WHAT'S THE QUESTION?

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ABSTRACT: Two kinds of critical questions have been asked about the propriety or rightness of Christian beliefs. The first is the de facto question: is Christian belief true? The second is the de jure question: is it rational, or reasonable, or intellectually acceptable, or rationally justifiable? This second question is much harder to locate than you’d guess from looking at the literature. In “Perceiving God” William Alston suggests that the (or a) right question here is the question of “the practical rationality,” construed as he construes it. I argue that the question is ambiguous: and one of the disambigues is too easy to answer, while the other is such that its answer is really irrelevant to any sensible version of the de jure question. I conclude by venturing a suggestion as to what a sensible de jure question might be.

At least two kinds of critical questions have been raised about the propriety or rightness of Christian belief. On the one hand, there are those who argue that the beliefs Christians typically hold are false or unlikely: it is at best unlikely that there is such a person as God, or that, if there is, He was incarnate in Christ Jesus. Here typical arguments would include the argument from evil, the argument that there couldn’t be a person without a body, the argument that science, or scientific method or perhaps something else lurking in the neighborhood has somehow shown or suggested that there is no such person as God, and so on. Since this question is about the truth of Christian belief, we may call it the de facto question. On the other hand, there is the question of the sensibility, or reasonability, or justification or rationality, or to combine those last two, the rational justification of Christian belief. Christian belief may be true and it may be false. But even if it happens to be true, so the critics say, there are serious questions as to whether it is rational or rationally justified to accept it. Defenders of Christian belief respond to the objections, and the result has been an impressive number of books and articles. Here perhaps the most prominent
argument has been that (1) there is insufficient evidence for the main claims of Christianity, and (2) it is irrational to believe something on insufficient evidence. Since this second question concerns the rightness or acceptability of Christian belief, let’s call it the de jure question.

I am presently interested in the de jure question. But what, precisely, is the question? What is it to be justified, or to be rationally justified? Suppose the critics are right: Christian belief is not rationally justified. If so, what precisely is it that is wrong with Christian belief? What defect thereby attaches to it? This is the question I want to address. It is more difficult than you might think to locate a sensible question here.

In its modern and contemporary incarnation, the de jure question goes back most prominently to John Locke. And as Locke states the question, it essentially concerns duty and requirement, rights and obligation. The question is whether one violates or flouts intellectual duty by accepting Christian belief. The question is whether a Christian believer can be within her intellectual rights in believing as she does. Locke begins from the idea that we have a duty, an obligation to regulate our opinion in a certain way. With ability comes responsibility: our lofty standing as rational creatures, creatures capable of belief and knowledge, brings us under obligation to conduct our intellectual or cognitive life in the proper way. Our exalted station as rational creatures, creatures with ratio, reason, carries with it duties and obligations:

Faith is nothing but a firm assent of the mind: which if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good reason; and so cannot be opposite to it. He that believes, without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due his maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of mistake and error. He that does not this to the best of his power, however he sometimes lights on truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be accountable for whatever mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the light and faculties God has given him, and seeks sincerely to discover truth, by those helps and abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature, that though he should miss truth, he will not miss the reward of it. For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties, which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clearer evidence and greater probability (Essay IV, xvii, 24).

Two notable features of this passage: first, Locke holds that we have a duty or obligation to regulate belief in a certain way. Second, if we ask what that
way is, the answer is that it is our duty to follow reason, to believe "according as reason directs" us. And what is it to believe as reason directs me? In the case of Christian belief, it is to accept only those tenets of Christian belief for which I have good evidence: but to have good evidence for a proposition is to have a good (deductive or nondeductive) argument for it; so if I believe according as reason directs, I will accept only those Christian beliefs for which I have a good argument, an argument whose premises trace back ultimately to beliefs that are certain for me. 2

Now many, perhaps most contemporaries and near contemporaries who raise the *de jure* question follow Locke here. Their complaint is that Christians do not hold their beliefs on the basis of evidence, propositional evidence from other things they believe: they don't hold their beliefs on the basis of rational argument. Because of this, the critics say, Christian belief is unjustified; it is contrary to epistemic duty. So the real criticism of Christian belief, from this point of view, is that it is ordinarily accepted in a way that goes contrary to intellectual duty. From this point of view, Christians are moral delinquents, derelicts who flout their intellectual duties.

Although this is the most common contemporary complaint about Christian belief, at least on the part of its philosophical critics, I don't propose to discuss it here. The reason is that it is too easily seen to be mistaken. I don't have the space here to argue this point in detail, but it doesn't require much argument. Consider a typical believer: he has been brought up as a Christian, and for the most part Christian belief has always seemed to him clearly true. While he has never looked carefully into the alleged objections to Christian belief, what he has heard of them doesn't seem promising; those whom he respects on these matters tell him the objections are without foundation and he accepts their opinion. Such a person, surely, is not to be censured; he is not a proper subject of moral disapprobation. He may be mistaken; he may be deluded; he may be foolish; he may be insufficiently critical (in a way that doesn't involve blameworthiness) but there is no reason to think him derelict in his epistemic duties. On the other hand, consider someone who is very well aware of the critics; she has read and reflected on her Marx, Freud and Nietzsche, her Mackie, Flew and Nielsen, but is unconvinced. If, after careful and mature consideration, it still seems to her that Christian belief is clearly true, how could she be going contrary to duty? What duty would she be flouting? Wouldn't she be obviously and entirely within her rights in believing as she does?

This question then, is too easy to answer. But if this isn't the *de jure* question, the right question of rational justifiability, what is? A good way to make progress, I think, is to study William Alston's splendid book *Perceiving God* 3—clearly the best work there is on the epistemology of religious belief. Still, so it seems to me, the way Alston handles the *de jure* question isn't quite right: more remains to be said. Exploring his approach, I hope, will enable us to achieve greater clarity about the topic in question.
I. Justification?

A. Alstonian Justification

"The central thesis of this book," says Alston, "is that experiential awareness of God, or as I shall be saying, the perception of God, makes an important contribution to the grounds of religious belief. More specifically, a person can become justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing so-and-so" (1). Here 'perceiving God' is not taken as a success term; perceiving God, in this sense, doesn't entail or guarantee that there is such a person as God. Instead, the experiences in question, the experiences that confer justification, are to be thought of as "those that are taken by the subject to be an awareness of God..." (Alston's emphasis) (1). So the claim is that by way of these experiences a person can be or become justified in holding certain beliefs about God: such beliefs as that He is strengthening me, comforting me, sustaining me in being, communicating a message to me. The emphasis is squarely upon justification: "The chief aim of this book is to defend the view that putative direct awareness of God can provide justification for certain kinds of beliefs about God" (10). And of course if beliefs about God can be thus justified, the same goes for the belief that there is such a person as God: "if beliefs 'about God' entailing or presupposing that God exists, are justified by being based on putative experiential awareness of God, then so is the belief that God exists" (9).

