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Religious Disagreements and Doxastic Practices

ROBERT M. ADAMS
Yale University

I am a fan of *Perceiving God.* The theory of doxastic practices Alston presents there is the best general framework for epistemology that I have seen. The following, in very compressed form, are some main points on which I agree with him. Rationality is possible for us only through forming and assessing beliefs in ways, or practices, that are socially established and socially learned. These practices, while intimately connected with each other, are irreducibly plural, in the sense that they cannot be reduced to any single overarching practice or criterion (such as inference to the best explanation). Some important doxastic practices have "inputs" that are not beliefs but something else, such as sensory or mystical states; to learn such a practice is to learn how to form and assess beliefs on the basis of being in such states—often without forming beliefs *about* those states. Questions of the *justification* of beliefs can be *internal* to doxastic practices; learning a doxastic practice involves learning its "distinctive ways of assessing and correcting the beliefs" formed in it (p. 158).[1] *External* questions can also be raised about the reliability or rational justification of the doxastic *practices*; but because of the irreducible plurality of the practices, answers to the external questions will tend to be afflicted with a certain circularity, relying on the practices themselves. Under these circumstances we have no choice but to regard it as (practically) rational to rely on established doxastic practices, subject to certain qualifications by which we can try to weed out the obviously or probably unreliable.

Nonetheless, there are some points on which I disagree with Alston, or on which I would like to push the argument further in ways with which he may or may not agree. Here I will discuss two such points pertaining to religious belief.

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[1] Parenthetical page references are to William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991).

1. Individual and Social Dimensions

The social establishment of doxastic practices, including religious ones, is a main determinant of their rationality, in Alston's view. This gives his theory a certain conservative aspect. He explicitly withholds the cachet of presumptive rationality from "idiosyncratic" doxastic practices, "giving initial, ungrounded credence only to the socially established practices. Newcomers will have to prove themselves," he says (p. 170). There are reasons for such a stance. Most epistemologists will agree that a considerable measure of cognitive conservatism is necessary for sanity. Still I am uneasy about the degree of conservatism it suggests with regard to religion.

In assessing the rationality of doxastic practices I would place less emphasis than Alston does on social establishment, and more emphasis than he does on a more individual factor. I would ask particularly whether the practice is "firmly embedded in our psyches," as Alston puts it (p. 168), and whether the beliefs formed in it feel right and seem true or plausible to the individual practitioner. My preference for a somewhat more individualistic approach is supported by some considerations that pertain particularly, but not exclusively, to religious doxastic practices.

Alston's prime example of a "standard" doxastic practice is SP, sense perceptual practice. SP is an obvious and appropriate choice, given his focus on the perceptual aspects of religious doxastic practices. But in other ways SP may be a misleading model for thinking about religious doxastic practices. SP belongs—I won't say to the "foundations," but—to the substructure of our thought, whereas religion is very much part of the superstructure. Some parts of SP, as a *belief*-forming practice, are acquired by children even before language learning is begun. There is probably a large measure of innate determination, and only a limited measure of environmental, social, and individual malleability, in our acquisition of SP. These features are not unique to SP. Memory-belief-formation, for example, probably has much the same sort of substructural role as SP.

Other important doxastic practices are different in these respects, however. Our practice of forming beliefs about other people's psychological states on the basis of various perceptual cues as well as their linguistic utterances is at least at a higher level than SP, if not yet in the superstructure. Our acquisition and use of it is much more language-dependent, and seems more malleable both culturally and individually. Higher up, learned later, definitely in the superstructure, are religious and ethical doxastic practices, and practices of aesthetic assessment. Higher still are formal academic practices of belief-formation. Very high indeed, perhaps way up the mast in the crow's nest, is philosophy, a doxastic practice socially transmitted and socially established in more or less identifiable intellectual communities, but acquired only in adolescence and adulthood, and only by a minority in any population.

A common feature of most of the more superstructural practices is that there is more disagreement *within* them than there is in SP. This feature may well be at a maximum in philosophy, where disagreement and debate can easily seem the very lifeblood of the activity, though of course possibilities of reaching agreement are also important. The role of disagreement in philosophy is very different from its role in SP. When there is a disagreement in SP, we can normally infer that the practice is not working as it is supposed to in at least one of the contending parties. No such inference holds in philosophy. No doubt when two philosophers maintain inconsistent conclusions, at least one of them holds an erroneous belief. But the philosophizing of both parties may be exemplary. Conversely, anyone who cannot maintain a disagreement in philosophy is simply incompetent in the practice, whereas one can be very good at sense perception without being any good at arguing about it.

