly, I will merely summarize Alston's understanding of CMP's significant self-support.

In our brief earlier examination of significant self-support, we saw that it differs from the kind of trivial self-support we get when "we simply use the same output twice, once as testee and once as tester."[24] Alston also holds that significant self-support differs with the nature of the practice, so that we should not expect CMP to exhibit the same support as SP, although Alston holds that "it is reasonable to think that the self-supporting fruits of CMP would be related to *its* basic aim and structure in a similar way."[25] That is, Alston holds that if a doxastic practice exhibits significant self-support, such support will be related to the practice's *basic function*.

> The basic function of SP in our lives is to provide a `map' of the physical and social environment and thereby enable us to find our way around in it, to anticipate the course of events and to adjust our behavior to what we encounter so as to satisfy our needs and achieve our ends. Part of the self-support we have noted for SP constitutes the successful carrying out of this aim.[26]

Alston suggests that to find the significant self-support of CMP we need to consider CMP's basic function.

> It [CMP's basic function] is an analogous function, namely, providing a `map' of the `divine environment', providing guidance for our interaction with God. CMP, along with the other sources that are drawn on to build up the Christian scheme of things, has the function of giving us a picture of God, His purposes, activities,

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22. *PG*, p. 274.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid, p. 250
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.

requirements on us and plans for us, a picture that will guide us in our interactions with Him.[27]

Having laid out this much, Alston proceeds to argue that CMP does exhibit self-support, in the sense that the practitioners of CMP, if they fulfill the required conditions, do experience a kind of spiritual development or "sanctification"[28] that is in a sense predicted or expected. "Here [in CMP] the appropriate self-support would rather be provided by the fact, if it is a fact, that prolonged interaction with God, of the right sort, should lead to spiritual development."[29] Thus, CMP's claim to rational acceptance does receive support (no pun intended) from significant self-support.[30]

There is an objection that Alston considers and rejects, namely that since significant self-support is plainly epistemically circular, it can do nothing to shore up the status of a doxastic practice. The astute reader can probably anticipate Alston's response. It is two-fold: (1) SP is often thought to be supported by considerations which fall under the rubric of significant self-support; (2) Unless one is to be guilty of employing a "double standard", one cannot disallow significant self-support in the case of CMP unless one also disallows it with respect to SP. And, it is clear that one should allow significant self-support to count as positive epistemic support in the case of SP. By parity of reasoning, then, one should allow it to count as positive epistemic support in the case of CMP. We can perhaps sum up Alston's response as saying that there are vicious and non-vicious (perhaps even virtuous) kinds of epistemic circularity, or perhaps more accurately, what is epistemically circular is vicious in some but not necessarily all respects.

B. The Minimalistic (Worst Case) Scenario

It is time to come to some sort of (preliminary) overall judgment on the status of CMP. I'm going to do so in terms of a perhaps overly simplistic model of those considerations that strengthen the *prima facie* rational acceptability of CMP ('pros', taken in a wider sense than underwriters), and those considerations that weaken the *prima facie* rationality of CMP ('cons' taken in a wider sense than overriders). There are going to be several incarnations of such overall judgments, depending on what we allow in and what we exclude as considerations. Hopefully, these models will serve as illuminating what results on various different

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27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, p. 251.
29. Alston, William P., "The Autonomy of Religious Experience", *Philosophy of Religion* 31 (1992), p. 85.
30. It might be thought that what Alston is calling significant self-support is merely what has often been called "coherence". Alston realizes this and does not seem to be bothered by it (*PG*, pp. 251 -2). Presumably he would say that it is a strength of his moderate kind of foundationalism that it recognizes the role of such "coherence".

construals of the relevant considerations, i.e. various positions Alston (or whoever) might hold.

Just one caveat. I believe I have given considerations sufficient to show that our standard doxastic practices are prima facie rational - i.e. the practical argument given in the discussion of the first stage of the PR argument, together with the rest of Alston's argument suitably amended. Can these considerations be extended to religious practices? Well, from an objective perspective, will ceasing to engage in or radically changing one's MP cause one to experience more than the minimal amount of unnecessary hardship? We could become embroiled in an argument about whether the hardship caused would be "unnecessary", but that might be counter-productive. In the spirit of generosity, I am willing to concede that the answer to the above question is yes, and thus religious practices pass my test for *prima facie* practical rationality.[31] Of course, this does not mean they pass the overrider test, and I have already largely examined how CMP fares in this regard. So in what follows, I will assume that CMP (and any other established doxastic practice) has prima facie rational status, which, to use Alston's terms, means that we may reasonably consider it to be *prima facie* rationally engaged in, *prima facie* rationally supposed to be reliable, and *prima facie* rationally supposed to have epistemically justified outputs.[32]

The next step is to consider whether this *prima facie* status survives assessment by pros and cons. The first overall judgment I will make is based on Alston's worst case scenario and my own worst case scenario, a sort of combined worst case scenario. Alston's worst case scenario consists in supposing that the *sole* epistemic ground of Christian belief is perceptions of God, i.e. the doxastic practice of CMP, ignoring such possible grounds as tradition, revelation, and natural theology.[33] My own worst case scenario would be to suppose that the "problem of hell" isn't really a problem, i.e. I have not shown that it is at least a *prima facie* problem for the Christian conceptual scheme. This situation is a bit artificial since neither Alston nor myself really accepts it; but, it marks one space on the continuum of possibilities, and more to the present point, it marks the least that is claimed by Alston in *PG*.

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31. To deny CMP *prima facie* rational status simply on the grounds that it is a religious practice would seem to beg the question against it. At the least, one would have to show that there is no satisfactory argument for its prima facie rational acceptability, which I won't even attempt to do. In any case, there is sufficient room for epistemic evaluation at the level of overriders and underwriters for religious practices.

32. The second and third parts of this explication of prima facie rational status do not follow deductively from the third, since the 2nd stage of the PR argument is inductively correct only. In fact, I would favour replacing the 2nd part with something like *prima facie rationally defended*, but then the rest of the PR argument wouldn't follow. This is just to say that I only accept part of the PR argument, suitably amended.

33. *PG*, p. 270. In the final chapter of *PG* (chapter 8), Alston makes a brief attempt to show how tradition, revelation, and natural theology work together with experiential grounds to comprise the total support for Christian beliefs.

On the pro side, then, we have significant self-support, which I have admitted CMP has. On the con side, there are inconsistencies within CMP (not including the problem of hell) and inconsistencies between CMP and other mystical practices (I also allowed inconsistencies with secular practices to drop out). Alston admits that CMP exhibits more numerous and more serious internal inconsistencies than SP, and that this reduces the *prima facie* status somewhat. He also admits that inconsistencies with other MP's reduces the *prima facie* status, but to a lesser extent than intrapractice ones. Alston's overall judgment is that CMP is still rationally engaged in.[34] I take Alston to have shown that there is *just barely enough* by way of positive epistemic status to make CMP rationally acceptable, on the supposition that interpractice inconsistencies are not that serious. But we have examined reasons to suppose that interpractice incompatibilities are more serious than Alston supposes, and I take this to be enough to push CMP over the edge, so to speak. Thus, CMP is *not* rationally engaged in on the combined worst case scenario.[35]

In a provocative article, Terence Penelhum surveys what he takes to be an important trend in the epistemology of religion and presents a crucial problem for it.[36] This trend Penelhum dubs the Basic Belief Apologetic (a term we earlier borrowed from him).[37] As he presents the position, it begins with a distinction between those beliefs we accept on the evidential basis of other beliefs, and those beliefs we do not (basic beliefs).[38] The Basic Belief Apologetic's central tenet is that beliefs about God are or can be rational or justified (or in some other way epistemically up to par) even if they are not based upon evidence or what we might call external support. The proponents of this view often point out that many secular beliefs (e.g. that sense perception is reliable) are allegedly in no better position *vis-a-vis* external support than belief in God.

The crucial problem for the Basic Belief Apologetic that Penelhum sees is that the strategy it uses to argue for the rationality of theistic beliefs could just as easily be used to argue for the rationality of completely different religions, and even of purely secular beliefs.[39] The danger here is a kind of *balkanization* where each camp is rational and justified, and cannot be dislodged from it's position by any other camp. Penelhum argues that the Basic Belief Apologists cannot can rest content with this because it tends toward "some form of the relativist conformism of the

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34. Ibid, p. 279.
35. There is one objection that is not available to Alston, namely that I have not used any precise method to come to my overall judgment. This is true, but Alston also (plausibly in my mind) holds that there is no precise way of coming to such judgments. Cf. "Response to Critics", *Religious Studies* 30 (1994), p. 175.
36. Penelhum, Terence, "Parity is Not Enough", pp. 98 - 120.
37. Ibid, p. 99.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid, p. 110.

classical skeptic".[40] The solution is to turn to natural theology, as Reid did (in the sense that he did not disparage it) but some of those whom have taken inspiration from him (Penelhum mentions Alston, Plantinga, and Wolterstorff) have not.[41] The final point Penelhum makes is that it is not clear to him that natural theology can do everything it needs to do for the Basic Belief Apologists, and thus the Christian is faced with a theological problem: why is there diversity, not only of religions, but of secular practices that are competing with religions?[42]

All very interesting, you might say, but what does Penelhum's position have to do with the considerations at hand? I believe Penelhum has shown that, for *some* purposes at least, the Christian needs to turn to more than just his or her experiential grounds in order to rationally proceed in his or her religion. To see this we need to get a little clearer about just what Penelhum holds. His position is, I take it, that the Basic Belief Apologetic succeeds in showing that religious believers are prima facie rational in their religious beliefs. I interpret him this way because of passages like this:

> To summarize: I agree that the arguments of Wolterstorff, Alston, and Plantinga succeed in their objective of showing that it is rational to hold religious beliefs without the independent support of natural theology. But this does not provide the basis of a satisfactory response to the problems attendant on religious pluralism and ambiguity and makes it more difficult to ascribe unbelief to sinfulness.[43]

The reason why Penelhum does not think that the Basic Belief Apologists arguments show that religious beliefs are unqualifiedly rational is that more than just experiential grounds are necessary for this end. His prime example is the assertion that unbelief is due to sin. Many theologians and ordinary Christians make this claim and it is precisely this kind of religious belief that cannot be justified merely on experiential grounds. The basic reason is that "the very ambiguity of the world is itself a plausible reason for withholding belief"[44], or in other words: "Minimally, and with the fullest allowance for human corruption and self-deceit, a religiously ambiguous world is one in which unbelievers have good excuses for their doubts, even if their doubts are not

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40. Ibid, p. 111. What Penelhum means by this "relativist conformism of the classical skeptic" is a kind of beliefless conformity which he attributes to Sextus Empiricus. "The classical skeptic accommodates himself undogmatically, or belieflessly, to the conventional pieties but turns aside from the dogmatic controversies about the god's ultimate reality or nature."(Ibid, p.107)

41. Ibid, p. 111 - 2.

42. Ibid, p.119. Penelhum's preferred phrase is "multiple religious ambiguity" (the question becomes, why does the world display multiple religious ambiguity?), which is somewhat of a misnomer since he means by it the diversity both of incompatible religions and of competing secular approaches (e.g. naturalistic explanations of religious experience, atheism, agnosticism).

43. Ibid, p. 113.

44. Ibid.

conscientious ones."[45] The only recourse is to natural theology of a kind that would prove that it is positively irrational *not* to believe in God. Such natural theology would disambiguate the world.[46] And, Penelhum doubts whether any natural theology is up to such a formidable task.

The overall judgment we reached about the combined worst case scenario was that CMP was not rationally engaged in. Penelhum has shown that even if we grant *prima facie* rational status to Christian beliefs in general, some beliefs will likely fail to be unqualifiedly rational because it is unlikely that they will receive the independent support they require. In an odd way, Alston has an even less optimistic view of natural theology, although he doesn't seem to realize the implications of his position.

> However, I do feel that Penelhum overstates the case when he suggests that a successful natural theology would 'disambiguate our world' religiously. The trouble is that many of the most important points that divide religions fall outside the scope of natural theology....That enterprise, if successful, might help us to choose between theistic religions and, say, Zen Buddhism, but it has little to say about the choice between different theistic religions. Therefore, while fully agreeing that the enterprise is of the first importance, I would enter a caveat against unrealistic expectations.[47]

Alston explicitly recognizes the need for natural theology, but seems to have an even dimmer view of its potential than Penelhum. The problem, on Alston's view, would therefore seem to be even worse than Penelhum portrays. This does not bode well for Alston's project of providing positive epistemic support for Christian beliefs.