The argument, therefore, will be that putative perception of God is what justifies these beliefs, or brings it about that they are justified. Later I’ll say more about the character of the experiences Alston has in mind; for now we can note that these experiences involve being apparently presented with God, in a way similar to the way in which one is, in perception, apparently presented with such objects as houses, rabbits and so on: "Our sources take it that something, namely God, has been presented or given to their consciousness, in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are presented to one’s consciousness in sense perception" (14). What is crucial here is that it seems to the subject that God is present to her, comforting, guiding, communicating. "...A person can become justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving [in that sense that doesn't entail success] God as being or doing so-and-so." God is apparently presented, and presented as doing certain things: comforting and guiding and supporting. But he is also presented as being certain ways: loving, wise, powerful, and the like.

The conclusion, therefore, is that a person can be justified in holding certain beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving God (in the nonsuccess sense). How, exactly, does the argument go? But first we must see what it is, according to Alston, for a belief to be justified. This sounds initially like the familiar deontological question about rights, permissions and obligations; it looks like the question suggested by Locke, the question whether the Christian believer is within her intellectual rights, is flouting no doxastic duty in believing as she
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does. But appearances are deceiving: “I reject all versions of a deontological concept [of justification] on the grounds that they either make unrealistic assumptions of the voluntary control of belief or they radically fail to provide what we expect of a concept of justification” (73). We might add the conclusion I drew above: if this is the de jure question, the answer is much too easy. It is almost too obvious that many people are justified in their theistic and Christian beliefs; there simply don't seem to be any intellectual duties such that all or most people who accept Christian belief are violating them just by virtue of accepting those beliefs.

Alston therefore quite properly turns away from that whole discussion. Instead, he proposes a different account of justification:

to be justified in believing that p is to be in a strong position for realizing the epistemic aim of getting the truth. ...I will begin by making the plausible assumption that to be in an epistemically strong position in believing that p is to have an adequate ground or basis for believing that p. 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...(p. 73).

A belief is justified, therefore, if and only if it is formed on the basis of an adequate ground. Now it isn't initially clear what a ground is: what sort of animal is a ground of belief? Although Alston doesn't essay a general account, he does point out that there are two kinds of grounds, mediate and immediate. A mediate ground of a belief is another belief on the basis of which the belief in question is formed; an immediate ground of a belief is an experience on the basis of which the belief is formed. Again, it isn't wholly clear what it is to form a belief on the basis of an experience, but perhaps it is not necessary to go into that question here. It is worth noting, however, that according to Alston a justified belief must be based on an adequate ground; it isn't sufficient that the subject merely have an adequate ground in his epistemie possession. Perhaps the fact is I know some things with respect to which it is likely that my income tax will be higher this year. Suppose I don't think of those things, don't make the connection, but nevertheless form the belief that my taxes will be higher. (I am inclined towards general pessimism and have a tendency to believe the worst; I always believe my taxes will be higher, even in years when they turn out to be lower.) Then the belief that my taxes will be higher isn't justified, in Alston's sense, even though I have good grounds for it in my possession.

But what is it for the ground of a belief to be adequate? “...The ground of a belief will suffice to justify it only if it is sufficiently indicative of the truth of the belief. If the ground is to be adequate to the task, it must be the case that the belief is very probably true, given that it was formed on that basis” (75). The idea, therefore, is that the ground G of a belief B is adequate just if a certain conditional probability is high: the probability that B is true given that or on the condition that it has been formed on G. And here the probability in ques-
tation is an objective probability of some sort; 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. I form the belief that the largest oak in my backyard is now losing its leaves. I form this belief on the basis of experience of some kind—as Alston might put it, it seems to me that the tree is presenting itself to me as losing its leaves. Then that belief is justified if and only if it is objectively probable that the tree is losing its leaves, given that or on the supposition that I undergo that experience. (There are problems here—for example, the dreaded problem of the reference class rears its ugly head—but for the moment suppose we ignore them.) Putting these elements together, we can say that a belief \( B \) is justified—actually, *prima facie* justified—for \( S \) if and only if it is formed on the basis of a truth conducive ground \( G \)—if and only if, that is, it is formed on the basis of some ground \( G \) such that the objective probability that \( B \) is true, given that it has been formed on \( G \), is high.

**B. Is This Really the Question?**

From the present point of view, then, the (or a) right question to ask is whether Christian belief is justified. More specifically, the question, for a given Christian belief \( B \), I hold—the belief, say, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—the question is whether there is some truth conducive ground \( G \) such that I hold the belief in question on the basis of that ground. The question is whether I hold the belief on the basis of a ground \( G \) such that it is likely that the belief in question is true, given that it was formed on \( G \). But is this really the right question? I want to suggest that it is not. When we ask the *de jure* question about Christian belief we are asking whether Christian belief is acceptable, OK, such that a sensible, intelligent, rational, informed person in something like our epistemic circumstances could or would hold such beliefs. But the question whether such belief sometimes or typically has a truth conducive *ground* seems to me to be a very different question.

In the first place, several important sorts of beliefs—*a priori* belief and memory belief in particular—do not seem to *have* a ground in Alston's sense at all. Consider memory, for example. You remember what you had for lunch: lentil soup and a doughnut. This belief isn't based on propositional evidence. You don't infer it from other things you know or believe, such things, perhaps, as your knowledge that you always have a doughnut and lentil soup for lunch, or your knowledge that it is now shortly after lunchtime and there are doughnut crumbs on your desk and an empty plastic soup dish in your trash. So it doesn't have a mediate ground. But it also isn't based on an experience. Here there is a small problem, perhaps, in that we don't know precisely what it is for a belief to be based on an experience. But whatever exactly it is, it seems clear that memory beliefs are not typically based on experience—at any rate, it is clear that memory beliefs are not based on anything like sensuous experience or phenomenal imagery. There may be a bit of such imagery present (a fragmentary and partial image of a doughnut or a bowl, perhaps); but you certainly don't form the belief *on the basis* of that image.
For first, it is clear that you could remember without having that imagery—or, indeed, any other imagery; some people report that they have no phenomenal imagery associated with memory at all. So the imagery isn’t necessary. But it is also insufficient; you could also have that imagery without remembering. The reason is that the imagery that goes with imagining that you had a doughnut and lentil soup for lunch, or entertaining the proposition that you did, is indistinguishable (at least in my case) from the imagery that goes with remembering that you had a doughnut and lentil soup for lunch. And even if you do have fairly explicit phenomenal imagery in connection with this memory, you surely don’t know that it was lentil soup on the basis of that imagery; the image isn’t nearly clear enough, detailed and explicit enough, to enable you to distinguish lentil soup from, e.g., pea soup, or bean soup, or (in my case, at least) any other kind of soup at all.5

Accordingly, it isn’t that you know it was lentil soup on the basis of this experience; you don’t form the belief that it was lentil soup with that experience as ground. Instead, you simply remember, simply form that belief. Or, perhaps more accurately, that belief is formed in you: you don’t yourself, so to speak, take much of a hand in forming it.