Ethical doxastic practice (EP), I believe, is somewhere between philosophy and SP on this, but closer to philosophy. It is doubtless important that children's learning of EP begins with beliefs that are not controversial, at least in their families and immediate communities. But there is nothing abnormal about disagreement in ethics, and we certainly have not mastered EP until we have learned to conduct disputes in it.

Religious doxastic practices are quite similar to EP in this respect. The ordinary life of a religious community depends on a measure of agreement, particularly on doctrines that figure prominently in the lives of the less "expert" believers. But disagreement, not only disagreement between religions, but *internal* disagreement, is a persistent feature of religious life. The history of most religious traditions is in large part a history of doctrinal dispute, and a real mastery of a religious doxastic practice will include an ability to take a stand on disputed issues within the tradition.

I do not take myself to be disagreeing with Alston about the extent of disagreement in most of the superstructural doxastic practices.[2] But we may disagree about some of the consequences of these facts for the epistemology of the affected practices. One such consequence, I think, is that it is misleading to treat interpersonal disagreements generated within such a doxastic practice as "internal inconsistencies" of the practice, as Alston does (p. 170f.). I would distinguish between *disagreements* between persons and *inconsistencies* within the belief-system of a single person. If a practice leads too often to inconsistencies of the latter sort in competent practitioners, that could obviously be a crushing objection to the practice. But it is harder to say how far frequent, persistent interpersonal disagreements within a doxastic practice should be regarded as a powerful overrider of the *prima facie* rationality of the practice, as Alston seems to think (p. 170f.). In some important doxastic

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2 See his remarks about disagreements in ethics and philosophy, p. 273 n.

practices, after all, as I have argued, people can show themselves exemplary practitioners in disagreeing with each other.

In such cases (and perhaps in other cases as well) it will sometimes be important to focus on the reliability of practitioners rather than of practices. It is practitioners, not practices, that form and hold beliefs. In maintaining my position in an ethical dispute, I will typically be relying on my own moral sensibilities and judgment, my own socially and individually formed doxastic habits, tendencies, and skills, and not merely on EP as an impersonal institution. I will tell the truth, to be sure, if I say that I rely on EP; but I will tell more of the truth if I say that I rely on myself as a practitioner of EP. That is what competent practitioners of EP do, and I think the same goes for religious doxastic practices.

Is it rational to rely on oneself in this way, in the face of the disagreement of other competent practitioners? Certainly such disagreement should often move one to reconsider one's own position, and perhaps it should sometimes reduce one's confidence in one's belief. But I do think it is often rational (practically rational) for the competent practitioner to maintain her belief in the face of persistent disagreement—especially if the practice is one in which a certain self-reliance or autonomy of the practitioner is part of the point of the practice. Self-reliance obviously has this importance in philosophy, and in the forms of ethical practice most of us are most familiar with. Religious practices doubtless vary on this point, but it is quite common in many religions to view the religious life as involving a personal quest, and to think that however else one may go wrong, one cannot do well religiously by going against what seems to oneself, on careful consideration, to be right.

More generally, since you cannot form or hold beliefs at all except by your own doxastic abilities and inclinations, you have the same sort of practical reason to rely on yourself in such matters as to rely on socially established doxastic practices—namely that you could not form or hold beliefs at all without relying on both. In practices in which disagreement is normal, therefore, we have a kind of reason for relying on our own exercise of the practice that we do not have for relying on other people's exercise of it; and in this I may be disagreeing with Alston (pp. 279–84).

2. Doxastic Practices, Theology, and Religious Diversity

I want also to address the difficult issue that Alston faces in regard to religious diversity. He compares the actual diversity of mystical doxastic practices to the situation that would obtain if "there were a [similar] diversity of sense perceptual doxastic practices," corresponding to diverse metaphysical theories (say, Cartesian and Whiteheadian as well as Aristotelian) about the nature or status of the physical world (p. 273). I take it Alston is trying to think what it would be like if there were people who not only *believed* a

Cartesian or Whiteheadian theory, but had the physical world *appearing perceptually* to them in a Cartesian or Whiteheadian way.