C. The Expanded Scenario

Let's proceed to the next scenario upon which to make an overall judgment. We have seen that on the minimalist worst case scenario CMP does not fare well. Penelhum has shown us the need for natural theology, and Alston recognizes the need as well. We may as well bring in the other elements of Alston's total picture - tradition and revelation - and the problem of hell as well (since I *do* think it is a real problem). The last pieces of the puzzle will be some considerations argued for or suggested by some recent commentators on Alston's *PG*. Once we have all of this together, we will have assembled what I call the expanded scenario, and we will be ready to make a final judgment on the PR approach (considered in conjunction with these other elements).

Alston distinguishes between two types of experiential support, the type provided by mystical perception and the type provided by experiences that do not count as perceptions of God but can be (best) *explained* by divine activity.[48] The difference between the two is illustrated by the

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45. Ibid, p. 114.
46. Ibid, p. 117.
47. Alston, William P., "Concluding Reactions", *Faith, Reason and Skepticism*, pp. 156 - 7.
48. *PG* , pp. 286 -7.

analogous difference between "the support for the belief that there is a mouse under the straw in the barn provided by one's seeing the straw moving around in such a way as to be explainable by the hypothesis that a mouse is under there, and the support provided by actually seeing a mouse in the straw."[49] We earlier examined Alston's theory of perception and saw that direct perception was to be distinguished from indirect perception, and Alston wants to further distinguish explanatory experiential support from indirect perception. If I indirectly perceive something, that thing must still be present to my awareness, though via my perception of something else.[50] It is no part of my program to challenge Alston's theory of perception, but there may be cases in which it will be very difficult to distinguish indirect perception from explanatory experiential support.[51]

Besides experience, Alston distinguishes three other basic kinds of grounds of Christian beliefs: natural theology, tradition, and revelation. Natural theology as he conceives of it divides into the traditional project of trying to establish that God exists, and the broader project of attempting to show that "we can attain the best understanding of this or that area of our experience or sphere of concern...if we look at it from the standpoint of a theistic, or more specifically Christian..., metaphysics."[52] Tradition, from the standpoint of the community, "constitutes a set of beliefs the grounds for which we need to explore, rather than constituting a type of ground."[53] But from the standpoint of the individual, tradition, "is one source of belief and a possible supporting ground thereof."[54] Revelation is divided by Alston into three categories: (1) "*Messages* delivered by God to His people at large through selected messengers."[55]; (2) "*Divine inspiration* of writings or oral communications, where the human agent does not consciously receive a specific communication."[56]; (3) *Divine action in history* : "It has traditionally been supposed that God reveals Himself, His purposes and His requirements for us, by what He does as well as by what He says and what He inspires us to say."[57]

Alston reduces these basic categories even further. Tradition is omitted from the list of basic grounds because it is merely a set of communally accepted beliefs, and these beliefs must (originally, at least)

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49. Ibid, p. 287.
50. Ibid, p. 288.
51. Such as the counter-examples given by Robert Audi in, "Perceptual Experience, Doxastic Practice, and the Rationality of Religious Committment", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX, 1995, pp. 1 - 18.
52. *PG*, p. 289. This broader project is allegedly exemplified by an issue of *Faith and Philosophy* entitled "Philosophy from a Christian Perspective", Vol. 4, no. 4 (October 1987).
53. *PG*, p. 289.
54. Ibid, p. 290.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.

have had some other basis. The first kind of revelation, messages, depends on a particular form of mystical perception. The other two types of revelation are of the form of an "inference to the best explanation"[58]. The philosophical arguments for the existence of God reduce to the purely *a priori* - the ontological argument - and explanatory claims as well, i.e. other inferences to the best explanation. And, the explanatory type of experiential ground is explicitly a form of inference to the best explanation. Thus, the grounds for belief in God reduce to the purely *a priori*, direct perception, and inferences to the best explanation.[59]

The simplest way in which such grounds relate to support Christian belief is an additive or cumulative one.[60] In considering how the CMP fared on the simple worst case scenario, I was basically using this model. This model is not the whole story, of course, and Alston proposes more subtle ways in which these grounds relate.

All by themselves, perceptions of God typically present rather limited content. The background conceptual scheme helps to fill out this content and provide a theoretical characterization.[61] However, perceptions of God have their own role to play in that they generate "beliefs full of force and conviction", and can tell one specific things that cannot be learned from natural theology and revelation, such as "what God is doing vis-a-vis oneself at the moment...and what God's will is for oneself in particular."[62] Another aspect of the relations of grounds is that perceptions of God (indeed all perceptions) require a background system of beliefs in order to *identify* the object of awareness as God, and also to provide an *overrider system* for testing perceptions of God.[63] This requires that the background system of beliefs be itself (largely) known or justified, and Alston holds that this system is itself built up at least partly on the basis of mystical perception.[64] Finally, these grounds are interrelated in that when one is doubted, others may be called upon to (at least somewhat) alleviate the doubt. "Although none of the grounds is immune from such worries, the fact that the output of each supports the claims made for the others rightfully increases our confidence in all of them, and thus increases the total support given to Christian belief by their combination."[65]

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58. Ibid, p. 291.
59. In summarizing Alston's reduction of these grounds to these three most basic categories, I am drawing upon *PG*, pp. 291 -2, and "The Place of Experience in the Grounds of Religious Belief" in Clark, James Kelly (ed.) *Our Knowledge of God: Essays on Natural and Philosophical Theology* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992), pp. 94 - 96.
60. *PG*, p. 292.
61. Ibid, p. 293.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid, pp. 294 - 5.
64. Ibid, p. 295.
65. Ibid, p. 296.

All of this clearly smacks of coherence theories of justification and knowledge, and one might wonder what is left of Alston's alleged foundationalism. Alston's way out is to make some by now familiar distinctions. First, perceptions of God require an overrider system to be unqualifiedly justified, but are *prima facie* justified in virtue of being appropriately based on experience. Also, perceptual beliefs require that at least most of the background system of belief *be* justified in order to be unqualifiedly justified, but this is *not* something that the believer has to justifiably believe or know.[66] Thus, at rock bottom, what is foundational about Alston's theory of justification is that certain beliefs are *prima facie* justified solely in virtue of being based on experience (and, of course, having an *adequate* ground), i.e. in virtue of having an immediate (adequate) ground. Other than that, considerations of coherence seem to come to the forefront.

Now, Alston realizes that doubts can be raised about each and every one of the (putative) grounds of Christian belief. There are naturalistic explanations of mystical experience and the `changed' lives of religious converts (a kind of self-support), and analogs of such naturalistic explanations for the types of revelation that are explanatory inferences. There is the problem of religious diversity, contradictions between CMP and secular practices, and *prima facie* contradictions within the Christian conceptual scheme (e.g. the problem of hell, the problem of evil). There are many philosophers who doubt the efficacy of traditional arguments for the existence of God, enough, Alston says, "to fill a sizable library."[67] There are even some who give atheological arguments. And, there are epistemological arguments against Christian (and usually other religious) belief, such as "the evidentialist objection" that Plantinga so resolutely opposes.[68] This is not an exhaustive list; there are probably some doubts concerning Christian belief that both Alston and I have overlooked (although perhaps some positive grounds we have missed as well).

For some of these grounds, Alston considers himself to have given an adequate or at least partial answer. He considers himself to have defused naturalistic explanations of mystical experience, and to have (correctly) downplayed the significance of internal and external contradictions of CMP. We should not forget Alston's main target, the epistemological objection(s) to Christian belief, which *PG* and other works as a whole are taken to be refuting. I have given some reasons for thinking that Alston is not as successful in defusing or downplaying such criticisms as he seems to think. And, with regard to criticisms of natural theology and alternative explanations of (the explanatory forms of) revelation, he is only slightly more than agnostic.[69]

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66. Ibid, pp. 299 - 300.
67. Ibid, p. 299.
68. Cf. Plantinga, Alvin, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality : Reason and Belief in God.*
69. *PG*, p. 298.

How Christian belief and CMP fares, all things considered, will be greatly affected by the significance of these various criticisms. And, although I share with Alston the conviction that there is no precise way of judging such things, I want to make a crucial point that Alston neglects. He makes much of the fact that the grounds of Christian belief give each other mutual and reciprocal support, and this is taken to be an advantage over a situation in which "the whole thing rests on some particular basis, a basis that will inevitably be subject to serious doubts that it cannot satisfactorily resolve with its own resources alone."[70] In one sense, it is; but in another sense, it clearly is not. The disadvantage for mutual support (and coherence) systems is that a criticism that would otherwise affect only one ground on an independent system, has deleterious effects on *all* of the grounds because of their reciprocal relations. To take my own favoured example, the problem of hell casts doubt upon the Christian conceptual scheme; but if perceptions of God require that this scheme be justified in order for them to be justified, it also casts doubt upon them. There are many criticisms of Christian belief, as we saw above, and each of them casts doubt upon all of the grounds of Christian belief, on Alston's system. The combined effect is far greater than Alston supposes, perhaps worse than for a system in which the grounds are independent.[71]

Before we reach an overall judgment on the status of CMP, there are a couple of considerations yet to be examined. In "Religious Disagreements and Doxastic Practices", Robert Adams makes a suggestion that helps Alston's case somewhat.[72] Adams distinguishes between those doxastic practices that are part of the *substructure* of our thought, so to speak - sense perception, memory, testimony, etc. - and those that are part of the *superstructure* - such as religious and ethical practices, and also philosophy. The salient difference between the two for Adams is the role of individual factors in whether they are rationally engaged in, in relation to the amount of disagreement that is "normal" in these practices. In those doxastic practices that constitute the superstructure, we expect more disagreement, and the disagreement does not affect the rationality of engaging in the practice to the extent that it does in the substructure. Adams insists that the proper way to evaluate such higher-level practices is to give special consideration to factors such as individual reliability and whether the beliefs formed in the practice, "feel right and seem true and

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70. Alston, William P., "The Place of Experience in the Grounds of Religious Belief", p. 111.
71. It is clear what the way out for Alston is, if there is a way out. He needs to make some further distinctions between the ground that a criticism bares directly upon, and the grounds it indirectly bares upon, or something in that neighbourhood. One danger here is that in so doing he might turn his reciprocal support system into an independent support system. Even supposing that danger could be avoided, it seems to me that after all the Chisholming is done, the various criticisms of Christian belief will be a more significant threat to Alston's system than he acknowledges.
72. Adams, Robert, "Religious Disagreements and Doxastic Practices", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* , Vol. LIV, No.4, Dec. 1994, pp. 886 - 890.

plausible to the individual practitioner."[73] Adams holds that it may be rational to engage in such practices even in the face of widespread disagreement with other practitioners, and he certainly holds that philosophy is a practice in which the ability to take a stand on controversial issues is crucial to its rationality.[74]

Alston's reply to Adams is fair and balanced. He admits that he neglected the role of individual factors in the rationality of engaging in practices, but insists that the reliability of the practice as a whole is still relevant. If there is widespread and persistent disagreement in a practice, then the practice *as a whole* cannot be reliable (though certain of its practitioners can be), and this counts against the rationality of the practice. Regarding social and individual factors, Alston says: "Both sides are essential and there is no competition between them."[75] His summary of the issue is in the same vein. "The discussion comes down to questions of the relative weight to be given to global and individualized considerations."[76]

If Adams has a point, as he clearly seems to, then Alston's case for the rationality of CMP can be bolstered somewhat by noting that even if the practice contained enough inconsistencies to warrant supposing it not to be reliable (or not very reliable, at the least), that could be moderated somewhat by appeal to individual factors. Alston continues the analogy with philosophy suggested by Adams: "...I should have cited, e.g. philosophy as an illustration of the way in which a relatively low reliability is compatible with rational engagement in the practice. Few philosophers, at any rate, would deny that it is rational to engage in the enterprise of making the best judgments that we can on philosophical issues."[77]

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73. Ibid, p. 886.
74. Ibid, p. 887.
75. "Reply to Commentators", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. LIV, No. 4, Dec. 1994, p. 898.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid, pp. 898 - 9. It might be claimed that Alston and Adams are merely begging the question, i.e. presupposing that philosophy is rationally engaged in. I'm not sure how to argue that philosophy is rational without presupposing that it is, and in any case, since this document is a philosophy thesis, I'm evincing a practical acceptance of the proposition that philosophy is rationally engaged in.