The same goes (though perhaps more controversially) for *a priori* belief.6 I believe the proposition *Necessarily, if all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal.* Now there is indeed a sort of imagery connected with this belief when I entertain it—perhaps something like a fragmentary image of the relevant English sentence written on a blackboard as in a logic class. But surely the belief isn’t formed on the basis of that imagery; that imagery isn’t anything like a ground for it; it doesn’t stand to that imagery in anything like the way in which my belief that the leaves are falling in my backyard stands to the visual imagery I now enjoy. Indeed, the imagery accompanying that proposition is the same, so far as I can tell, as that which accompanies entertaining *Necessarily, if all men are mortal and Socrates is mortal, then Socrates is a man.*

Many memory beliefs and many *a priori* beliefs, therefore, are not formed on the basis of a ground in Alston’s sense, either mediate or immediate. But of course these memory and *a priori* beliefs are eminently sensible, reasonable, rational, and the like. It therefore follows that a belief need not have a truth conducive ground to be reasonable, sensible, or rational.

On the other hand, there are also beliefs that do have a truth conducive ground (explained as Alston explains it) but are nonetheless not sensible or reasonable. A belief is based on an adequate ground, says Alston, if and only if it is based on a ground such that it is objectively probable that it is true, given that it is based on that ground. But (if objective probability conforms to the Probability Calculus) a *necessary* truth will have an objective probability of 1 on any other proposition whatever. The probability of \(29 \times 38 = 1102\) is 1 on any condition whatever. Any belief in this proposition on any ground, therefore, is automatically a belief on the basis of an adequate ground. More gener-
ally, any grounded belief in (of) a necessary proposition \( p \) is justified on this account; for the objective conditional probability that \( p \) on any proposition will be 1. So suppose I am extraordinarily gullible when it comes to set theory and believe, say, Cantor's Theorem\(^7\) not because I have understood a proof or been told by someone competent that it is true, but just because I picked up a comic book on the sidewalk and found therein a character who claims it is his favorite theorem. Then this belief of mine has a truth conducive ground, but isn't rational or reasonable.

Further and closer to current concerns: according to the bulk of the theistic tradition, God is a necessary being who has His most important attributes essentially: there is no possible world in which He does not exist, and none in which he lacks such attributes as omniscience, goodness, love, and the like. If this is true, then the proposition that there is such a being as God, or that He is omniscient, or loving, will have an objective probability of 1, and hence an objective conditional probability of 1 on any other proposition; hence for any ground at all, the probability that one of those beliefs is true, given that it is formed on the basis of that ground, is 1. But in asking the *de jure* question about belief in God, we presumably do not mean to ask a question to which an affirmative answer follows just from the fact that God is a necessary being who has his primary attributes essentially.

**II. Practical Rationality?**

Now to do a proper job here, we should explore other ways of explaining what it is for a belief to be based upon a truth conducive ground. For example, Alston's way of putting the matter involves the probability of the *belief in question*'s being true: where \( A \) is a belief that is based on a ground \( G \), \( A \) is based on a *reliable* ground just if the objective probability of \( A \)'s being true, given that it is based on \( G \), is high. As we have seen, this leads to trouble. But perhaps we should say instead that, where \( A \) is a belief that is based on a ground \( G \), \( A \) is based on a reliable ground just if the *general* probability of a belief's being true, given that it is based on \( G \), is high. Or perhaps the idea should be explained in some quite different way. It won't be necessary for us to canvass these possibilities, however; for the fact is, as Alston's book proceeds, *justification* tends to recede into the wings and *rationality* moves to center stage.\(^8\)

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:

My main thesis in this chapter, and indeed in the whole book, is that CMP is *rationally engaged in* [my emphasis] since it is a socially established doxastic practice that is not demonstrably unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational acceptance (194).

And this question, the question whether it is practically rational to form beliefs in this way, seems to me at any rate *closer* to the *de jure* question about
Christian belief. But what is this 'practical rationality'? How does Alston understand this protean notion, and how does he argue for the practical rationality of Christian belief?

A. Doxastic Practices

Here we need a bit of stage setting. A distinctive feature of Alston's entire epistemology is its emphasis upon doxastic social practices—socially established ways of forming belief. (It makes a certain rough sense to think of Alston as judiciously blending Reid with Wittgenstein.) For example, there is sense perception, SP, the social practice of forming beliefs on the basis of perception of objects in our environment. There is also the practice of forming beliefs by way of reasoning, both deductive and nondeductive; and also the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of memory. Together these form what Alston calls "the standard package," perhaps because they are shared by all properly functioning human beings. Further, there is the practice of attributing beliefs, desires, pains and pleasures, affective states, spiritual gifts, and the like to our fellow human beings. Thomas Reid calls this practice (or rather, the faculty or power that underlies it) 'sympathy'; we may think of sympathy as part of SP, or, alternatively, as a practice intimately linked with SP, but nonetheless separate and semi-autonomous. (If we think of it the latter way, we should consider it part of the standard package.)

These are doxastic practices: they issue in the formation of beliefs. They are also social practices in that they contain a considerable component contributed by our social environment. SP, for example, involves a substantial social component in that what we learn from others by way of teaching and testimony becomes part of the practice. For example, what we learn from others is involved in the society of checks and tests whereby we determine whether a putative perception is a real perception, and of course I had to learn from others (parents, for example) what it is that I perceive when I perceive a tree or house or star. The contributions of nature and nurture may vary over these different practices; the contribution of nurture is perhaps maximal with respect to SP and perhaps minimal with respect to our grasp of elementary arithmetic and logic.

In addition to these universally shared practices, there is also what Alston calls "MP," "mystical practice," the practice whereby many but not all of us form beliefs about God (or the Ultimate) on the basis of experience or perception of God (or the Ultimate). A specific variant of this is CMP, Christian Mystical Practice, where the beliefs formed are the specifically Christian beliefs held by Christians of all stripes in many different parts of the world and at all times since the beginning of the Christian era.

B. Epistemic Circularity

Clearly there are many questions we can raise about these practices: in particular, we can ask whether they are reliable. We can also ask whether we can show that they are reliable. If we ask this latter question about SP, then we are asking whether we can show or argue that the beliefs formed in this practice
are for the most part true, or at any rate close to the truth, or likely to be true or close to the truth. (This question is therefore clearly connected with the question of justification in Alston's sense.) Our main target, of course, is CMP; but since Alston thinks of CMP as essentially involving perception of God, he discusses the question of the reliability of CMP in tandem with the counterpart question about SP.

Alston concedes (indeed, insists) that we can't give a good noncircular argument for the claim that CMP is in fact reliable. But then he pays the same compliment to SP: we can't give a good noncircular argument for its reliability either, so that distressing fact about CMP is balanced by a complementary distressing fact about SP. Alston displays real virtuoso mastery in showing that it isn't possible to give a good noncircular argument for the reliability of SP. He considers the major ways in which people have tried to argue SP is in fact reliable; in nearly every case he detects epistemic circularity. An argument for the reliability of a faculty or source of belief suffers from epistemic circularity, for you, if one of its premises is such that your belief in it originates in the operation of that very faculty or source of belief. If you give an epistemically circular argument for the reliability of a faculty, then you rely upon that very faculty for the truth of one of your premises. An obvious example would be arguing that your intuitive arithmetical faculties are reliable by pointing out that your arithmetic intuitions seem to you intuitively sound. A less obviously circular project would be that of trying to determine if human cognitive faculties (including your own) are reliable by doing some science: you find out what human beings think, and then check to see whether or not what they think is true. Clearly enough, this procedure is epistemically circular, for you rely on your cognitive faculties in finding out what human beings think and checking to see if what they think is true. Alston detects more kinds of epistemic circularity than you might have thought, some obvious and some not so obvious. He really does establish the conclusion that it is not possible to show in a noncircular fashion that SP is reliable—at any rate he gets as close to establishing this conclusion as philosophers ever get to establishing any important conclusion.

