

WILLIAM P. ALSTON

REPLY TO PASNAU

(Received 1 March 1993)

Pasnau has done a good job of bringing out the main lines of argument in the parts of my book that he is discussing. Hence I am spared the task of doing that over again, and I can concentrate on replying to Pasnau's criticisms. I will devote most of the space to his treatment of the meta-practice(s) he thinks I am advocating, but I will first comment on some other matters.

I

Pasnau claims that what he labels 'C_m' is "obviously untenable" (8). That principle is:

C_m. It is prima facie rational for S to take the practice of mystical perception established in S's society and entrenched in S's psyche to be reliable. (7)

C_m is a particular case of premise C in his reconstruction of my argument for the rationality of taking beliefs yielded by established doxastic practices to be prima facie justified.

C. It is prima facie rational for S to take the doxastic practices established in S's society and entrenched in S's psyche to be reliable.

Pasnau's reason for holding C_m to be untenable is the "massive incompatibility of different kinds of mystical perception" (8). Since there is a plurality of incompatible forms of MP,

How can it be rational for S to take her form of mystical perception to be reliable when we know that most forms of mystical perception are not reliable, and when S has no evidence favoring her particular practice? (8)

Amazingly enough, in making this claim Pasnau totally ignores my arguments against it, particularly the argument to the effect that since the incompatibility is between different doxastic practices with different modes of forming, and criteria for evaluating, beliefs, it doesn't have the same negative consequences as an incompatibility between different beliefs within the same practice. On p. 12 he says that my arguments in that section of Ch. 7 are directed only to the rationality of engaging in CMP, not to the rationality of taking it to be reliable. But a close reading of the text will show this not to be the case (See, e.g., pp. 268—69, 272—73).

Pasnau also fastens on a (perhaps ill advised) suggestion of mine to the effect that "it is a reasonable supposition that a practice would not have persisted over large segments of the population unless it was putting people into effective touch with some aspect(s) of reality" (*Perceiving God*, p. 170). He criticizes this as an argument for the reliability of established doxastic practices. The criticism is not really relevant, since I never intended to be putting forward any such argument. The remark in question was made in the course of rejecting a suggestion that even idiosyncratic practices should be regarded as *prima facie* rational just by virtue of being engaged in. The point was that idiosyncratic practices lack a crucial part of what entitles socially established practices to that status. But this is all in the context of a consideration of what practices it is *practically rational* to engage in. And throughout I insist on the distinction between an argument for practical rationality and an argument for the truth of a claim to reliability.

But in any event, Pasnau's criticism is wide of the mark. His counter-argument consists of enumerating socially established but unreliable doxastic practices — astrology, witchcraft, and dream analysis. But it is doubtful that these pass my tests for being distinct doxastic practices. However, I don't deny that there have been, and still are, unreliable doxastic practices that are socially established. Indeed, as has already been made explicit, I am committed to the proposition that most forms of MP are somewhat unreliable. I had only meant to suggest social establishment as one indicator of reliability, not, by any means, an infallible indication.

II

Pasnau's main weapon in his argument against my claim that it is rational to take SP and CMP to be reliable is an attack on a premise of my argument for that claim, "B" in his reconstruction of that argument.

- B. Engaging in a doxastic practice commits S to taking it to be reliable. (5)

He first points out that:

B seems perfectly plausible — but only until we remember the bleak epistemological position Alston claims we are in. Normally, when we engage in a doxastic practice, we engage in the practice because we think it's reliable . . . But the situation changes completely if our epistemic circumstances are as Alston describes them. In such circumstances — given our inability to show that any given practice is reliable — it will be reasonable to engage in the practice and reasonable to accept the beliefs formed through the practice as true. But doing so does not entail that it is reasonable to believe that the practice is reliable. The crucial point is that if our epistemic condition is as bad as Alston claims, then it is reasonable to *act* as if the practices are reliable, but it is *not* reasonable to *claim* that they are reliable. (9–10)