There is also the question of whether philosophy really is unreliable. In response to Alston it might be claimed that we have of late made progress in philosophy. Taking into account its full history (some 2500 years or more) philosophy may be unreliable; but taking into account its recent history (the last 100 years or so?) it has significantly improved. I don't know whether this is a good response or not, but it seems worth noting that the arguments one could give in its support are likely to be controversial. In any case, it would seem likely that any reasonable appraisal of our current situation would judge that philosophy still has a *relatively* low reliability, given its still considerable diversity of opinion.

The last item I want to bring to the table is a rather simple one: the amount of rationality or positive epistemic support required for a person already engaged in CMP is less than what would be required for a person not already engaged in CMP to join CMP. This applies just as much to other practices that have serious competitors - e.g. other religions - as to CMP. This point is not made by Robert Audi but was brought to my mind by an article of his on *PG* (he may not take this to be a compliment).[78] Audi stresses that the epistemic status of MP is less than SP because, on the one hand, SP is more *comprehensive* than MP (it yields a greater diversity of beliefs), and on the other hand, SP is more *basic* than MP because it produces beliefs required for the success of MP, whereas MP does not do the same for SP. It is not clear to me that Alston denies this, for at various points he admits that MP has less by way of epistemic status than SP.[79] Audi goes on to say of Alston's position that, "it should not be surprising if different levels and kinds of justification arise in different practices, and he [Alston] is concerned with a certain appropriate level of justification, not with, e.g. indefeasible justification or even warranted certitude."[80] The question is, what is the appropriate level of "justification" for CMP? The answer has to be relativised to the epistemic situations of persons, and the most salient difference here is between those who are engaged in CMP and those who are not.[81] And, not only does the existence of serious competitors reduce the status of CMP for those engaged in CMP, it reduces it even further for those outside of CMP. Perhaps more accurately, the standard for non-participants is higher than for participants, so the existence of serious competitors tends to make it harder for CMP to reach the standard for the former than the standard for the latter.

It is time to attempt to make a judgment about the rationality of CMP (for the participant) based on the expanded scenario I have been presenting. The scenario includes all of the various grounds Alston cites - direct experiential support, explanatory experiential support, revelation, tradition, natural theology, significant self-support - and their relations of reciprocal support. The scenario also includes all of the various criticisms of these grounds we canvassed, such as naturalistic explanations of

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Also of note is Alston's suggestion that the history of Christianity reveals progress in religion such that it is more reasonable now than it has been. One such advance is the general move away from overly literal interpretations of holy texts. See *PG*, pp. 239 - 242.

78. Audi, Robert, "Perceptual Experience, Doxastic Practice, and the Rationality of Religious Committment", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX (1995).

79. E.g. *PG*, p. 238, 277.

80. "Perceptual Experience, Doxastic Practice, and the Rationality of Religious Committment", p. 11.

81. There is also the important difference between mature cognizers and immature ones, and the standards of rationality for the former are quite plausibly seen to be more stringent than for the latter. I certainly don't want to fault a child for believing what his religious parents teach him or her. In fact, in general I support a distinction between *grades* of knowledge such as made by Sosa between animal and reflective knowledge (Cf. *Knowledge in Perspective*)

various kinds, criticisms of natural theology, apparent contradictions within CMP, incompatibilities of CMP with other mystical practices, and so forth, and we should not forget that each of these considerations impinges on all of the grounds Alston cites because of their relations of mutual support. We should also add the point made by Adams that individual factors have more weight in religious practices. Putting all of this together, it seems to me that we have something close to a stalemate, whichever way it goes. It is quite implausible to hold either that there are strong reasons for judging CMP to be rational, or strong reasons for judging it to be irrational. The only reasonable procedure seems to be to give the benefit of the doubt, so to speak, to CMP. Here, as in baseball, the tie goes to the runner.

A straightforward consequence of this seems to be that those who are *already* engaged in CMP are rational to do so. In my introductory remarks on Alston I said that I thought perceptions of God to provide *some* justification (where I meant "justification" in the wide sense of positive epistemic support, not committed to any particular way of spelling this out) for belief in God, though less than Alston thinks, and we have finally seen why.[82] The stickier question is whether those who are *not* already engaged in CMP are rational in being in that state, and an even stickier question is whether those who are not engaged in CMP *ought* to be engaged in it in a sense in which they are culpable for not doing so.

I have to answer No to both of these questions. Part of the reason is that it is reasonable to hold CMP subject to more stringent standards for non-participants than for participants. Suppose we ignore this and use the weaker standard of the participants. Then, I still think the answer is No. Whatever practical rationality is, it is not the kind of thing that falls into two dichotomous categories of rational/irrational or ought to do/ought not to do. There is some sort of state in-between in which I may be rational in engaging in x, and rational in not engaging in x, or put in deontological terms, it is not the case that I ought to do x, and also not the case that I ought not to do x. In response to some recent criticism, Alston has denied that practical rationality is a deontological notion.[83] We also saw earlier that Alston characterizes the rationality of an action primarily as the objective soundness of the reasoning that issued forth the action.

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82. I am referring to the practical argument given earlier for the prima facie rationality of established doxastic practices. I am also tempted to give a more direct argument for the principle that one is *prima facie* rational in believing that X is such-and-such on the basis of an experience of X as such-and-such. This principle strikes me as true, at least in general, and perhaps it could be justified as a considered judgment in reflective equilibrium. If this principle is true, then persons engaged in CMP can have *prima facie* rationality in their M-beliefs (or if this isn't sufficient for *prima facie* status, it would at least count as providing *some* positive epistemic support). I realize this isn't much of an argument, so I won't press the point.

83. Norman Kretzmann makes this charge in "St. Teresa, William Alston, and the Broadminded Atheist", *Journal of Philosophical Research*, Vol. XX (1995). Alston's denies the charge in "Reply to Critics", same volume.

Thus, it seems that we can say, on Alston's own account of rationality, that nothing in the reasoning used to argue that CMP is rationally engaged in commits a non-participant to having to engage in CMP. Of course, the same holds in reverse for the reasoning that CMP is not rationally engaged in (supposing my overall judgment to be correct). In fact, even if practical rationality *were* construed deontologically, I would say we have a case in which it is permissible but not obligatory to engage in CMP, and permissible but not forbidden to not engage in CMP.

We are now in a position to put theological assertions that unbelief is due to sin, and assertions of the same kind, in a new light. Such assertions are rational for the Christian, but only in the limited, "internal" sense just described. Such assertions have no hold over non-Christians. If faced with such an assertion, the proper response by the non-Christian is to point out the nature of the rationality that CMP as a whole enjoys. To make any such assertions forceful for the non-participant, they would need to be supplemented by the kind of successful, disambiguating natural theology that Penelhum describes. Successful natural theology of this kind would in effect change the whole epistemic situation of CMP. However, since the possibility of this being realized seems pretty remote (as admitted by some of its most distinguished contemporary practitioners[84]), non-participants have little to fear.

The limited, internal rationality of CMP actually has some far-reaching implications. If things are the way I have argued they are, then not only do certain kinds of assertions become robbed of force for non-participants, there is some reason to think that the way in which CMP is engaged in for *conscientious* practitioners will also have to change. For example, how does the conscientious, reflective Christian go about the task of spreading the Gospel, i.e. of evangelizing the non-Christian world? I take it that an evangelical project is essential to Christianity. How does the Christian go about doing this with the full realization that his opponent has about as much by way of positive epistemic support or rationality as he does? It is not merely a question of motivation. It is a question of morality, of whether it is ethical to try to convince someone of something one very well knows can rationally be rejected. And even if this can ethically be done, the great majority of Christians are not aware of Alston's (or my) abstruse meditations. There is thus some question about whether these innocents are acting ethically in failing to provide their prospective convincees with all of the relevant information. *If* there is an

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84. We have already seen that Alston admits this (see footnote 47 above), and Plantinga only holds that there are *good* theistic arguments, but he does not seem to think that they are as good as would seem to be required. See Plantinga's "The Prospects for Natural Theology"in *Philosophical Perspectives 5, Philosophy of Religion 1991* , ed. Tomberlin, James E. (Atascadero, Calif. : Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991), p. 312.

ethical problem here, then that generates a theological problem: How can one be a Christian if doing so requires one to act unethically?[85]

D. The New Alston: "Hang Tough"

The last thing to consider before we close the book on Alston is whether his newly adopted position fares any better than the PR approach. In a reply to Plantinga, he says:

> Hence at the moment I am disposed to ditch the practical rationality approach and replace it with something much simpler. To wit, considerations of epistemic circularity show that there is no appeal beyond the doxastic practices to which we find ourselves firmly committed. We can make modifications within that sphere. We can tidy up some of them so as to minimize internal and external contradictions. And in extreme cases, we may have to abandon some in order to maintain the most coherent total position. But our starting place for any cognitive enterprise is the belief forming dispositions with which we find ourselves at the moment. This is a kind of negative coherentism with respect to doxastic practices, *not* with respect to beliefs. Needless to say, this shift of strategy does not involve abandoning the emphasis on doxastic *practices* in epistemic evaluation. It only involves dethroning practical rationality from the position given it in the book [*PG*].[86]

This new approach certainly appears to be simpler than the PR argument, and given the myriad convolutions, contortions, and deficiencies of the latter, perhaps this suffices to make it an improvement. One of the first questions to ask is: what is a "negative coherentism"? The term derives from Pollock.[87] He says: "Some coherence theories take all beliefs to be prima facie justified....According to theories of this sort, reasons function in a negative way, leading us to reject beliefs but not being required for the justified acquisition of belief. I call these *negative coherence theories*."[88] In Alston's case, this suggests that doxastic practices for him are innocent until proven guilty, and that internal and external contradictions (among other considerations?) function as defeaters of this initial status.

The first point I have is that it is not clear how Alston means this negative coherentism with respect to doxastic practices to relate to the other grounds of Christian belief. Presumably it is not meant to obviate the need for these other grounds. There is a certain worry on Alston's new picture because the coherence is allegedly among *doxastic practices*, and significant self-support, naturalistic explanations of mystical experience, and in fact revelation, tradition, and natural theology are all not naturally construed as doxastic practices. Perhaps Alston has two

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85. I'm not claiming that there is an ethical problem here, not even a *prima facie* problem. I'm just putting it forth as a tentative suggestion, a disturbing possibility. I also assume that what is ethical is not determined by God's fiat.

86. Alston, William P., "Reply to Critics", *Journal of Philosophical Research* , Vol. XX, 1995, p. 72.

87. Pollock, John L., *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, p. 72.

88. Ibid.

kinds of coherence, that among doxastic practices and that among the various grounds of religious belief. But then what happens to significant self-support and naturalistic explanations of mystical experience? Will we also have two different sets of overriders and underwriters? It's not at all clear how Alston's overall epistemology of religious experience is supposed to work with the new "hang tough" approach.[89]

It is interesting to examine whether this negative coherentism with respect to practices falls prey to any of the objections that Alston has raised against coherentism with respect to beliefs.[90] Is it ambiguous with respect to what it means by "coherence"? Not in this case, for the passage cited above makes it clear that he means logical consistency. Is it insufficiently sensitive to experience? This is at present impossible to determine because Alston has not in general specified just how those generational doxastic practices that take experience as input work - that is, what their input-output functions are, which is just to say that his theory is incomplete.[91] The fairest judgment may be that a complete theory of doxastic practices will have to address this issue.[92] Is it insufficiently discriminating with respect to practices? This seems to be the objection (of the main ones Alston raises) that has the best chance of succeeding. Indeed, it seems that any number of doxastic practices could have sufficient internal coherence and coherence with other practices to count as justified or rational on this approach. However, why should this be a problem? So long as we have an overrider system, I can imagine Alston saying, we can let all doxastic practices into the fold, and separate the sheep from the goats at the later stage. And so, on this interpretation, this new approach does seem to pass the test of Alston's standard objections to coherentism.

What's to be said *in favour* of such an approach? Alston is driven to this position because of the numerous objections raised by critics (some

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89. Assuming that Alston still wants to retain a kind of *foundationalism* with respect to beliefs, his overall epistemology is even more complicated. He has a fallible, reciprocal support foundationalism at the level of beliefs, a negative coherentism at the level of doxastic practices, and somewhere in this mess the various grounds of religious beliefs are supposed to fit.