There are no such people; but I do not think we would have to be such people in order to believe, with full sincerity, a Cartesian or Whiteheadian metaphysics. I did not begin to *see* physical objects any differently, and I certainly did not cease to see them at all, when I began to believe a Berkeleyan metaphysics, just as I had not begun to *see* bodies as full of empty space when I began to understand and believe atomic physics. Alston may or may not disagree with me about this,[3] but all these metaphysical beliefs seem to me to be (as they are intended to be) quite compatible with engaging in our ordinary SP. I grant that SP would not of itself naturally suggest any of these theories; neither would it suggest 20th century physics. But it is not incompatible with them.

Practicing SP commits me to believing that there *are* bodies, and thus commits me against *eliminationism* about bodies. It does not commit me against any other sort of metaphysical theory about bodies; in particular it does not commit me against *reductionist* theories, idealist or nonidealist. For SP, as I learned it in childhood, does not incorporate any sort of metaphysical (or physical) theory about the nature of bodies. Hence SP can be reliable no matter which of these metaphysical theories is true.

Alston accepts this conclusion as it applies to questions of *physics*. Even on the most unfavorable construal of SP's relation to modern physical theory, he thinks perceptual beliefs "can still be highly useful guides to [the] environment," and SP can thus have the sort of reliability that Alston thinks is most relevant here (p. 105). So far as I can see, SP retains the same usefulness and reliability on any of the *metaphysical* theories mentioned here.

The relation between religious doctrine and mystical practice (MP) is not entirely analogous to the relation between metaphysics and SP. Many of the doctrinal disagreements between different religious obviously do require differences in ordinary religious doxastic practice. Still we should not exaggerate the theoretical commitments of practices such as the Christian version of MP. The ways in which people form beliefs about God's speaking to them, reproving them, forgiving them, and calling them to various tasks often remain largely the same through considerable variation in theological opinion on the finer points of the faith, and even in the interpretation of its foundations. Moreover, the belief-systems of many religious traditions contain warnings against ascribing too much adequacy or finality to any doctrinal formulations, including their own.

These considerations seem to me to limit what theology, or the theoretical elaboration of religious doctrine, can derive from Alston's defense of mystical practice. He has provided a justification of participation in those doxastic

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[3] He avoids commitment on a related point, p. 105.

practices that are essential to a religious life. This is an important defense of the rationality of religious faith and practice. But there is no short or uncontroversial route from this to the justification of any doctrinal system. For the ordinary, everyday religious doxastic practices provide little more than the raw materials for the working out of a theology, and the biggest part of the theologian's task is in that working out. Affirming the reliability of the doxastic practice will therefore not carry with it the acceptance of any well worked out theology. This makes it easier, however, to ascribe reliability to the ordinary doxastic practices of a religion different from one's own. In so doing one will accept the view that there is something importantly right about many of the beliefs formed in those practices, something cognitively right as well as practically fruitful about them, some way in which they are in touch with religious reality; but one will not commit oneself to any doctrinal system characteristic of the other religion. One need not even accept any of its beliefs in particular, since one need not have any opinion about *which* of the beliefs are importantly right or what is right about them. It is the doxastic practice as such, not the particular beliefs, to which one is extending a limited endorsement. One can also leave open the possibility that the correct doctrinal or metaphysical formulation of what is right in the other religion's beliefs may be as remote from the present understanding of all concerned as Berkeleyan and Whiteheadian metaphysics were from one's understanding of SP when one was six years old. Likewise one can be agnostic, as Alston seems to be (p. 278), about what is the ultimately correct theory of the relations between the beliefs of different religions.

Although it involves a limited departure from the exclusivist claims of most religions, something of this sort seems to me the most reasonable stance toward other religions for someone who appeals to an Alstonian doxastic practice epistemology in defense of the rationality of her own adherence to a religion. It has the further benefit of making available the reflection that from the perspective of any other religious faith that is justified in the Alstonian way, it will be reasonable to extend the same presumption of limited but religiously significant reliability to the basic doxastic practices of one's own religion. And if this sort of reliability of each other's doxastic practices need not be impugned by believers in the different religions, then I think it *can* be denied that "the fact of religious diversity" greatly "reduces the rationality of engaging in" the basic doxastic *practices* of any one religion (cf. p. 275).[4]

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[4] This paper is drawn from a longer one presented at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in March 1993. I am indebted to Professor Alston's comments on that occasion, though I have largely stuck to my guns.