Here I find myself in the enviable position of enjoying support from what was intended as a criticism. Pasnau's contentions here, obviously intended to tell against my position, actually support it. What lies behind this curious state of affairs is that Pasnau is ignoring a distinction that is crucial for my position — the distinction between the *practical rationality* of a belief or a line of action and the *epistemic justification* of a belief, where the latter, but not the former, involves believing in such a way or on such a basis that the belief is likely to be *true*. The only way I can find the above quote acceptable is to read it as saying that on my view one is not *epistemically justified* in taking one or another basic doxastic practice to be reliable. But that is what I have argued for. My counterpoise to that is the claim that it is *practically rational* to take established practices to be reliable, just because it is practically rational to engage in them. Our inability to show that those practices are reliable does not affect my argument for the latter.

But Pasnau goes on to criticize that argument, which, as he notes, amounts to claiming that there is a pragmatic implication between engaging in a doxastic practice and taking it to be reliable. Against this,

he asserts that “I *can*, for instance, consistently accept most of the beliefs generated by my senses while neither affirming nor denying that the practice of sense perception is reliable”. (10) And “it seems to me that one can engage in a practice on a day-to-day basis without ever believing the most of the beliefs generated by the practice are true”. (11) True enough. But I was at pains to point out that to be committed to a proposition, as I was thinking of that, does not require actually believing or accepting that proposition. Pasnau, however, goes on to claim that one could engage in a practice while “professing uncertainty” about its reliability. This is no doubt psychologically possible, but he goes on to deny that there is anything irrational about this. Perhaps we are confronted here with a rock bottom clash of intuitions. It seems clear to me that if I confidently form beliefs in a certain way, and continue to do so over a long period of time, where this (naturally) involves taking those beliefs to be true, I thereby evince my confidence that that way of forming beliefs can be relied on to yield mostly true beliefs.

It may be that Pasnau’s dissatisfaction with both B and C is due in large part to his failure to appreciate the point that I claim only a practical rationality for taking established doxastic practices to be reliable and to yield justified beliefs. A number of his statements reflect this failure.

But why should the epistemic limits that Alston’s negative thesis describes force us into believing a claim [that established doxastic practices are generally reliable] that we cannot successfully defend? (11)

The answer (at least the answer to a similar question framed in a less provocative way than in terms of “forcing”) is that our inability to “defend” the thesis (i.e., to show it to be true or epistemically justified) takes nothing away from the considerations that lead to the conclusion that it is practically rational to accept it.

Although we may have reason to engage in one practice from each range of options, we have no reason to take those we engage in to be reliable. (14)

The references to “reason” is ambiguous between practical rationality and epistemic justification. On my position it is practically rational for us both to engage in the practices and to take them to be reliable. It is

the kind of reason that shows the reliability claim to be (probably) true that we lack.

We may still have reason to engage in CMP and other doxastic practices, but we have no reason to take these practices to be reliable, and therefore no reason to take our beliefs formed on their basis to be justified. (15)

Again, this is acceptable only if 'reason' in the first occurrence is practical reason, and in the next two occurrences has to do with truth-conducive epistemic justification.

III

Now for my main topic, Pasnau's claims concerning "meta-practices" and the bearing of this on my position. He begins by, correctly, attributing the following view to me.

- A. It is *prima facie* rational for S to engage in the doxastic practices that are established in S's society and entrenched in S's psyche.

He says that he "will henceforth call" this "*The A meta-practice*" (16). He then goes on to make the following concession.

It is not, to be sure, a doxastic practice, for A makes no recommendations (directly) with respect to choosing beliefs. But A does describe a way of choosing doxastic practices, and what A calls rational is nothing other than a practice of selecting doxastic practices. Hence I call it a meta-practice: a way of choosing between competing doxastic practices. (16)

I find this concession quite inadequate. A does not "describe" any practice of any sort, and certainly not a practice or way of choosing or selecting doxastic practices. If A means what it says, in plain English, it makes no reference to any practice whatever, other than the doxastic practices of which it speaks. It makes a statement of the conditions under which it is rational for one to engage in such practices, but it says nothing of any activity of *choosing* between competing practices. Pasnau himself acknowledges right away that "it is not clear that many (if any) people actually engage in it [the alleged meta-practice]" (16). Hence it is not at all clear what is supposed to be going on here.