90. See footnote 21 in chapter 2.

91. See footnote 42 in chapter 2 for the distinction between generational and transformational practices.

92. For SP, he does say that the characteristic function is that of going from experiences of X as such-and-such to the belief that X is such-and-such. This seems at least on the right track, although we still need some answer to the question of why this particular function is the correct one. (Is it that it is a reliable way of forming beliefs? How could we prove this?) Interestingly, a theory like Plantinga's which focuses on proper function can say that this function is part of what it is to function properly with respect to sensory experiences and sensory beliefs, although for this to be explanatory there needs to be some account of how and why properly functioning people form beliefs in various circumstances (and why we should care about proper function). We need more, in other words, than simply giving the label "proper function" to this input-output mechanism.

of which I have mentioned), and the primary reason he gives concerns epistemic circularity in the practical rationality approach itself. (I have in effect already raised this issue in the discussion of the first stage of the PR argument, but let's let Alston reach this position in his own way.) The PR approach was supposed to get beyond the purely internal approach of "naturalistic epistemology" (e.g. Quine, Goldman, Van Cleve) and have something more external to say, something of a more general nature.[93] Alston does not want to actually admit that the PR argument is epistemically circular, because it is not so clear that we are "assuming, even in practice, that it is *practically rational* to engage in SP...it is only if the argument commits us to that assumption that it is epistemically circular."[94] But he admits this much:

> But even if no epistemic circularity is involved, it remains true that in putting forward any argument, we are relying on certain doxastic practices to furnish us with the premises of that argument. And that is enough to show that the recourse to practical rationality does not place us at some neutral, "God's eye" point of view...But if that is the case, why suppose that my practical rationality argument is superior to what I called in the book a "hang tough" approach (better known nowadays as 'naturalistic epistemology'), in which we simply work, in uncritical and unselfconscious fashion, within the doxastic practices to which we are accustomed, without any attempt at external assessment? I have to admit that in the light of the considerations just adduced, no such absolute authority can be claimed.[95]

And, several lines after the last sentence in this passage, Alston begins the passage quoted earlier: "Hence at the moment I am disposed to ditch the practical rationality approach..." So, in effect, Alston has adopted the "hang tough" approach, not because he is particularly happy with it, but because he thinks it is inevitable.

I earlier sided with Alston on the problem of induction because it seemed to me that the "hang tough" approach solved very little, namely, only allowing us to claim that we could show that induction was reliable (and justified) if induction was reliable (and justified). But if that is all we can do, then the "hang tough" approach is the correct one, or at least the most honest one. Unfortunately, I don't have a good argument to the effect that we can do more than simply work within the doxastic practices we find ourselves in, because it looks like Alston is right; any such argument I could give would itself be relying on a doxastic practice (or more than one) for its premises, and moreover, I would have to use a doxastic practice to evaluate the argument, and even to formulate it.

To be honest, this isn't any more disturbing for me than the familiar fact that, since we are *finite* creatures, all argument must end in non-argument. That is, at some point we simply accept the premise(s) of an argument without argument, or in Alston's terms, we rest content with the possibility of simply being justified without being able to show that we

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93. *PG*, p. 149.
94. "Reply to Critics", p. 71.
95. Ibid, pp. 70 - 1.

are justified. To repeat an earlier point, this does not imply that there isn't any point to giving arguments. In one or another dialectical situation, there is much to be gained by giving arguments, or in other words, by taking certain doxastic practices or principles for granted while subjecting others to scrutiny. Philosophy pushes the demand farther than any other area of inquiry, but even in philosophy, if we push far enough, we reach points where it seems that all we can do is rely upon a premise without an giving argument for it, or accept a doxastic practice uncritically. This may be disappointing, but it appears to be a brute fact about our human cognitive condition.

So, at the present I am disposed to accept something like Alston's negative coherentism position. Does the evaluation of CMP change on this account? I don't think so. CMP coheres sufficiently well to pass the test for *prima facie* rationality (although I would suggest not by much, given its serious internal conflict), and from there on, the evaluation goes about the same as it did on the PR approach. We will have analogs of the worst case scenario and the expanded scenario, and CMP will fare about as well on these scenarios as in the originals.

Has Alston succeeded in his main aim of showing that the typical Christian is in some sense epistemically up to par in being a Christian? I think so, although just barely. He has not succeeded in showing that the non-Christian is epistemically deleterious in being a non-Christian, if that was an aim of his (which I have my doubts about). Moreover, being a Christian, we have noted, is not trouble-free because of certain moral and theological problems that the (typical) non-Christian does not have. So while it may be a victory for Alston, I can't help but think that it is bittersweet.[96] What Alston has succeeded in doing, however, is providing an interesting and illuminating approach to the epistemology of religious belief that will no doubt continue to be stimulating for years to come.

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96. So far we have left out the question of how *faith* fits into this picture. Alston's position is that, "even when we have marshaled all of the sorts of grounds we possess for supposing a particular system of religious belief to be true, that will still fall short of the degree of support we enjoy with respect to beliefs of many other sorts, including sense perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, and beliefs in generalizations about the physical world. There is still need for faith, for trusting . . . whatever we do have to go on as providing us with a picture of the situation that is close enough to the truth to be a reliable guide to our ultimate destiny." (*PG*, p. 277) Since the Christian religion seems to demand a certain kind of doxastic attitude that goes beyond the available evidence, Alston needs to make this point. This is all well and good for the Christian, but not much help to the non-Christian. The question, I suppose, is at what point is the leap of faith acceptable, i.e., how big a leap should we be prepared to make? This isn't the place to develop a detailed answer, but my suggestion is that the leap of faith acceptable to the non-Christian is, and should be, generally smaller than that which is generally acceptable to the Christian.

Chapter V - Sellars' Practical Argument

In chapter 2, I promised an examination of the practical argument given by Wilfred Sellars and a comparison/contrast with Alston's PR argument. Now that we have completed our examination of Alston's approach, and found it to be, if not unsatisfactory, at least replete with complications, a natural question is whether a different approach might be simpler yet equally effective. Before we begin, I should caution that Sellars presents a challenge for interpretation that I may not have entirely met, and so I can only make a cautious endorsement of my views.

Sellars' practical argument works on several levels. At the lowest level, he argues that one cannot be justified (in Foleyan terms, epistemically rational) in particular introspective, perceptual, and memory beliefs (IPM beliefs or judgments) unless one is justified in certain meta-beliefs about introspection, perception, and memory.[1] These meta-beliefs are beliefs such as "MJ_3 If a person ostensibly perceives (without ground for doubt) something to be Ø (for appropriate values of Ø) then it is likely to be true that he perceives something to be Ø." [2] Notice that this is equivalent to the belief that perception is reliable in normal circumstances, over an appropriate range of issues, etc. Notice also that this meta-belief is in fact more than just a belief: it is a practice. Sellars is in effect considering the practices of introspection, perception, and memory - an obvious commonality of concern with Alston.[3] At this level, then, Sellars is claiming that particular IPM beliefs are reasonable because they are the products of IPM practices.

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1. From "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind":
> "...we have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only have authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is....the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*. And to admit this requires an abandonment of the traditional empiricist idea that observational knowledge 'stands on its own feet'."(p. 168, *Science Perception and Reality*)

2. "More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence", p. 177, in *Justification and Knowledge*, ed. Pappas, George S. (D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1979).

3. One advantage of Sellars' approach over Alston's is that Sellars is considering the reasonableness of a group of practices - introspection, perception, and memory - whereas Alston often talks about the practical rationality of single practices, e.g. SP or MP. As Bruce Hunter has pointed out to me, the practical rationality or reasonableness or SP (or any other practice) *by itself* is practically nil. How rational could it be to accept SP but not memory, or induction, or introspection, for example? What would be left of SP without these practices? The point is that these practices are so intimately involved that they cannot be evaluated individually. Alston presumably realizes this, for it is implicit in his explanation of what doxastic practices are. I myself am somewhat guilty of speaking in a misleading way when I gave the argument that it is *prima facie* practically rational to engage in SP because doing so best satisfies our prudential goal. However, I think my argument can be successfully amended so as to be considering the practical rationality of all of our "standard" doxastic practices.

What about the IPM practices themselves? Sellars argues that it is reasonable to accept them because are elements in a theory T which is the framework of epistemic evaluation.[4] And what about this theory T? Sellars considers theory T to be empirically well-confirmed, that is, supported by IPM judgments.[5] However, this is obviously circular.[6] What *independent* reason do we have for accepting theory T and the practices constitutive of it (introspection, perception, and memory)? At the third and highest level, Sellars seeks to vindicate the framework of epistemic evaluation by an appeal to effective agency. We can interpret Sellars as trying to escape the circle of giving truth-conducive reasons to support the framework of epistemic evaluation by grounding it in something broadly-speaking *practical*, namely, effective agency. He describes the account he uses to argue for the reasonableness of theory T:

> Such an expanded account might well be called `Epistemic Evaluation as Vindication'. Its central theme would be that achieving a certain end or goal can be (deductively) shown to require a certain integrated system of means...the end can be characterized as that of being in a *general* position, so far as in us lies, to act, i.e. to bring about changes in ourselves and our environment in order to realize *specific* purposes or intentions.[7]

Thus, Sellars' central contention is that a necessary means to the end of being an effective agent is that of accepting or being within theory T. Or is it?

There seems to be a crucial ambiguity in Sellars' argument. Is the argument that theory T must be *true* (or versimilitudinous) in order for one to be an effective agent? Or is the argument that one must *accept* theory T in order to be an effective agent?

I favour the former interpretation, if only because it seems to make a stronger argument. There is at least a certain initial plausibility in thinking that one can be an effective agent only if IPM judgments are likely to be true, that is, only if the practices of introspection, perception, and memory are reliable (in appropriate circumstances, over certain issues, etc.). There are difficulties with such an argument, but it is at least of a piece with a venerable philosophical tradition that values truth very highly and regards the only way to consistently be an effective agent or "be in effective touch with reality" as having mostly true (or approximately true) beliefs.[8]

The other interpretation seems to run afoul of an overly intellectual model of what it is to be a effective agent. There don't seem to be any convincing reasons to think that one cannot be an effective agent

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4. "More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence", pp. 178 - 9.
5. Ibid, p. 178.
6. Even this circular support might carry some weight; it may count as significant self-support, to borrow from Alston. However, it seems unlikely that this is enough support for rationality.
7. Ibid, pp. 178 - 9.
8. See the discussion of the first stage of the PR argument in chapter 3 where Alston uses the phrase "effective touch with reality".

unless one accepts theory T or something like it.[9] Ordinarily, I suppose, most people would say that they believed principles like MJ_3 if asked, but there is nothing stopping someone who denied such principles from being an effective agent. Just as one can be a competent practitioner of a doxastic practice without being an authority, so can one be an effective agent without accepting theory T. What matters for being an effective agent is that one form beliefs in *conformity* with principles such as MJ_3, or in other words, that one *have* reliable doxastic practices. It certainly seems possible for this to be accomplished without accepting theory T.

There are a number of other problems with Sellars' argument. For one, there is a lot more to the "framework of epistemic evaluation" than simply accepting IPM practices. We would have to include "standard" practices such as deductive and non-deductive reasoning and testimony. Moreover, one must be able to use such concepts as "rationality", "justification", and "reasonableness", to name just some of what Sellars has omitted.[10] Sellars' practical argument would seem to be able to cover some of these but may be problematic for others.

Another problem concerns whether the argument has any force if Sellars is not asserting that most of us are, generally, effective agents. If he is asserting this, then the spectre of epistemic circularity looms large; how could one know this unless one relied upon IPM practices (among others)? If he is not asserting this, then how is the argument relevant? One reply might be that what Sellars is trying to establish is that it is reasonable to accept theory T just because *if* we are effective agents, theory T is true. On this interpretation, Sellars is really aiming at *showing* that theory T is reasonable, not merely at showing that it is true. My objection to this is that it is not clear that this constitutes a good reason for accepting theory T in the absence of evidence that we *are* effective agents. However, I will concede this much. Perhaps *epistemically circular* evidence that we are effective agents - which seems to be the only kind possible - provides *some* support for accepting theory T as reasonable, in light of our previous discussions. There may not be enough support, however, especially when combined with the problems associated with the claim that effective agency implies that theory T is true.

On the whole, I don't think that Sellars' argument is satisfactory, i.e. I don't think he has shown that theory T is reasonable, because of the problems outlined above. The point isn't to debase or demean our standard doxastic practices or our "framework of epistemic evaluation", it's merely to point out that we need a better argument. There was another point in examining Sellars as well, which was to see if his

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9. Remember, the argument here is concerned with whether one can be an *effective agent* without accepting theory T, not with whether one can be rational or reasonable or justified without accepting it.