So SP and Christian Mystical Practice are in the same leaky epistemological boat. Indeed, the fact is, he argues, all of our basic doxastic practices are in the same epistemological boat; none can be shown in noncircular fashion to be reliable.

C. The Argument for Practical Rationality

The unhappy developments just explained, says Alston, present us with a "crisis of rationality" and a "desperate situation": "The course of the argument led us to the conclusion that with respect to even those sources of belief of which we are normally the most confident we have no sufficient noncircular reason for taking them to be reliable" (146). What to do? Well, we are obliged to settle for second best: although we can't show that any of these practices are reliable, perhaps we can at any rate show that we are rational—practically
rational—to engage in them. And this is just what Alston sets out to do; he turns away from the question whether Christian belief and perceptual belief are justified (have truth conducive grounds) and towards the question whether it is practically rational to engage in SP and CMP. (Of course he also argues that if it is practically rational to engage in these practices, then it is rational to believe that perception and Christian belief have truth conducive grounds.) Alston offers two different but connected arguments for supposing that it is practically rational to engage in these practices. According to the first, in essence, it is perfectly sensible or rational to continue to form beliefs in the SP and CMP ways, because (1) those ways do not lead to massive inconsistencies, (2) there is no reason to think them unreliable, and (3) we know of no alternative doxastic practices whose reliability we could demonstrate in an epistemically noncircular fashion. According to the second argument, any socially and psychologically established doxastic practice that meets certain other plausible conditions is prima facie rational, i.e., such that it is prima facie rational to engage in it; such a practice will be all-things-considered rational if, as far as we can see, there is no reason to abandon it. These two arguments are connected, as I shall argue below; it is only the second that he explicitly employs with respect to CMP.

Suppose we begin by examining the second argument; as we shall see, this argument leads back to the first. Here is how Alston puts the matter:

My 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. If CMP is, indeed, a socially established doxastic practice, it follows from the position defended in Chapter 4 that it is prima facie worthy of rational participation. And this means that it is prima facie rational to regard it as reliable, sufficiently reliable to be a source of prima facie justification of the beliefs it engenders. And if, furthermore, it is not discredited by being shown to be unreliable or deficient in some other way that will cancel its prima facie rationality, then we may conclude that it is unqualifiedly rational to regard it as sufficiently reliable to use in belief formation. (194)

The basic contention is that it is prima facie rational to engage in CMP, not because it is analogous to SP in one or another respect, but because it is a socially established doxastic practice; and that it is unqualifiedly rational to engage in it...because we lack sufficient reason for regarding it as unreliable or otherwise disqualified for rational participation (223).

...I am arguing that CMP is rationally accepted (engaged in) just by virtue of being a socially established doxastic practice that is not disqualified by severe internal or external incompatibilities (248, Alston's emphasis).

The main premise of this argument, then, is:
(Main Premise) it is *prima facie* rational (practically rational) to engage in a socially established doxastic practice, and unqualifiedly rational (rationally all things considered) to engage in a socially established practice that doesn't encounter severe internal or external incompatibilities.

And in chapters 5-7 Alston goes on to argue that CMP is indeed a socially established doxastic practice, and that it does not encounter severe internal or external incompatibilities.

### D. Practical Rationality Initially Characterized

Now suppose we think about the Main Premise. First, I don't know precisely how to state the second part, the part about rationality all things considered. While this is mildly annoying, it isn't really serious, because I intend to comment only on the first part. How exactly are we to understand this proposition, and what is the sense of 'rational' in which it is *prima facie* rational to engage in a socially established doxastic practice? As to the second, we are talking about 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.) Whether an action is rational for me will obviously have something to do with what it is I am *aiming at* in taking that action, what I am trying to accomplish, what my *purpose, end, goal* is. So the kind of rationality at issue, presumably, is *means-ends* rationality, *Zweckrationalität* as our continental cousins call it. The rational action, for me, is the one that will contribute to the realization of my goal, or contribute more to it than any other action open to me. Here there is an important distinction: is it the action that will *in fact* contribute to my goal that is rational, for me, or the one *I believe* will so contribute? Presumably the second; I am not irrational, in taking a given line of action, if I make a perfectly sensible mistake about what the best means to my end is.⁹ If I am very thirsty and what I want is a drink of water, it will be rational for me to open the faucet and hold a glass under it; I believe that is a fine way to get a glass of water. It would be irrational for me, under these circumstances, to go (instead) for a walk in the desert; I know that water is hard to find in the desert. On the other hand, if I believed that the faucet isn't connected to any source of water, then the action of opening the faucet wouldn't be a rational way for me to get a drink; and if I believe the nearest water is in the Sonoran desert just outside of Tucson, the action of going for a walk in the desert would be rational.

Now the case under consideration, of course, is the case of those doxastic practices; we are to ask whether it is rational to form beliefs by engaging in SP and/or CMP. Here our relevant aim or goal, says Alston, is that of getting in the right relation to the truth, achieving some appropriate balance between avoiding error and believing truth. And now the question for us is whether a good way to achieve that goal is to form beliefs as we always have, by employing SP and/or CMP.
WHAT'S THE QUESTION?

Initially, of course, this question has about it a certain air of unreality. It is up to me whether I open the faucet to get a drink of water; but it isn't really up to me whether I will form beliefs in accord with SP. And that means that the question of the practical rationality of continuing in SP is a little peculiar. I might as well ask whether it is rational for me to continue to be such that the earth attracts my body with a force that is inversely proportional to the square of the distance between us: this really isn't up to me. And the same goes with respect to my major ways of forming belief: it isn't up to me whether I form beliefs in those ways. I can try as hard as I like, but I doubt that I could seriously alter my basic belief forming proclivities. Offer me a million dollars to believe that I live in Wyoming, say, rather than in Indiana, or that I am really the president of the United States: I can strain my uttermost, but I won't be able to collect.

Well, perhaps I do have a bit more control over my belief forming proclivities than over whether my body is attracted by the earth. I injudiciously read Kant when in an unduly expansive mood; I am persuaded that a really autonomous, rational creature, with all the dignity and worth thereunto attaching, would not be at the mercy of his impulsionial nature when forming beliefs; that is at best undignified and faintly ridiculous. After much toil, training, and agony, I learn to resist the sorts of belief forming tendencies automatically acquiesced in by lesser mortals; I learn to form the belief, upon being appeared to greenly by something, that that thing in question is red. (I also develop an unfortunate tendency to patronize those unfortunates who haven't made as much progress on the road to autonomy.) Is this possible? Perhaps. At any rate we shouldn't rule it out a priori. And of course there are other, more standard ways in which I can influence, mold, form, my belief producing tendencies. In any event, however, Alston is well aware of the problem here; and what he suggests is that the interesting question is whether it would be rational to continue to engage in the practice in question if it were within my power to refrain. The question is what it would be rational for me to do, if I were in a certain position: a position in which one of the things I know is that it is within my power to continue to form beliefs in the ways I have (by using the standard package and CMP), and also within my power to refrain from forming beliefs in those ways, either forming no beliefs at all of those sorts, or perhaps using some quite different belief forming practice.