The subsequent discussion, in fact, focuses on specifications of A for MP and SP.

- A_m. It is *prima facie* rational for S to engage in the form of mystical perception that is established in S's society and entrenched in S's psyche. (16)
- A_s. It is *prima facie* rational for S to engage in the form of sense perception that is engaged in by S's society and entrenched in S's psyche. (20)

These two principles, like their generic ancestor, have nothing to do with any meta-practice of choosing between alternative doxastic practices. And the discussion clearly indicates the confusion involved in supposing them to specify meta-practices. Although the discussion purportedly has to do with the unreliability of meta-practices, it veers wildly between the official topic and the reliability of the doxastic practices that are indicated by these principles. Thus on pp. 17–19 Pasnau lays out conditions for a doxastic practice to be unreliable, and proceeds to argue for the unreliability of CMP, misusing Nozick's criteria for knowledge in the process.¹ But then he takes this discussion to show that the alleged meta-practice is unreliable, without explaining just how these different issues are connected. The ensuing discussion of A_s is more consistently directed to an alleged meta-practice, except for the not-so-little difficulty that the principle under discussion specifies no such practice.

Is this discussion completely hopeless, or can something be saved? I believe it would be a fairly simple matter to clean it up. Forget these A principles and focus the discussion on meta-practices of choosing doxastic practices. Then considerations of the sort Pasnau brings forward can be used to argue that since we have no way of telling which of the various forms of MP and which of the various possible forms of SP, if any, is reliable, then any procedure for picking one such form will not be reliable, so far as we can tell, since we have no reason to think that it can be depended on to pick a reliable doxastic practice. An alternative cleansing would involve forgetting about meta-practices (a well advised move since, as Pasnau acknowledges, it is doubtful that

anyone engages in such practices), and stick with principle A. The argument then would be that we have no sufficient (truth-conducive) reason for supposing that the doxastic practices that satisfy the conditions laid down by A are reliable. But once Pasnau moves in that direction, it is clear that the game is up. For this is a point on which I insist in the book. This last contention has no standing as a criticism of my position.

But what about the former clean-up job? Is it any objection to my position that we are not in a position to show that any meta-practice of choosing doxastic practices is reliable? The answer is clearly NO, I would say. Even if I thought that people do significantly often choose doxastic practices (as I do not), I would not be disturbed by learning that we cannot show any such practice to be reliable. That would just be an extension of my claim that we cannot show any of our basic doxastic practices to be reliable. But Pasnau goes on to argue that his negative conclusion about meta-practices shows that beliefs acquired by doxastic practices it picks are not justified. This does contradict a basic claim of the book, and so I must consider it.

First, there is an ambiguity as to just what conclusion about meta-practices Pasnau thinks he has established. He opens the argument I am about to consider by saying: "I now want to argue that the unreliability of a meta-practice entails that beliefs acquired on its basis [sic] are not justified". (23) This sounds as if he thinks he has shown that the meta-practices under consideration *are* unreliable. But on the previous page he had said: "I haven't *proven* that the A_s meta-practice is unreliable". Then he tempers that admission by saying: "But if we accept Alston's view, according to which there are a great many competing practices and we have no basis upon which to choose one over the other, then the only evidence we have favors the conclusion that the A_s meta-practice is unreliable". I don't accept this last claim at all, one that does go directly against the trend of argument in my book. There I maintain that even though we have no neutral way of choosing between competing forms of MP, it is rational to take a particular form to be reliable (and hence, by implication, that we do not have sufficient evidence to justify taking it to be unreliable). However, I do not want to get into that controversy here. I will assume for the sake of argument

that Pasnau has provided sufficient reason for supposing that any meta-practice of choosing a particular form of MP is unreliable, and see what follows from that.