10. There is also the problem that Sellars seems to be assuming that there is something coherent enough to be called the framework of epistemic evaluation, and that there is only one such framework.

approach could provide support for religious practices. I think the answer is a straightforward "No". The simple reason is that engaging in a religious doxastic practice is not necessary for effective agency, nor, so far as I can see, even likely to be helpful. One may very well have to accept a religious practice in order to realize certain *specific* religious intentions, but no such acceptance is required for being in a general position so as to act. And even if religious practices were necessary or even helpful to effective agency, there would still be the problem of determining which of the many incompatible competitors to accept. So there doesn't seem to be any help for religious practices in Sellars.

Chapter VI - Plantinga's Position

A. The Position Characterized

It is time to turn to Alvin Plantinga's attempt to show that (at least some) Christian beliefs can count as knowledge.[1] Plantinga's approach is similar to Alston's in many ways. For one, their theories of knowledge are both foundationalist, externalist, and they both have non-deontological views of justification (or in Plantinga's case, "warrant"). Another similarity is that they share the same general-to-specific strategy. Where Alston's strategy essentially consists in developing the PR argument to shore up doxastic practices generally, Plantinga's strategy essentially consists in developing a general theory of knowledge and trying to accommodate Christian beliefs within it. Accordingly, his approach is successful insofar as his general theory of knowledge is correct and is able to handle the special problems raised by the problem of religious diversity. I will argue that Plantinga's approach fails (or at least looks implausible) on both counts.

To begin, there are two lines of argument in WCD and WPF, or what might be better called two main theses. There is the negative thesis (predominantly carried out in WCD) that none of the prominent contemporary theories of knowledge succeed in providing an adequate account of knowledge. There is also the positive thesis which is Plantinga's own theory of knowledge (mainly carried out in WPF), and which for lack of a better name we may as well call *proper functionalism.* I am not mainly concerned to examine Plantinga's negative thesis. I am going to confine most of my remarks to his positive thesis. It is not that I agree with everything he has to say about competing theories of knowledge, but rather that I must restrict the scope of my project, I am more interested in his positive thesis and it is that upon which I have more original things to say.

Plantinga's recent epistemology is an approach to the general topic, what is knowledge and how is it distinguished from mere true belief?, but he expends much of his energy on the topic of *warrant* rather than (directly) on knowledge. What, then, is warrant? Warrant, says Plantinga, is that which added to true belief constitutes knowledge (thus, Plantinga at least accepts the analysis of knowledge as a species of true belief).[2] The notion of a *design plan* is central in Plantinga's account of warrant. "The design plan of an organism or artifact specifies how it works when it works properly: that is (for a large set of conditions), it specifies how the

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1. This attempt is not entirely carried out, but its main outlines are clear. Plantinga has published two volumes in this project, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (hereafter WCD) and *Warrant and Proper Function* (hereafter WPF) and has promised a third, *Warranted Christian Belief.*

2. Preface to WPF, p. v.

organism should work."[3] Plantinga claims that our cognitive faculties have a design plan, in some sense hard-wired into us, and that it was designed by God. We shall have occasion to examine the design plan in more detail in a moment.

Plantinga's account essentially proposes four conditions for a person S's belief b being warranted: (1) S's cognitive faculties must be functioning properly, or more exactly, the modules or segments of the design plan that produced b must be functioning properly; (2) S must be in the right cognitive environment, i.e. one sufficiently similar to that for which S was designed; (3) the modules of the design plan involved in the production of b must be aimed at truth; and (4) S's design plan must be a good one. If and only if all four of these conditions are fulfilled, then b is warranted, and if b is true, b constitutes knowledge for S. Moreover, according to Plantinga these four conditions characterize the central, paradigmatic core of our concept of warrant, that is, they hold (with some qualifications) for the "main modules" of our epistemic establishment, such as self-knowledge, memory, perception, *a priori* knowledge, and induction.[4]

By way of situating Plantinga vis-a-vis the main issues of contemporary epistemology, we should note that his theory of knowledge is *foundationalist* in that it retains the notion of beliefs warranted but not on the basis of other beliefs (basic beliefs, and if they result from proper function, properly basic beliefs), *externalist* in that none of the conditions of knowledge are something of which the subject must be aware, and his notion of warrant is *non-deontological* in nature. His theory also retains a strong connection with reliabilism as seen in his explication of the fourth condition of knowledge. A good design plan is one in which a belief b produced by properly functioning faculties whose modules responsible for the production of b are aimed at truth, in a congenial environment, has a high objective probability of being true.[5] In other words, a design plan is good if for any belief b, if all of the other conditions of warrant are satisfied, b has a high objective probability of being true. Thus can Plantinga say that reliabilism is "a zeroeth approximation to the truth".[6]

The astute reader may have noticed that I have switched from talking about justification to the notion of warrant. This is unavoidable in presenting Plantinga's position, since he outright rejects the concept of justification. A proper understanding of why he does so would take us deep into his negative thesis, but I can say this much. Plantinga sees deep connections between justification, deontology, and internalism, and he

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3. WPF, p.22.
4. Plantinga says this in many places, e.g. WPF, pp. 47-48 and WCD, pp. 214-215.
5. WPF, p.17.
6. WCD, p. 214.

attempts to trace the sources of these connections to Descartes and Locke.[7] Justification, properly so called, is deontological, in that it involves fulfillment of epistemic duty or aptness for fulfillment of epistemic duty.[8] Many contemporary philosophers use the concept of justification in this way, and even those who use the closely connected concept of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence (evidentialism) without explicitly endorsing deontology can be best seen as implicitly accepting the deontological conception, or a close analog of it, according to Plantinga.[9] In fact, according to Plantinga, all of the contemporary accounts of justification can be seen as either belonging to the central deontological core, or being analogically related to it.[10] And, deontology leads to internalism, the most basic sense being that whether I am justified (have fulfilled my epistemic duty) is something that I can tell by reflection and that is under my control.[11] So, the bewildering variety of contemporary accounts of justification can be reduced to order by seeing them as either part of the core justification-deontology-internalism triumvirate or being analogically related to it.[12]

Given this way of seeing things, it is a short step from "justification" to "warrant". Plantinga rejects deontology and he rejects internalism. This by itself would not preclude one from producing a different account of justification, an account that one thinks is correct. However, one reason for moving towards warrant is that by rejecting both deontology and internalism, presumably Plantinga holds that the connection with the epistemological tradition (about justification, anyway) is tenuous at best, and the difference is significant enough to deserve a new term. More importantly, Plantinga sees his theory as a fairly radical approach to epistemology (which it is), and even more importantly, he sees it as a simpler and more unified approach than the current ones (which I am not convinced about). Thus, we can understand the rationale for using the term "warrant" to stand for that which in addition to true belief constitutes knowledge, even if we don't accept Plantinga's theory of knowledge.

I have hopefully presented enough of Plantinga's theory that the reader will have a good grasp of its essentials. I maintain that his theory does *not* provide an adequate analysis of knowledge, mainly because even if it were able to accommodate most of our intuitions, it is plagued by its own very serious internal problems such that it cannot reasonably be claimed to constitute an advance in our understanding of the nature of

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7. I will not here perform the much needed history of philosophy to see whether Plantinga is right in his reading of Descartes and Locke, but I feel compelled to note that I am not entirely convinced. His historical efforts strike me as a little too cursory, a little too quick.
8. WCD, p. 25.
9. Ibid, p. 26.
10. WCD, p. 28.
11. WCD, pp. 15 - 24.
12. WCD, p. 29.

knowledge. In other words, Plantinga's theory raises at least as many problems as it solves (if it solves any). Moreover, his theory is not as unified and simple as he seems to think, making one wonder, in sum, if it is really much better than its prominent contemporary rivals (e.g. reliabilism, coherentism).

It is time to get down to the nitty-gritty, i.e. to investigating some of the main problems that Plantinga's theory faces, and that constitute, if they are not intractable (and I suspect some are), at least sufficient reasons for rejecting his theory as it stands. The problems to be examined are the following: (1) the generality problem (or an analog thereof); (2) the problem of determining what's in the design plan (i.e., what does a properly functioning person believe?); and, (3) the problem of design (as related to the problem of evil). Let us take each in turn.

B. A Generality Problem for Proper Functionalism

The generality problem is a problem for reliabilism, raised to prominence by Richard Feldman and commented on by many others.[13] It does not apply exactly to Plantinga's theory, but an analog of it seems to. Appropriately enough, Feldman himself develops the problem in application to proper functionalism. However, let us first briefly see how the problem arises for reliabilism.

Generic reliabilism, or what we might, following Plantinga, call "paradigm reliabilism", holds that a belief is justified if and only if it is produced by a reliable process, and the degree of its reliability varies in direct proportion to the reliability of the process that produced it.[14] Now, reliability is a property of types of belief forming processes, and any belief is a token of many different types. Moreover, typically the reliability of types will vary. So, for any given belief b, which type of belief forming process ought we to focus on? As Feldman says, "We have no idea what the theory implies about the epistemic status of beliefs until we know which types are relevant to their evaluation. Without specifying relevant types, the theory is seriously incomplete."[15]

Feldman argues that something similar holds for proper functionalism. The situation is not identical, for while every belief forming process is a token of many different types, if Plantinga's theory is correct, then there are not many different modules or segments of the design plan responsible for producing the belief. If Plantinga is right, then

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13. Feldman, Richard, "Reliability and Justification", *The Monist* 68: 159 - 174. The characterization of the problem given in this section is largely due to Feldman. See footnote 14 in chapter 2 for a slightly different characterization, owing more to Sosa (Cf. "Intellectual Virtue in Perspective" in *Knowledge in Perspective.*)

14. WCD, p. 198.

15. "Proper Functionalism", p. 41 in a symposium on proper functionalism (also participated in by Sosa) in *Noûs* 27: 1 (1993). Plantinga's response - "Why We Need Proper Function" - is contained in the same volume.

there are modules or segments in the design plan, and "there is a fact about which module a belief results from."[16] Feldman's central objection is that, at the present, we do not know whether the cognitive system has modules or segments, and more importantly (since he seems willing to concede the previous point), we do not know what the modules are actually like. Since we do not know what the modules are like, we are in no position to specify whether, for any given belief b, if the modules producing b are functioning properly, or if they are aimed at truth, or if there is a high objective probability of b being true given that it has been produced by these modules. Thus, it is (at present, anyway) impossible to apply the theory and see what kind of implications it has, and in this sense it faces the same problem as reliabilism.[17]

Plantinga's response is informative although not entirely adequate. He essentially *denies* that, in the absence of information about what the modules of the design plan are like, we cannot tell whether there is proper function, or whether the modules involved are aimed at truth, or whether the belief produced has a high objective probability of being true. With respect to Feldman's belief that he sees a large number of people (presumably occasioned by the experience of seeing a large number of people), he says:

> But what, exactly, is the problem?...So are the cognitive faculties involved in the production of Feldman's belief functioning properly and aimed at truth? I should think so. Is the cognitive environment appropriate for his kind of cognitive system? It certainly seems so. And is there a high objective probability that a belief produced by these faculties (the ones involved in the production of Feldman's belief) functioning properly in an appropriate environment will be true? I see no reason to doubt it. So I don't really see the problem here.[18]

Thus, the dispute between Feldman and Plantinga on this point boils down to whether we can tell if Plantinga's conditions for warrant (or rather, three of the four) are fulfilled *independently* of knowledge about the modules or segments of the design plan involved, knowledge that is admitted to be lacking by both sides. Feldman says we cannot, Plantinga says we can. What is interesting is that neither one of them gives any reason if favour of his position; they seem to be merely begging the question against each other.

I wish that I could give an answer to this question, at least in general. Plantinga's answer gains whatever plausibility it has (and I think it has some) because of the fact that the belief in question is a relatively uncontroversial one. I suspect that what Plantinga is really doing is appealing to common sense, or, if you prefer, widely shared intuitions. *Of course*, believing that one is seeing a large number of people when one has the visual experience of seeing a large number of people is the result of proper function. People do it all the time, it is perfectly

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16. "Proper Functionalism", p. 43.
17. Ibid.
18. "Why We Need Proper Function", p. 73.

normal.(Actually, the belief that there are a large number of people nearby would be a bit more usual than Feldman's belief, although I don't think Feldman's belief is abnormal). *Of course,* Feldman's belief is the result of faculties aimed at truth; what else could they be aimed at? And so on. The strength of Plantinga's position rests upon the strength of the intuitions to which he is appealing, and they appear to be rather strong.