E. The Original Position

Suppose we call this position the 'Original Position' (with an apologetic bow to John Rawls). Our question, specified to the standard package, is something like this. Suppose I am in the Original Position: I know (or at any rate believe truly) that it is within my power to stop forming beliefs in the ordinary way, via SP, memory, and reasoning (the standard package). Perhaps I also know that it is within my power to choose some other way of forming belief. Then what would be the rational thing to do: continue to form beliefs as I have all along, or try some other way, or give up on this whole belief-forming enterprise?
The answer, as we have seen, depends at least in part upon my aims, ends, and goals. If my aim is psychological comfort, feeling really good about myself, perhaps I should choose some belief forming mechanisms that lead me to think I am a really fine fellow. Perhaps I should choose a way that will bring it about that I believe I have just won the Nobel Prize in chemistry, heroically overcoming such serious obstacles as that I have no training in the subject and know very little about it. (David Kaplan once fantasized screaming headlines in the Los Angeles Times: Kaplan proves Godel wrong!!) Naturally I should carefully avoid any belief forming practices on the basis of which I would come to see the true extent of my failures and ineptness, my sins and miseries, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it. But in the present context, of course my aim, according to Alston, is not personal comfort, or happiness, or psychological well being, but getting properly in touch with the truth.

The rational course depends upon my aims and goals; it also depends upon what I believe—i.e., what I believe at the time I take the decision in question. If my aim is to feel good about myself, it would be irrational to choose belief forming mechanisms that, as I believe, would lead to a proper knowledge of my sins and miseries. To make the rational choice, I must figure out which course is most likely to lead to the accomplishment of my goal(s), and then act on that belief by taking that course.

And this leads to an important question about the Main Premise. As you recall, it begins thus:

(Main Premise) It is prima facie rational (practically rational) to engage in a socially established doxastic practice...

But why this emphasis upon socially established doxastic practices? True, if in the Original Position I think socially established practices are especially likely to yield true beliefs, then the rational thing for me to do, in that position, is to choose socially established doxastic practices. But what if I don't think that? I unwisely read Nietzsche, becoming convinced that the common herd is commonly wrong; I develop a lordly Nietzschean disdain for the ways in which the generality of mankind form their belief. Then presumably the rational thing would be to choose practices that are not socially established. I should instead choose practices that are enjoyed only by the fortunate few whose Promethian efforts have taken them far beyond hoi polloi. Why is social establishment important or relevant? What counts, for practical rationality, is what I think will achieve my goal; in the Original Position it may or may not be the case that I think socially established practices are especially likely to achieve my goal of believing the truth.

Here we see the connection between the first and second of Alston’s arguments for the practical rationality of SP and CMP. The Main Premise of the second argument, we might say, takes it for granted that in the original position I believe that socially established practices are likely to lead us to the right relationship to the truth; and indeed I suppose most of us do in fact believe that.
The main premise of the first argument is different; it is that I don't know that SP (or CMP) is subject to any massive unreliability, and also don't know of any alternative practice I could adopt, which is such that I could show with respect to it that it is reliable. In the Original Position (the first argument continues) I would have this belief (I would believe that I know of no better alternative practice); therefore the rational thing to do is to stick with what I've got. (Or if that seems a bit strong, it is at any rate true that sticking with my present practices is a rational thing to do.) The first argument is the basic one; the second argument takes for granted the main premise of the first argument and then incorporates something else most of us are in fact inclined to believe, namely that *socially established* doxastic practices have a good chance of being reliable, perhaps a better chance than idiosyncratic doxastic practices.

F. Further Specification of the Original Position

These thoughts lead to a crucial question: precisely what *is* it that I believe in the Original Position? In particular, what do I believe about the reliability of SP and CMP in that position? Is the idea that my beliefs, in the Original Position, are as much as possible like the beliefs I do in fact have, given that (in that position) I know or truly believe that it is within my power to give up SP and/or CMP? Perhaps that is the way to think of the Original Position. But this doesn't take us very far. For of course the fact is I now in fact believe that both SP and CMP are reliable. Therefore, if my beliefs in the Original Position are the ones I do in fact have, the question as to the rational course is easily answered: I should continue to form beliefs in the way I have been forming them. My aim is to be in the right relationship to the truth; I propose to attain as good a mixture of achieving the truth and avoiding error as possible; but in fact I believe that SP and CMP offer a vastly better chance to achieve that goal than any alternative I can think of; therefore the rational choice for me to make, obviously enough, is to continue both in SP and in CMP.

Here there is a strong odor of triviality. I do in *fact* think both SP and CMP are reliable; so if in the Original Position I have the beliefs about SP and CMP that in fact I *do* have, then in that position, naturally enough, the rational choice would be to continue with SP and CMP. Given what I do believe about them, that would be the rational thing to do. But this conclusion, while no doubt true, is pretty weak tea. Of *course*, if I knew I could refrain from forming beliefs in the SP and CMP way, but also believed that those ways were reliable, more reliable than any alternative way open to me, I would choose to continue to form beliefs that way. True, but not very interesting. The same would go for any beliefs I have, no matter how crazy. The same would go, for example, for the insane beliefs of Descartes' madmen, who believed that they themselves were gourds—zucchini, perhaps, or summer squash—and that their heads were made of pottery. If I really do believe that I am a squash, then the rational thing for me to do, if offered the chance, is to continue to form beliefs in the way that yields (as I see it) this true belief. We haven't yet located the *de jure* question.
Of course we do have to consider another facet of the dialectical situation, one that so far I have been slighting: *I am aware in the Original Position, of the fact that neither SP, nor CMP, nor any other major doxastic practice can be noncircularly shown to be reliable.* That, after all, is what, according to Alston, precipitated the crisis of rationality and called forth the question of rationality in the first place. It is after we realize *this*, he thinks, that we are in the desperate situation of which he speaks. So we must add that in the Original Position I am aware of the fact that we can’t noncircularly establish that the practices in question are reliable. We must also add, perhaps, that I have devoted some attention to this fact, have thought about it at least a bit; perhaps we should say that I am *acutely* aware of it.

But this changes very little. In the Original position as now conceived, I know that it is within my power to withhold perceptual and/or Christian belief; I also know that it isn’t possible to give a good noncircular argument for the reliability of these sources of belief; but otherwise my beliefs are as much as possible like they are in fact. And our question remains: what would be the rational thing to do: continue with SP and CMP, or stop forming beliefs in those ways? But again, the answer is too easy: *of course* the rational thing would be to continue with SP and CMP. Once more, this is because I am in fact convinced that these sources of belief are reliable. True enough: I realize that I can’t give a good noncircular argument for their reliability, but this gives me no pause. For (*pace* Alston) I can’t see that this puts us in a desperate situation, or that it should lead to a crisis of rationality. For this situation is a necessary feature of *any* doxastic condition. Not even God Himself, necessarily omniscient as He is, can give a noncircular argument for the reliability of His ways of forming beliefs.11 About all we can say about God’s ways of forming beliefs is that it is necessary, in the broadly logical sense, that a proposition $p$ is true if and only if God believes $p$.12 Of course God knows that, and knows therefore that all of his beliefs are true. But (naturally enough) He knows this only by virtue of relying on His ways of forming beliefs. If, *per impossible*, He became a bit apprehensive about the reliability of those ways of forming beliefs, He would be in the same boat as we about that question. He couldn’t give an epistemically noncircular argument for the reliability of His ways of forming beliefs; for of course the beliefs constituting the premises of any such argument would themselves have been formed in those ways.

In the Original Position, therefore, I would be convinced that SP and CMP are reliable sources of belief, despite the fact that I realize it isn’t possible to give a good noncircular argument for their reliability; hence in the Original Position the rational thing to do, again, would be to continue with them. We are still mired in triviality. We still don’t have either the *de jure* question or the Original Position quite right. The problem is that if, in the Original Position, we have the beliefs *we actually* have with respect to SP and CMP, then it is trivially obvious that the rational decision would be to continue to form beliefs in those ways.
But perhaps the suggestion would be that in the Original Position we *bracket* our confidence in the practices in question; better, we simply don’t *have* any beliefs of this sort in that position. We are to engage in the following thought experiment: try to see what the rational thing to do would be if you didn’t already believe in the reliability of SP or CMP, knew that there are no good noncircular arguments for their reliability, and believed that it is up to you whether you engage in those practices. At any rate that will dispel the aura of triviality afflicting the last suggestion. So in the Original Position we don’t believe that the sources in question are reliable, and of course we also don’t believe that they are not: we have no opinion on the subject. We must add, I think, that in the Original Position we also lack the beliefs that (in our actual position) arise out of SP and CMP, or are formed in those practices. Otherwise we would be back at triviality: for then we would accept those beliefs (thereby thinking them *true*), and we would know that they were delivered by SP and CMP. But then, of course, we would have excellent reason to think SP and CMP are reliable, and we would be back at the previous condition of triviality. So we must suppose that in the Original Condition we don’t have these beliefs; and I suppose the same would go for other beliefs that essentially *depend* upon SP or CMP beliefs.

But what about the experiences we have that go with SP and CMP? Do we have those, in the Original Position? Do I have the phenomenal imagery that goes with SP? Do I have religious experience, do I have, as it seems to me, an occasional glimpse of the majesty and glory and love and perfection of God? Do I have those occasional feelings of complete dependence upon Him, and those occasional feelings of confidence, as if nothing can go really wrong for those who love the Lord? Do I find in myself the nondoxastic component of any of the religious affections of which Jonathan Edwards speaks? I doubt that it matters for our present question. I am to imagine myself in a position in which I don’t have SP and CMP beliefs. As to those impulses and promptings that lead to the beliefs in question, I might have them and I might not. If I do have them, then, since I don’t have the corresponding beliefs, they must be to me as if they were experiences of other people; they would have no more epistemic significance for me than the experiences of someone else.

So the Original Position as now understood includes (1) my knowing that it is within my power to form beliefs in the SP and CMP way, but also within my power to withhold SP and CMP beliefs, (2) my knowing that it is not possible to give a good noncircular argument for the reliability of either practice, (3) my having no views as to the reliability or unreliability of either practice, and (4) my not having perceptual or CMP beliefs or beliefs dependent upon perceptual or CMP beliefs. My aim or purpose, of course, is to believe truth and avoid error. And now the question is: what would it be rational for me to do, if in fact I were in that position? Form beliefs the CMP and SP way, or not? Or reject them altogether? Or (another possibility) adopt a sort of ironic Rortian double-mindedness, a frame of mind as difficult to describe as it is intriguing, one in
which at one level I believe these things, but at another adopt an ironic distance, sheepishly conceding, of course, that I do in a way believe these things, but adding that I somehow don't take these beliefs at all seriously? (Of course the answer could go one way with SP and another with CMP).

If we have the Original Position accurately characterized, then Alston's answer is that the rational thing to do, under those circumstances, would be to decide to form beliefs in the SP and CMP way. But is this at all clear? Why would that fit better with my aim to get at the truth than some other course—abstention, for example, or trying something new? I find it hard to say what would be the rational course here; none of the options emerges as a clear winner. Alston argues that it would be rational to adopt SP and CMP because adopting some other line of action would be disruptive. Of course it would; my relationship with others might change drastically, depending on what other sort of doxastic practice I adopted. But do I know that independent of SP? I don't see how. Hence presumably in the Original Position I don't know this either. Do I know, in the Original Position, that I have been forming beliefs all along in the SP and CMP way, and that it would therefore be inconvenient to change, whether or not other people are involved?

I think this leads to a puzzle, a puzzle having to do with the limitations of this kind of counterfactual thought experiment. I am to imagine myself in the Original Position, one in which I don't have any SP and CMP beliefs; but then, of course, I would have already changed my ways of belief formation. If I am in the Original Position, it is not true that if I were not to employ SP and CMP, then I would be changing my ways of forming beliefs; for in the Original Position I don't form beliefs in those ways! What this shows, I think, is that this counterfactual way of trying to get at the de jure question, either about SP or about CMP, suffers from substantial limitations. For example, perhaps you endorse conservatism: all else being equal, you say, the sensible thing to do is to do things the way you've been doing them. But in the Original Position as presently characterized, the conservative thing would be to continue in the agnosticism that is part of that position; so if, in that position, you accept conservatism, then the rational thing to do would be to remain agnostic!

Let's set this puzzle aside for the time being. Our question has been: what would be the rational course to take in the Original Position (so described)? But the real question here, it seems to me, is this: why is that question relevant? I doubt that anything epistemically interesting hangs on the answer to it. Here we should divide the issue, separating SP from CMP; and suppose we think first about SP. We ask what the rational thing to do would be, if in the Original Position; but do we have anything left to go on, in that position? At any rate do we have enough left to go on to make a decent decision? What we have left, substantially, is reason, memory, and introspection, the faculty (or means) whereby we know what our experience is (for example, how we are appeared to). And the fact is we have only part of memory left. In the Original Position I wouldn't have any memory belief that depends upon perceptual belief; for
example, I wouldn’t have the memory belief that I saw a cat yesterday, but only
the belief that it *seems to me* that I saw a cat. What I would have to go on,
therefore, would be (at least for the most part) just introspection, reason and
some fragment of memory.

That’s not much, and I really can’t see where the probabilities would lie. But suppose the answer is that those probabilities lie with agnosticism. All
things considered, from the perspective of the Original Position it looks as if
the course most likely to produce the best position with respect to the truth is
agnosticism about the deliverances of SP. But how would that be relevant to the
question whether it is *in fact* (in the situation in which in fact I find myself)
rational, in some interesting sense of ‘rational’ to form belief the SP way? If we
decide this question by asking whether it would be practically rational to do so
*in the Original Position*, we are entirely ignoring perception as a source of
warrant. We are treating it as if it had no authority or credentials of its own,
ev en with respect to the very area to which it seems to be addressed. We are
treating it in the way Thomas Reid thinks Hume treats it.