But Plantinga's approach has its limitations. In particular, it has trouble accommodating people who don't share the commonsensical views in question, and, just as troubling, it cannot cover cases of controversial belief. Perhaps Feldman is one of those who questions common sense on this point. What can Plantinga say? Presumably he doesn't want to say, "Well, my theory only works for those who share my intuitions." Perhaps he holds that there is a presumption in favour of common sense when it comes to whether a particular uncontroversial belief is the result of proper function, whether the modules producing it are aimed at truth, and whether the belief is likely to be true given the fulfillment of the other conditions for warrant. But why think that? Certainly Plantinga has given us no argument for this presumption (if this is what he holds), and its not clear that any good argument is available.

To reinforce this point, consider the following sort of argument. Premise: Most people (this can be made stronger - nearly everyone, a great majority, etc.) believe p in circumstances C. Conclusion: It is normal (in the non-statistical, normative sense) for people to believe p in circumstances C.[19] This argument appears to be blatantly invalid. But perhaps I have left out a premise (or premises). What would the missing part(s) be? I can't think of any non-question begging premises to add, or at least, nothing that wouldn't itself require a substantial amount of argument that might itself be dubious. My point isn't that no argument is available for the intuitively appealing conviction that beliefs like the belief that one is seeing a large number of people (when one has the visual experience of seeing a large number of people) arise from proper function, but rather that no good argument is easily available, and to be really convincing, Plantinga's approach requires one. (A good argument, not necessarily a readily available one.) Thus, while it may not face an impossible task, Plantinga's theory at least faces a rather difficult one.

The problems facing Plantinga discussed so far really stem from a more basic issue that he does not even begin to adequately address: what's in the design plan? This issue is more basic and more general than the one Feldman raises, and deserves a section all its own.

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19. Presumably, proper function can be reached from normality, since this is one of the "connected group of interdefinable notions" Plantinga associates with it. Cf. WPF, p. 4.

C. What's in the Design Plan?

Recall that the design plan contains a set of triples: circumstance, response, and function. The circumstance concerns the environment the subject is likely to be in, the response presumably will be something like "believe p" (and perhaps something specifying how strongly p is to be believed), and the function presumably will be something like "believe for the sake of truth" or "believe for the sake of preserving psychological well being". Now, the question is, *how do we know* what a properly functioning person is supposed to believe in any given circumstance, and how do we know what the function of believing p is in any given circumstance? This amounts to the questions, what's in the design plan, and how do we know what's in it?

We have already noted some problems with the appeal to common sense and the argument from the fact that most people believe p to the claim that it is normal to believe p. We should be aware that the appeal to common sense occurs frequently in Plantinga's epistemology, or at the very least, Plantinga makes judgments about what properly functioning people do that he does not present any arguments for (I maintain that the best interpretation of such judgments is as implicit appeals to common sense). For example, his "solution" to the problem of other minds is simply that it is part of our design plan to believe that there are other minds and that they are much they same as our own.[20]

Now, I am willing to make the generous concession that Plantinga is correct when it comes to relatively uncontroversial beliefs like the belief that there is a tree in front of me when I am having the experience of seeing a tree in front of me, or the belief that another person is in pain when I see them stub their toe and hop around displaying pain behaviour. Strictly speaking, of course, Plantinga owes us an argument for the claim that these sorts of beliefs are the appropriate ones in the circumstances, and the claim that our faculties are aiming for truth in believing them - i.e. the appropriate circumstance-response-function triple is in the design plan - but I am willing to suppose that this requirement could be fulfilled. Where I am not willing to concede this point is when it comes to controversial beliefs, such as the belief that God (as conceived by theists) exists, and this problem cuts to the heart of Plantinga's theory.

I said earlier that Plantinga's position is most plausible when applied to uncontroversial beliefs. This plausibility evaporates when applied to relatively controversial beliefs, such as belief in God. The appeal to common sense will not help, since there is no consensus on the matter (this seems to follow by definition from the meaning of "controversial" belief). We should note that there are at least two sorts of problems here. First, there is the problem of specifying what the appropriate response is for a properly functioning person in a certain

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20. WPF, pp. 74 -5.

circumstance. For example, what does a properly functioning person believe when, as an adult, he or she is exposed to Christianity for the first time? Second, there is the problem of determining what the purpose of a controversial belief is, which is itself a controversial matter. With regard to religious beliefs, specifically theistic beliefs, Plantinga is committing himself to it being true that they are, at least sometimes, aimed at the truth, setting himself squarely against some prominent schools of thought in the psychology of religion. Now, I don't want to take a stand on the psychology of religion, but it seems to me that Plantinga owes us some reason(s) to think that religious beliefs are (at least sometimes) aimed at the truth, which he has nowhere done.[21]

Not only does Plantinga require that it be true that theistic beliefs be appropriate in certain circumstances, and that the purpose of such beliefs be to obtain truth, his theory also plausibly requires that it be true that there are no other appropriate responses in such circumstances. I say "plausibly" because Plantinga has not explicitly committed himself on this issue. It is conceivable that in a certain circumstance there could be more than one appropriate response (it does partly depend on how broadly one construes the relevant circumstance). Suppose we consider the circumstance of a reasonably well educated adult, who has no strong prior beliefs about the matter, who is confronted by Christianity for the first time, say by an honest, earnest believer. Presumably Plantinga wants to say that the proper response is to believe, or at least to have a doxastic attitude that is conducive to believing in Christianity. Presumably he wants to say there is something wrong with not believing. More generally, presumably Plantinga holds that the atheist is not, at least in general, functioning properly with respect to belief in God, and moreover, that people of other religious persuasions (say, Buddhist or Jainist) are not functioning properly. If he doesn't say this, then his theory leads to a kind of *balkanization* of proper function in which people with incompatible beliefs are functioning properly and equally warranted in their beliefs. There's nothing incoherent or logically impossible about such a view (I have some attraction to it myself) but it is hardly conducive to a Christian view of the world.[22]

The problem of specifying what's in the design plan has even more ramifications in Plantinga's epistemology. Plantinga defines a properly basic belief as that which a properly functioning person takes in a basic way, i.e. as not inferred from other beliefs.[23] Depending upon what's in

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21. At the very least, Plantinga needs to refer to some respectable school(s) of thought within the psychology of religion that is sympathetic to his position, and he nowhere does so. Alston is guilty of the same omission, both philosophers seeming to think that it is sufficient to register their doubt about certain psychological schools without giving anything further.

22. My inspiration on this point is Penelhum's article "Parity Is Not Enough", which we have already discussed.

23. WPF, p. 183.

the design plan, different propositions will be properly basic. Plantinga suggests that belief in God can be properly basic, but if the balkanization described above obtains (i.e. one can be a properly functioning atheist, or agnostic, or Buddhist, or Daoist, or Confuscionist...), then we have reason to think that there will be a balkanization of properly basic beliefs.

There is one sort of response that I have not yet considered, namely, that we can determine what's in the design plan (at least in rough outline) if we have been designed by God. This would seem to be the way Plantinga is inclined, since he is well known for his arguments for the existence of God, and he has also given arguments that the only way to make sense of the notion of proper function is to suppose that we have been designed by God, and that naturalism is self-defeating.[24] I can only reply that it is quite philosophically respectable to view the arguments for the existence of God as unsound (this is admitted by Plantinga himself), and that I think there are good reasons for thinking that his other arguments are flawed as well.[25]

In conclusion, the problem of specifying what's in the design plan is a particularly nasty one for Plantinga's proper functionalism, especially concerning controversial beliefs. At the very least it shows that the theory is unacceptable as it stands, and it goes some way towards showing that Plantinga's theory wouldn't really constitute an advance in our understanding of knowledge since it creates its own set of serious problems. Moreover, it shows one way in which Plantinga's theory is incapable of handling religious diversity.

D. The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Design

What I do intend to do in this section is explore some of the relationships between Plantinga's work on the problem of evil and certain aspects of WCD and WPF. I will argue that Plantinga's epistemological theory faces a problem analogous to that of the problem of evil, but a solution analogous to the Free Will Defence seems unavailable.

As we have seen, Plantinga holds that human cognitive faculties have a design plan designed by God. In barest outline, the problem I am pointing out has to do with why an omnipotent and omniscient God would have to made trade-offs and compromises in the design plan, what sense it makes to say there could be unintended by-products in a design plan designed by God, and whether the distinction between design plan and max plan holds for God. For convenience call this the *problem of design*. I do not wish to mount an atheological argument with the problem of design as some have done with the problem of evil. Rather,

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24. Cf. WPF, chapters 11 and 12.

25. See Carl Ginet, "Comments on Plantinga's Two-Volume Work on Warrant" and Richard Swinburne, "Response to *Warrant* " both in a symposium on Plantinga's work in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. LV, No. 2, June 1995).

my proximate conclusion shall be that just as the problem of evil should occasion at least some serious reflection and analysis (which Plantinga has done admirably), the problem of design should similarly call for more reflection and analysis from Plantinga. The further conclusion to draw from this is that we have even more evidence that Plantinga's theory of knowledge is incapable of supporting Christian beliefs.

The plan for this section is as follows. We will first flesh out certain aspects of Plantinga's theory of warrant, paying particular attention to trade-offs and compromises, the distinction between design plan and max plan, and the notion of unintended by-products, and then move to a consideration of the Free Will Defence. As our final stop, we will explore the nature of the problem of design, the ways in which it is and is not analogous to the problem of evil, and the difficulty it poses for Plantinga's epistemology.

"The design plan of an organism or artifact specifies how it works when it works properly: that is (for a large set of conditions), it specifies how the organism should work."[26] Plantinga claims that our cognitive faculties have a design plan, in some sense hard-wired into us, and that it was designed by God. The design plan, furthermore, contains a set of triples: circumstance, response, and purpose or function, which dictate how the organism or artifact should respond in various circumstances.[27] The design plan has its limitations, however; it only specifies how the thing in question should work under those circumstances "that in some sense (in the paradigm artifactual case) the designer(s) plan for, or have in mind, or intend."[28]

In general, the max plan takes into account those circumstances not included in the design plan, i.e. "it is *not* a description of how the thing works under just those circumstances (as in the paradigm cases) the designer plans for or takes into account."[29] The max plan is a complete set of circumstance - response pairs that describes what will happen to the thing in circumstances such as when "it is broken or damaged or destroyed as well as what it will do when functioning properly"[30] within the constraints that the thing "retains its approximate present structure in circumstances involving the natural laws that do in fact obtain."[31]

Plantinga also distinguishes between "what the thing in question is designed to do and unintended by-products of the way it works."[32] His example of an unintended by-product is that of a refrigerator which, when touched by a screwdriver on a certain wire, makes a "loud angry

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26. WPF, p.22.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, p. 23.
29. Ibid, emphasis added.
30. Ibid, pp. 23-24.
31. Ibid, p. 23.
32. Ibid, p.24.

squawk".[33] The sense in which the loud squawk is unintentional or accidental is not that it happens by chance or isn't caused to happen; it is "accidental, rather, from the point of view of the intentions of the designer."[34]

We must make one more stop in this whirlwind tour of Plantinga's design plan. Plantinga considers the following kind of objection. In cases where the cognitive response r is misleading, e.g. cases of perceptual illusion, there does not seem to be cognitive malfunction. When the unwary perceiver mistakes the straight stick in water for a bent stick, he is not malfunctioning; yet, according to Plantinga, even if by chance the stick were actually bent, the result would not be warrant. Why not?

The answer, says Plantinga, has to do with trade-offs and compromises.[35] Our cognitive faculties have been designed by God but He had to work within certain constraints, such as that, "the system be realized within a certain sort of medium (flesh, bone and blood rather than plastic, glass, and metal), a humanoid body...in a certain kind of world, with certain kinds of natural laws or regularities."[36] The main purpose of our cognitive system is to produce true beliefs, but it was not possible - or the price was too high - for God to design a system which produced true beliefs on every occasion within these kinds of constraints.

Thus, God made some trade-offs and compromises in the design plan. The end result is a cognitive system which "works well in the vast majority of circumstances; but in a few circumstances produces false belief."[37] Misleading cognitive responses - such as perceptual illusion cases and cases of belief in false testimony - are, generally, the result of trade-offs and compromises in the design plan. They are produced by segments of the design plan which do not directly serve the main purpose of getting truth but rather do so indirectly. To return to the previous question, according to Plantinga misleading cognitive responses do not have warrant because "a belief has warrant for you only if the segment of the design plan governing its production is directly rather than indirectly aimed at the production of true beliefs".[38]

(i) The Problem of Evil

Adams and Adams state the basic outline of the problem of evil in this way:

> It is often seen as the logical problem
> whether the theistic belief
> (1) God exists, and is omnipotent, omni-

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33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid, p. 38.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid, p. 39.
38. Ibid, p. 30.