But, as Reid also says, why should I trust reason (and that smidgin of
memory) more than SP? Why should SP have to prove itself before the bar of
reason? To descend from the level of metaphor: 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? Per­
haps, from that impoverished point of view, it is *not* more likely than not that
SP is reliable; does that show anything of interest? I doubt it. Suppose we did
have a battery of reliable ways of forming beliefs, reliable faculties; suppose,
indeed, that we have been created by God, who intended that we be able to
know the sorts of things we think we know by virtue of just such a battery of
faculties: reason, memory, sense perception, introspection, sympathy, the Sen­
sus Divinitatis and the Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit, if there are such
sources of belief, and all the rest. What reason is there to think that if these
faculties are reliable, then it would appear that they are from the perspective
just of reason, that bit of memory, and introspection? Maybe those three simply
aren’t able to give much of an answer: but why would that matter with respect
to the rationality of forming perceptual beliefs? I don’t think it would. So it
isn’t clear to me that, in the case of SP, it matters much which answer we get
here. The question was: would it be practically rational, in the Original Position
thus thought of, to decide to engage in SP? But the answer to that question
doesn’t matter; hence we still don’t have the *de jure* question about SP.

The situation is a bit different with CMP. First, the Original Position is
different. It includes introspection, memory and reason, as in the previous case,
but it also includes, presumably, perception and sympathy. So the Original
Position with respect to CMP includes my aiming at the truth, believing what I
do in fact believe on the basis of the standard package, but having no beliefs
about the reliability of CMP. I am to try to decide which among the courses
open to me is the most likely to get me in the right relation to the truth. One option is to accept CMP. Another is to reject it in favor of some other systematic practice of forming beliefs on the questions to which CMP is addressed: for example, I could accept philosophical naturalism, or perhaps some non-Christian religious practice. Still another option, presumably, would be to continue in the agnosticism that is part of the Original Position. And the question is: if I were in this situation, what would be the rational thing for me to do: adopt CMP, or adopt some alternative to it, or remain agnostic?

Here it seems to me agnosticism should probably get the nod. All things considered, the best road to avoiding error and believing truth on the topics of CMP as judged from the Original Position is agnosticism. To establish this, of course, would require a lot of work—first, a canvass of all the rational arguments for and against the existence of God, and then an examination of the arguments for and against specifically Christian doctrines such as Incarnation and Atonement. From the point of view of the standard package, I think, it is somewhat more likely than not that there is such a person as God. Although the standard arguments don't have anything like the probative force some have claimed for them, they do have (I think) some force; and there are in addition a great number of other theistic arguments, all with at least a bit of force. On the other side is the problem of evil, of course; but on balance it seems to me that the nod goes to theism.

I doubt, however, that the same can be said for specifically Christian belief such as that “God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (I John 4:9). Of course highly competent people disagree, holding that Incarnation and Atonement can be established or at least shown to be probable on the basis of the standard package. But to discuss this matter in proper detail would take us too far afield—particularly in view of the fact that the question put this way is in any event the wrong question.

For why suppose that if Christian belief is sensible or rational (in some important sense of that multifarious term) then from the point of view of the standard package it must be more likely than not that CMP is reliable? Consider memory, and consider its credentials from the point of view of the rest of the standard package. Suppose you don't know that there's been a past; you know only what reason, perception and introspection tell you. How likely is it, from that perspective, that the deliverances of memory are mostly true? Not very likely, I'd say. But would that be a reason for mistrusting it, or regarding it as suspect, or believing that it was less than wholly rational to rely on it? Would it so much as slyly suggest that it isn't rational to form beliefs in the memory way? I don't think so. But then presumably the same thing goes for CMP. Suppose there is such a thing as knowledge of God and of Christian doctrine, and that some of this goes by way of CMP; suppose that CMP is reliable. Would it follow that it is more probable than not just given the deliverances of the standard package, that CMP is reliable? I don't think so.
So I see no reason to hold that it is rational to take part in CMP only if it is likely with respect to the standard package that CMP is reliable. To think otherwise is to arbitrarily assume in advance that if CMP is a source of warranted belief, it must be more likely than not that it is reliable with respect to the standard package; but there is no reason to accept this assumption. Here things stand with CMP just as with SP. It seems entirely arbitrary to insist that it is rational to engage in SP only if the reliability of SP is more likely than not with respect to the deliverances of some group of epistemic powers that doesn’t include SP. But in the same way it is not sensible to conclude that Christian belief is rational (in the target sense, whatever exactly that is) only if the reliability of CMP is more likely than not from the perspective of the standard package. Suppose God has created us with a battery of faculties aimed at our being able to acquire truth in different areas: it doesn’t follow that the reliability of any of these faculties would be more probable than not with respect to the deliverances of some package of faculties not including the one in question.

What, therefore, should we conclude about practical rationality and the de jure question? That the de jure question is not the question whether it is practically rational to engage in CP. The reason, as we have seen, stems from the difficulty of specifying the Original Position, the position from which I am to imagine myself making the decision whether or not to engage in CP. The crucial question is this: which of my actual beliefs do I have in the Original Position? And the nasty problem is this. If the Original Position includes neither the beliefs I actually have about the reliability of CMP nor the beliefs I have already formed on the basis of CMP, then it doesn’t matter what would be the rational thing to do if I were in that condition. That is not in fact the condition I am in; the rationality, in the target sense, of my Christian beliefs clearly does not depend upon what would be the practically rational course in the Original Position as thus described. On the other hand, if the Original Position includes the beliefs I do in fact have, both my Christian beliefs and also my beliefs as to the reliability of CMP, then the question is much too easy to answer: of course the practically rational course would be to choose to continue to form beliefs in accordance with CMP. I am already committed to the reliability of those sources; I trust them, constantly accept their deliverances (their ‘outputs,’ to use the current but unlovely buzzword), and believe that at any rate the main lines of what they deliver is true; from that point of view, therefore, I’d be cutting myself off from truth of maximal significance if I didn’t continue in that vein. Taken one way, therefore, the question is irrelevant; taken the other it is too easy to answer.

III. The Real Question

So far we have come up empty in our quest for the de jure question. But surely there is a sensible de jure question somewhere in this neighborhood: what might it be? I have a suggestion. (This paper is already too long; so I shall have to be brief and merely suggestive.) Go back to the Original Position, and
recall that if, in that position, I accept SP and CMP beliefs, then, trivially, the rational thing to do is to decide to continue to form beliefs in those ways. Of course this would be true for other beliefs as well, even for beliefs that are in some clear sense irrational. Descartes' madmen believed that their heads were made of glass; no doubt they avoided bumps like the plague. Given that you do believe your head is made of glass, the rational thing to do is to avoid bumps like the plague. In the same way, given that you do believe your head is made of glass, the rational thing to do in the service of truth, is (if you are given the choice) to continue in that belief. After all, you think the belief is true; so if your aim is to believe truth and avoid falsehood you will continue to hold it.

Fair enough: given that you think your head is made of glass, it is rational to wear your football helmet wherever you go; and given that you think your head is made of glass, it is rational to decide, if presented with the choice, to continue in that belief. But is it rational to hold that belief in the first place? Given that you hold the beliefs produced by SP or CMP, and you don't know of any epistemically superior practice, it is rational to continue to form beliefs in that way; but is it or was it rational, reasonable, sensible to hold those beliefs in the first place?

It is in this neighborhood, I suggest, that we must look for the de jure question. What is it that determines whether a given way of acting or believing, given that your circumstances are thus-and-so, is rational or reasonable, in the relevant sense? Here is my suggestion: what determines this is what a creature of our kind with properly functioning reason, (ratio), would do or believe, given that she was in those circumstances. Or perhaps it is what someone with ideal ratio, ratio ideal for our kind of creature, would do or think in the circumstances. The question is really about the human design plan; it has to do with what that design plan, or perhaps a slightly idealized version of it, dictates for the situation in question. The question is about the sorts of beliefs a properly functioning human being would have in the relevant circumstances.

What kind of question is this? It isn't a question of practical rationality. The question is not: given that I am in circumstances e, have aims and beliefs A and B, and have raised the question whether I propose to do X, how likely is it that doing X will contribute to my aims and goals? It's a different kind of question altogether; it's a question as to whether those beliefs B are rational in the first place.

Perhaps we can get at this question as follows. The Freudian thinks there is something irrational about Christian belief and theistic belief generally: it is an infantile response to the grim and threatening visage the real world presents to us; it arises out of the mechanism of wish fulfillment, rather than out of reason; it is not a rational response to the situation. The Marxist also thinks there is something irrational about Christian belief: it arises out of an individual cognitive disorder that reflects a broader societal or political disorder. But in just what way, according to them, is Christian belief irrational? Here Marx and Freud diverge and I am out of space. Roughly, though, Marx thinks these
beliefs arise from lack of cognitive health, from cognitive dysfunction or disease; his idea is that Christian belief is \textit{insane} in a literal if broad sense. On the other hand, Freud thinks Christian and theistic belief aren't necessarily a product of cognitive malfunction: it is rather that they arise from a belief-producing source (wish fulfillment) other than reason. And the important thing about this source of belief, or belief-producing mechanism, is that it is aimed, not at the truth, but instead at psychological comfort; furthermore, the beliefs it produces are ones that reason would not produce.

The Christian, of course, will disagree; she will no doubt think that responding to the Lord in faith is indeed perfectly rational in both the Freudian and Marxist sense. \textit{Pace} Marx, she will think we have been created by the Lord in such a way that the right, or normal, or healthy response—the response dictated by our design plan—to many of the situations in which we find ourselves, including CMP situations, is Christian belief. And \textit{pace} Freud, she will also think the relevant part of our design plan is aimed at truth, at true belief, not at psychological comfort or survival.

When we see that the \textit{de jure} question is really about the human design plan, we see that the epistemological question as to the rationality or lack thereof of Christian belief has anthropological, and hence ontological and ultimately religious roots. What you properly take to be rational, at least in the sense in question, depends upon what sort of metaphysical and religious stance you adopt; it depends upon what kind of beings you think human beings are, and what sorts of beliefs their noetic faculties will produce when they are functioning properly. Your view as to what sort of creature a human being is will determine or at any rate heavily influence your views as to what it is rational or irrational for human beings to believe. And so the dispute as to whether theistic belief is rational can't be settled just by attending to epistemological considerations; it is at bottom not merely an epistemological dispute, but a metaphysical or theological dispute. You may think humankind is created by God in the image of God—and created both with a natural tendency to see God's hand in the world about us, and with a natural tendency to recognize that we have indeed been created and are beholden to our creator, owing Him worship, obedience and allegiance. You may add that the source of distinctively Christian belief—CMP, perhaps—has been created in us by God and is such that, when it functions properly, it yields Christian belief. Then of course you will not think of belief in God, or Christian belief as (in the typical case) a manifestation of cognitive dysfunction or any other kind of intellectual defect; nor is it a product of some mechanism not aimed at the truth. (It is then more like a deliverance of sense perception, or memory, or sympathy—or perhaps the faculty responsible for \textit{a priori} knowledge.) On the other hand, you may think we human beings are the product of blind evolutionary forces; you may think there is no God, and that we are part of a Godless universe. Then perhaps you will be inclined to accept the sort of view according to which belief in God is an illusion of some sort, properly traced to a sort of disease or dysfunction.
on the part of the individual or society. If you adopt the former view, you will of course think Christian belief eminently rational; if you adopt the latter you will think it irrational. But the thing to see is that this dispute can't be settled by attending only to epistemology: at bottom it is a theological question. My conclusion, therefore, is that the *de jure* question is not independent of the *de facto* question; to answer the former, we must already know the answer to the latter.

ENDNOTES

1 The last twenty years or so have seen a huge number of books and articles devoted to the subject, far too many to mention here. Among some of the most interesting books, however, would be Terence Penelhum's *God and Skepticism*, John Mackie's *The Miracle of Theism*, Basil Mitchell's *Justification of Religious Belief*, Richard Swinburne's *The Existence of God* and *The Coherence of Theism*, J. C. A. Gaskin's *The Quest for Eternity*, Anthony O'Hear's *Experience, Explanation and Faith*, Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Faith and Rationality*, Gary Gutting's *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, Anthony Kenny's *Faith and Reason*, Kelly Clark's *Return to Reason*, Keith Yandell's *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, and last and not only not least, but most: William Alston's *Perceiving God*.


4 For an account of the relevant forms of probability here, see WPF, pp. 138 ff.

5 For a fuller and more explicit argument here, see WPF, pp. 57 ff.

6 See WPF, pp. 104 ff.

7 According to which the cardinality of any set is less than that of its power set.

8 Of course (as Alston also argues) if it is practically rational to engage in CMP then it is also practically rational to hold that Christian belief is justified in Alston's sense.

9 Of course there are important distinctions within this category: is the rational action the one I *do* believe will accomplish my end, or the one I *would* believe would do so, if I reflected sufficiently on the question (Foley rationality), or the one I would believe would do so if *my faculties were functioning properly*, or the one I would believe would do so if *my faculties were functioning properly and I were to reflect sufficiently*, or...?

10 Apart from such Draconian measures as mind altering drugs.

11 Here I assume what Alston disputes: that God has beliefs. (Of course on Alston's view there would be something *like* beliefs in God.) But this is really irrelevant to the point I make here, which is that it is a necessary truth that no doxastic agent, no matter how exalted, could give a good, epistemically noncircular argument for the reliability of his doxastic faculties.

13Another possibility is that I continue to form beliefs the CMP way in the Original Position with respect to SP; in that case I think the probabilities would be with SP, at least if one thing I knew was that I have a powerful tendency to form beliefs the SP way. For God, as Descartes insisted, is no deceiver.

14The 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 ever took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason, says the sceptic, 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 ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another? *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, in *Inquiry and Essays* ed. Ronald Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983), pp. 84-85.


16Eliminating, of course, Calvin's *Sensus Divinitatis*, even if, as Calvin thought, that belief forming power or mechanism is part of the epistemic equipment of mankind generally.