> scient, and perfectly good, is logically consistent with
> (2) Evil exists.
> For initially it seems that
> (P1) A perfectly good being would always eliminate evil so far as it could;
> (P2) An omniscient being would know all about evils;
> and
> (P3) There are no limits to what an omnipotent being can do.
> But the conjunction of (1), (2), (P1), (P2), and (P3) forms an inconsistent quintet, so that it is possible from any four to infer the denial of the fifth. In particular, the last four entail the denial of they first, while the first combines with the last three to entail the denial of the second. Given (P1), (P2), and (P3), it seems to follow that either God does not exist or evil does not; and few have been prepared to deny the existence of evil![39]

Adams and Adams also instructively point out that such reasoning may be taken in two ways: *aporetically*, as generating a puzzle, a constructive challenge, a starting point for further analysis by the theist, or *atheistically*, as constituting an insurmountable objection to theistic belief.[40]

Many eminent philosophers have followed such reasoning to an atheistic conclusion.[41] Plantinga, however, takes such reasoning aporetically. The Free Will Defence aims specifically to rebut the charge of logical contradiction by establishing that the theist's beliefs - in particular, the propositions (1) God is omnipotent, omniscient and wholly good, and (2) There is evil - are not logically inconsistent.[42] Thus the Free Will Defence is just that, i.e. a *defence* against such atheistic reasoning from the existence of evil, and Plantinga (as one would expect) believes it has succeeded in showing that the existence of evil is not so great a problem for theism after all.

Reduced to its essentials, Plantinga's Free Will Defence works in this manner. One method of showing that a pair of propositions p and q are jointly consistent is to produce a third proposition r whose

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[39]. Introduction to *The Problem of Evil*, p. 2.
[40]. Ibid, pp. 2-3.
[41]. Bertrand Russell, for example, as well as J. S. Mill, J. L. Mackie, and H. J. McCloskey, among others.
[42]. Plantinga, Alvin. *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 165. I have focused on the Free Will Defence as it appears in *The Nature of Necessity* because it seems to me that even in his most recent writing on the topic, Plantinga maintains essentially the same position, and also because it is undoubtedly Plantinga's most well-known formulation of the argument. For confirmation, see Plantinga's self-profile in *Alvin Plantinga*, eds. Tomberlin, James E. and Van Inwagen, Peter, pp. 36-51.

conjunction with p is consistent and entails q. r does not have to be true or even plausible; all that is required is that it be logically possible. Plantinga employs this method in the Free Will Defence; he produces a proposition which is allegedly logically possible and which, in conjunction with proposition (1), entails proposition (2).[43] In so doing, Plantinga claims to have rebutted the charge of logical inconsistency, accomplishing the main purpose of the Free Will Defence.

Plantinga considers the following formidable objection in the course of his argument.[44] God, being omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect could have created a world containing moral good but no moral evil (or at least less moral evil than the actual world), and since He obviously did not do so, either God is not omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good or He simply does not exist.

Plantinga's answer to this objection is that it is logically possible that there are possible worlds which God, though omnipotent, could *not* have actualized. Given that He wanted to create free creatures, it is possible He could not have actualized a world containing moral good but no moral evil. Plantinga is an *incompatibilist* with respect to freedom; freedom is not compatible with determinism.[45] The freedom of creatures such as ourselves is such that a free action cannot be determined by causal laws or antecedent conditions.[46] God could have created creatures which always did good and never evil, but such creatures would not have been free. In Adams and Adams's words:

> This suggests that in order to have creatures who freely abstain from wrong-doing, God would have to leave it up to them whether they do right or wrong, and might thus be unable to prevent their wrongdoing while maintaining their freedom.[47]

Thus, for Plantinga, God's omnipotence is effectively limited by the nature of freedom.

Plantinga suggests similar propositions which, in conjunction with (1) entail (2), in response to such objections as that God could have created a world with less moral evil than the actual world and that the existence of natural evil is incompatible with (1).[48] Once again, Plantinga does not argue for the truth of these propositions but only their logical possibility. It appears that these propositions are logically possible and that Plantinga has succeeded in his endeavour, since most atheistic arguments from the existence of evil subsequent to the Free Will Defence have been of the

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43. The proposition which Plantinga produces is in fact a compound proposition consisting of the conjunction of these two propositions: (1) Every essence suffers from transworld depravity, and (2) God actualizes a world containing moral good. See p. 189 of *The Nature of Necessity*.
44. Plantinga initially states this objection on p. 167 of *The Nature of Necessity* and is not finished with it until p. 189.
45. Adams and Adams (eds). *The Problem of Evil*, p. 12.
46. Plantinga. *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 166.
47. Adams and Adams (eds). *The Problem of Evil*, pp. 12-13.
48. *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 190-193.

evidential, probablistic kind (i.e. with the conclusion it is improbable that God exists) rather than the deductive kind.

(ii) The Problem of Design

The problem of design is not analogous to the problem of evil in the sense that Plantinga's epistemological theory is allegedly logically inconsistent or that an atheological conclusion can be reached from the problem of design. Rather, the problem of design is analogous to the problem of evil in that, just as the theist at least faces the difficulty of explaining why evil exists, Plantinga at least faces the difficulty of explaining why God would have to make trade-offs and compromises in the design plan, what sense it makes to say that there could be unintended by-products in the design plan, and how the distinction between the design plan and the max plan holds for God. In other words, the problem of design is at least to be taken *aporetically*, as requiring further analysis and explanation to expurgate the pockets of conceptual darkness and confusion. The problem of design may cast a longer shadow than that, however; the sense which the traditional predicates of omnipotence, moral perfection, and, particularly, omniscience have when Plantinga applies them to God becomes rather obscure.

Let us return to Plantinga's distinction between the design plan and the max plan. The former is said to cover those circumstances which the designer planned for, or had in mind, or intended, and the latter, roughly, everything else.[49] This seems unproblematic for the case of a human designer or team of human designers - but does it make sense for God?

In a recent exchange with Patrick Grim, Plantinga has had occasion to define what he means by `omniscience'.

> Omniscience should be thought of as a maximal degree of knowledge, or better, as maximal perfection with respect to knowledge. Historically, this perfection has been understood in such a way that a being x is omniscient only if for every proposition p, x knows whether p is true (I understand it that way myself).[50]

Although Plantinga does not intend for this definition to be what he would call a complete "explication" of omniscience, he seems to think it is at least a step in the right direction. A little reflection will show, however, that this step is really a misstep.

For every circumstance c, there will be a proposition of the form "c is actual at time t". This proposition will be true if and only if c is actual at

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49. With regard to unintended by-products, the phrase "plan for, or have in mind, or intend" (WPF, p.23, quoted above) presumably means that planning for, having in mind, and intending are all synonyms. But if this is the case, Plantinga is simply wrong. Planning for and having in mind are close synonyms, but it is possible for one to plan for or have in mind something undesirable which one did not intend. E.g. A theist might maintain that God planned for the eventuality that human beings would sin, even though He did not intend for them to do so.

50. Plantinga, Alvin and Grim, Patrick, "Truth, Omniscience, and Cantorian Arguments: An Exchange", *Philosophical Studies* 71 (3), 267 - 306, p. 291.

time t, and false if and only if c is not actual at time t. According to Plantinga's definition, for every proposition p, an omniscient being would know whether p is true, which means that for every proposition of the form "c is actual at t", God would know whether that proposition is true. Now for God to know a proposition is for Him to fully understand it (unlike, for example, my knowledge of the proposition "the general theory of relativity has more explanatory power than Newtonian physics"). But if God knew and understood all propositions of the form "c is actual at t", God would know for every possible circumstance c whether c is actual at t. But if God knew this, then there would be no circumstances which God would not have in mind, or plan for, since God would know whether any circumstance was actual at any time. Hence, the distinction between the design plan and the max plan does not hold for God.

The notion of unintended by-products is similarly problematic when applied to God. In the case of a human designer, there are many reasons why unintended by-products might occur - the designer may have done her best but not have foreseen the by-product because of inexperience or ignorance, or she may have not foreseen it because of carelessness, or she may have foreseen it but simply not cared. At first glance (and second, I suspect), however, none of these reasons apply to God. God could not be inexperienced, or careless, or uncaring, or ignorant (for He wouldn't then be God). How, then, could there be unintended by-products in our design plan?

Let me say a bit more about God's being ignorant as a possible explanation of how there could be an unintended by-product in God's creation. Besides the obvious incompatibility of the notion of ignorance with our intuitive understanding of omniscience, it is incompatible with Plantinga's own definition of omniscience. Take any feature f that might be seen as a possible by-product in our cognitive faculties, such as the feature that unwary human beings tend to perceive a straight stick in water as a bent stick and to believe that the stick is in fact bent. There will be a proposition of the form "f is actual at t" which will be true if and only if f is actual at t and false if it is not. According to Plantinga's definition, for every proposition of this form, God will know whether it is true. Hence, God will understand every proposition of this form - but then God will know whether any feature is actual at any time, and there will be no features which could in any meaningful sense be "unintended" for God.

The conclusion I am pressing towards is that there is a tension in Plantinga's philosophy that crystalizes on the notion of omniscience. Plantinga's definition of omniscience rules out the possibility of applying the notions of design plan versus max plan and of unintended by-products to God. So either Plantinga has to revise his definition of omniscience or admit that these notions do not apply to God.

In any case, to say that there are circumstances which God did not plan for or have in mind and that there are unintended by-products in something He designed seems inevitably to go contrary to our intuitive

judgments about the nature of omniscience. There is a *prima facie* case for thinking that no explication of these notions will resolve the problem. And since Plantinga considers himself to be faithful to our ordinary epistemic notions, is he failing to live up to his own mandate?[51]

As we have seen, Plantinga claims that God made certain trade-offs and compromises in our design plan because it was not possible to have a cognitive system which delivered truth in every circumstance to be encountered in the cognitive environment for which it was designed and satisfy certain other constraints. Moreover, in several places Plantinga strongly suggests[52] that our design plan is the best compromise available between the aim of having a cognitive system which delivers truth as much as possible and the other constraints to which God was committed.

I want to address several issues in this regard that stand in need of further work. Although Plantinga does not explicitly state so[53], it is reasonable to assume that he means it was not logically possible for God to design a perfect cognitive system[54] and satisfy the other constraints he was committed to. Now, the most obvious question is, is this true? Is it the case that there is no possible world God could actualize in which our cognitive systems deliver truth in all possible circumstances included in that world, and all the other relevant conditions (e.g. we have humanoid bodies, our cognition is mediated by brain and neural activity, the same natural laws as in the actual world obtain, etc.) are fulfilled? The answer appears to be yes. For example, it may have been possible to design us with enormous brains capable of always obtaining truth, but we would then have been much less mobile, less able to defend ourselves, unable to

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51. I realize this notion of being faithful is far from clear. The intuitive idea can perhaps be conveyed by saying that if Plantinga wants to claim both that God is omniscient and that He does not anticipate or plan for all possible circumstances and there are unintended by-products in his creations, then Plantinga's use of the term `omniscience' has strayed so far from the ordinary use so as to no longer be considered to mean what it ought to, essentially, mean. Be this as it may, there is no doubt Plantinga considers himself to be the explicating our paradigmatic, intuitive ideas about warrant, belief, knowledge, and the like (e.g. WPF, p. ix), and presumably considers himself to be doing the same with our ideas about omniscience.

52. E.g. WPF, p. 40.

53. What he actually says on page 39 of WPF is: "It may not be possible, for example, to satisfy these other constraints and also have a system that...produces true beliefs in every sort of situation..." It seems obvious that unless we interpret Plantinga as referring to logical impossibility, his claim that God had to make trade-offs and compromises in the design plan has no hope of making sense.

54. Let us define a perfect cognitive system as follows: a perfect cognitive system P is one which delivers truth in every situation S an agent A who instantiates P might possibly encounter in any sufficiently appropriate cognitive environment C. Obviously enough, a really `perfect' cognitive system would has other virtues besides getting truth, but this definition is suitable for our purposes because Plantinga defines a good design plan in terms of the statistical probability of getting truth (e.g. WPF, p. 17) and like many epistemologists often claims that the main purpose of our cognitive establishment is to get truth (e.g. WPF, pp. 216-217).

play sports, etc. Of course, many of these undesirable consequences could have been avoided by making it so that the Earth's gravitation was weaker than it is in the actual world (say 0.5 G), but then we have changed one of the constraints. It is very difficult to imagine God creating us with perfect cognitive systems without thereby also changing one or more of the constraints to which God is (allegedly) committed.

On the other hand, suppose someone more astute than I were able to show that there is no logical impossibility in God actualizing a world in which we have perfect cognitive systems and none of the necessary constraints do not obtain. There would then be reason to question why God did not actualize such a world. Would it be because God is really not omnipotent, omniscience, and perfectly good? In that scenario, one could force Plantinga to choose, for example, between admitting that God, though `omnipotent', could not have done it (in which case Plantinga would water-down the notion of omnipotence) or God could have done it but chose not to (then for what reason?). As we noted earlier, philosophers have tried to force the theist into a similar (but not identical) disjunction with regard to the problem of evil. Is it that God, though `omnipotent', could not have actualized a world containing moral good and no moral evil or is it that God was capable of doing so but chose not to (for what reason?). With regard to trade-offs and compromises in the design plan, however, both disjuncts would be undesirable for Plantinga, while only the second disjunct might pose a problem with regard to the problem of evil. In fact, Plantinga openly embraces the first disjunct in the Free Will Defence, quite reasonably holding that limiting God's omnipotence to what is logically possible is in fact no real limitation.[55] Since I doubt there is a good argument to set up such a scenario in the first place, I will proceed no further with this line of thought.

There is another important issue here. It may be true that it was not logically possible for God to create us with perfect cognitive systems without altering at least one of the constraints which He was committed to. But who cares if *that* was not logically possible? If it had been possible for God to design us so that we always get truth and the only trade-off would have been that we would have four fingers instead of five (or something similarly trivial), would it not have been better if God had done it (i.e. actualize that world instead of ours)?

Plantinga actually employs something like an implicit distinction between important features of possible worlds and unimportant ones.[56] Important features are those which God could not have traded-off without thereby making a worse overall compromise than in the actual world. For example, the feature of humor is presumably an important feature of the

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55. Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity*, p. 167.

56. This distinction might also be phrased in terms of essential and accidental features or perhaps absolutely desirable and relatively desirable features. However one spells this out, I think the intuitive idea is fairly clear.

actual world such that if God could have designed us with perfect cognitive systems only by removing our sense of humor, such a compromise would have been worse than the actual one.

At this point an interesting parallel with the Free Will Defence presents itself. Could Plantinga argue that it was not logically possible for God to have created us with perfect cognitive systems and at the same time preserve our freedom (freedom in the incompatibilist sense, let us suppose)? Freedom is surely an important feature; if it was the case that God would have had to have sacrificed or limited our freedom in order to give us perfect cognitive systems (or even ones better than what we actually have), wouldn't that be an eminently laudable reason for making trade-offs and compromises in the design plan?

The answer is, yes that would be a superlative reason for making trade-offs and compromises, if it were the case that God could not have had both freedom and perfect cognitive systems. But I see no reason whatsoever to think that is the case. What is it about freedom that would limit our cognitive faculties' ability to discern truth? It appears that this line of argument is unavailable to Plantinga.

What is interesting about the notion of trade-offs and compromises in the design plan is not whether God could have logically made us with perfect cognitive systems without sacrificing any of the set of constraints He was committed to. We can freely admit that Plantinga is correct about this point and that it poses no threat to God's omnipotence. What we should not admit (without further argument) is that it was not logically possible for God to design us with perfect cognitive systems (or at least ones which deliver truth more often than our actual cognitive systems) without thereby sacrificing at least one of the important features that obtain in the actual world.

This leads us to further issues. What are the important features of our (the actual) world? What underlies judgments like it would have been worth it to sacrifice one finger on each hand to get perfect cognitive systems but not worth it to sacrifice our capacity for humor? How do we know that our present cognitive faculties are the result of the best possible compromise? All that would be required to demonstrate that our present faculties are not the best possible would be to find a compromise which preserved all of the important features of the actual world and overall was more cognitively powerful (in terms of delivering truth) than our actual cognitive systems. Admittedly, this would be a formidable task, since even determining what counts as important features[57] (and furthermore, enumerating all of them) would require considerable argument; but the same task awaits Plantinga if he really wants to establish that our present

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57. For example, is it an important feature that the speed of light be (about) three hundred thousand kilometers per second? What would another possible world be like with the speed of light double what it is in actuality? It is not at all easy to see all of the ramifications of adding, omitting, or altering features of the actual world, yet clearly an overall value judgment requires such meticulous calculation.

cognitive establishment is the best possible, rather than merely assert or suggest it is.

There are several directions one can take these considerations. If one were able to demonstrate that our present compromise is not the best one God could have actualized, one might have the ammunition to question one or more of God's attributes, e.g. His goodness or perhaps His competence as a designer.[58] One might argue that the fact (if it is a fact) that our cognitive systems are not the best possible makes it improbable that God is perfectly good, omniscient, and omnipotent. Put differently, one could argue that the existence of such a God (although not, perhaps, of a less-than-perfect God) is improbable given this (alleged) fact. This kind of argument is obviously analogous to the probablistic argument from the existence of evil.

I do not wish to undertake anything so ambitious. Rather, it seems to me we can safely conclude that Plantinga has not established that our cognitive systems are the best ones possible, although he may be (uninterestingly) right about the logical impossibility of God designing us with perfect cognitive systems and satisfying all the set of constraints He was committed to. What is certain is that Plantinga's treatment of trade-offs and compromises in the design plan is rather cursory and there remain many difficult issues to be explored.

My main point in this section has been that just as the problem of evil constitutes at least an aporetic problem for Plantinga (to which he has responded fairly well), the problem of design constitutes at least an aporetic problem for him as well. I fear that Plantinga's conception of the design plan, specifically in regard to his notions of unintended by-products, the design plan versus the max plan, and trade-offs and compromises, suffers from problems of perhaps an even more serious nature than those posed by the problem of evil. It is very problematic how the first two notions are supposed to apply to God; they seem far more at home for imperfect, limited, far-from-omniscient human beings.[59] In fact, the claim that they do apply to God raises questions about the nature of God's omniscience. The notion of trade-offs and compromises also raises issues about God's omnipotence and questions about whether in fact our

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58. It seems clear that God has the property of being a supremely competent designer, even though this is not listed as one of His traditional attributes (which are, obviously enough, omnipotence, omniscience, and moral perfection). Presumably, perfect competence is in some way implied by or subsumed under omnipotence and omniscience (it seems to be in between them) although the exact relation is very difficult to describe.

59. We can describe Plantinga's mistake in terms of his own metaphilosophy: getting too far away from the paradigmatic core of application of a concept. The paradigm cases in which the notion of unintended by-products and the distinction between design plan and max plan make sense are all cases of design by fallible, imperfect, limited beings (such as humans). Plantinga tries to make these notions work for design by God and they don't; the analogical extensions simply don't stretch that far.

cognitive systems are really the best ones possible and how such a judgment would be made.

What consequences do these problems have for Plantinga's epistemology as a whole? These problems provide more evidence for the conclusion that Plantinga's epistemology is beset with serious internal problems that make it unacceptable as an analysis of knowledge. Thus, the likelihood of Plantinga's strategy of providing support for Christian beliefs succeeding is rather small. Indeed, we have already seen that his theory cannot handle the problem of religious diversity.

This, of course, does not imply that some Christian beliefs are not rational or justified. I still think that the various grounds considered by Alston provide the typical Christian with enough by way of positive epistemic status for her beliefs to be acceptable, although I extend the same compliment to atheists. Part of Plantinga's problem is that he has not undertaken the consideration of the various grounds of religious belief that Alston has. He may remedy this in the future but it is clear that relying soley upon proper function is not likely to succeed.

As one final aside, we should recall that evaluations of rationality can take place from more than just the objective perspective. There is also the hitherto largely neglected notion - egocentric rationality. We can ask whether our doxastic practices satisfy our deepest personal intellectual standards, whether we are acting responsibly in engaging in them and believing their outputs. For the standard, uncontroversial practices, I take it that the answer would generally, if not invariably, be yes, whether the goals in question were epistemic ones or practical ones. For controversial practices such as ethical and religious ones (and practices which are opposed to them as well - e.g. atheistic ones), I would expect a much greater number of negative answers, although the ratio might still be significantly less than half.[60] So even though this notion of rationality may be less than what we had hoped for, it may still do some sifting, it may still sort out those who are rational (in a sense) from those who are not.

Are religious believers egocentrically rational in their religious practices and beliefs? To the extent that I cannot assume their perspectives, I cannot answer this question. But in the interests of avoiding intellectual arrogance, I have to think there are egocentrically rational theists - Aquinas, for example - and surely there are egocentrically rational atheists - Antony Flew, for example. Surely there are egocentrically rational Buddhists, Hindus, and agnostics as well. Egocentric rationality obviously does not contribute anything to the

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60. Hopefully, if one is engaging in the practice one is doing so because one has reflected carefully on the matter. However, this remains more ideal than real, for all kinds of practices.

question of the objective rationality of religious or secular systems of belief, although it remains an important notion nonetheless.[61]

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61. A parting comment: Much earlier I mentioned the notion of *existential* rationality (see footnote 89 in chapter II). Construing "positive epistemic status" or "rationality" quite broadly, existential rationality could be included in the overall assessment of CMP (see chapter IV). Doing so would not significantly change the assessment, so far as I can tell. Many Christians will be existentially rational in engaging in CMP, but on the other hand it seems that many people of other religious or secular persuasions will be existentially rational as well. Part of my reason for not including this notion is that it seems to be of limited use in evaluations from an objective perspective, since whether something is existentially rational is largely (though not entirely - systematic falsity may be disqualifying) a matter for each person to decide for himself/herself, like egocentric rationality.

Chapter VII - Conclusion

There is a long tradition in the philosophy of religion of theists and atheists engaged in a bitter struggle to show that each other's beliefs are false and/or in some sense epistemically deleterious. Sometimes this struggle has been constructive[1]; at other times it has descended virtually to the level of *ad hominems*.[2] Now, it would seem contrary to the very nature of philosophy to suggest that people ought not to critically evaluate other people's views (as well as their own), or that this ought not to be done in a public forum. In fact, the work of Alston and Plantinga and this very thesis belong (at least in a loose sense) to this well established tradition of exchange between theists and atheists.

There are two things that need to be changed, however. First, the dialogue between theists and atheists ought to take place in a less acrimonious fashion. There is no reason why both sides can't make the same points in a less deliberately offensive way. Second, and this is not much more than a suggestion, both sides need to take seriously the idea that there may be no way of showing that one side is radically better (from an objective perspective) than the other. There may very well be significant differences, but my contention is that when we take into account as many of the various grounds that can be mustered in support of either side as possible, we are likely to find that the differences in epistemic status are far less than is often thought. Theistic belief isn't *obviously* irrational and atheistic belief isn't *obviously* rational. It is my suspicion that the contrary view is often the result of an overly simplistic view of the relevant considerations. What I have tried to do is take account of as many considerations as seem relevant, and the overall judgment is that the typical atheist and theist are about equal in the positive epistemic status they enjoy. To be sure, I think the scale tips slightly in favour of the atheist (or agnostic), but not enough to make the typical theist irrational (in an objective sense).

This isn't to say that further investigation isn't necessary. The epistemic status of nearly any belief-system or practice can change with the

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1. For example: The exchange between people like H. J. McClosky and J. L. Mackie, on the one hand, and Alvin Plantinga, on the other hand, concerning the problem of evil has significantly advanced our understanding of the issues involved, so that we now distinguish between the logical problem of evil and the probabilistic problem of evil, and we now have a better understanding of such predicates as omnipotence and omniscience.

2. This seems to be the state of the exchange between atheists who have been calling theistic belief the product of fear, or wish-fulfillment, or a perverted social order, and theists who have responded that atheistic belief is the result of sin, or improper cognitive function, or the like. There is, of course, a real issue here, but its resolution hardly seems furthered by the acrimonious labels involved, and furthermore, both sides seem to be claiming way more than is justified by their evidence. For example, the psychological theories relied upon by some atheists involved in the exchange are quite questionable, and the improper function response made by some of the opposite side rests upon some dubious ways of identifying what properly functioning people believe.

discovery of new arguments, new interpretations, new issues. The overall judgment can and probably should change over time. Insofar as one is rational, then, one will have a relatively open attitude with respect to one's beliefs. This is a value built into philosophy and one which I cherish.

In conclusion, the most I can claim for my thesis is that it makes an important contribution to the understanding of several prominent religious epistemologists (Alston and Plantinga), and more widely, to a movement within religious epistemology generally (the Basic Belief Apologetic). Moreover, I think I may have contributed something to the understanding of the epistemic situations of the typical theist and atheist. If I have accomplished even approximately as much as this, I will be satisfied.

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