Pasnau contends, as we have seen, that it follows that the beliefs formed by any version of MP, or by any other doxastic practice chosen by the practice in question, are not justified. But why should one suppose that? As Pasnau brings out clearly, I hold that the reliability of the mode of belief formation involved (the doxastic practice employed) is required for the justification of the belief so engendered. Thus beliefs formed by CMP are justified only if CMP is reliable. But why suppose that they are justified only if the meta-practice engaged in to pick CMP as a way of forming beliefs (assuming that such a meta-practice was involved) is a reliable way of selecting doxastic practices? What does that have to do with it?

I find Pasnau's reasoning on this point to be totally without merit. Here is a representative sample.

The justification of a belief requires that the ground be adequate — adequate in the sense that it makes the belief “very probably true”. [This is Pasnau agreeing with me on that point.] But now take someone engaging in the A meta-practice. If the argument above in (i) is correct [to the effect that the A meta-practice is unreliable], then none of that person's beliefs are “very probably true”. (24)

But why that last judgment? Nothing that follows in the text gives any reason. I am left with no alternative to seeing a level confusion here, a confusion like that between the epistemic status of belief, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the epistemic status of a belief about the epistemic status of the first belief. In this case the levels have to do, rather, with the reliability of a certain way of forming beliefs, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the reliability of a way of choosing ways of forming beliefs (that was used in choosing that former way) on the other. Pasnau claims that since the latter is not reliable, the former cannot be either, and hence that the beliefs formed by the former are not “probably true”, not based on an adequate ground, and hence are not justified. But why suppose that the reliability of a doxastic practice depends on the reliability of the procedure used to pick it out from an array of competitors? Surely it is clear, if anything is, that whether CMP is reliable is solely a matter of whether the (relevant part of the) world is so constituted that beliefs formed in this way over a large and varied

sample, in typical situations, will mostly be true. If that is the case, CMP is, by definition, a reliable way of forming beliefs. What procedure, if any, we used to pick it has nothing to do with *that*. One is irresistibly led to suppose that Pasnau has simply failed to distinguish between the reliability of CMP and the reliability of A, fancying that the unreliability of the latter just amounts to the unreliability of the latter.²

But perhaps this p. 24 passage was just a slip, and Pasnau isn't really supposing that the *reliability* of a doxastic practice depends on the reliability of the meta-practice in the background. Elsewhere he stresses the point that if I pick a doxastic practice by an unreliable meta-practice, then, even if the former is reliable, it is just by "luck" that I am forming beliefs in a reliable way; I have just "stumbled" onto an epistemically desirable doxastic practice. Hence, in engaging in that practice I am not (as my theory of justification requires) in a "strong position" to get the truth. Hence, even if my beliefs are formed in a reliable way, I am not *justified* in holding them. (24ff.) But why suppose that? Since Pasnau gives no reason for holding that being lucky in engaging in one's doxastic practice(s) is incompatible with being justified in the beliefs so engendered, it is again tempting to see a level confusion at work. Let's agree that if one picks CMP by an unreliable meta-practice, one is not justified in believing that CMP is reliable. (That, of course, does not prevent CMP from *being* reliable.) But to suppose that that implies that the beliefs that stem from CMP are not justified is to fail to distinguish between the epistemic statuses of beliefs on different levels.

Moreover, we can see many cases in which sheer luck in one or another feature of the belief forming process is obviously not incompatible with epistemic justification. I want to ask Jones a question but don't know where to find him. I just happen to encounter him on the street. I ask him the question and get the answer that p. It was sheer luck that I was able to form the belief that p under favorable circumstances. But that doesn't prevent that belief's from being justified. Again, let's say that people differ widely in visual acuity. I am lucky enough to be in the 90th percentile in this respect. I can identify a bird on the horizon that you cannot see well enough to identify. It is my good fortune that I am able to form a well-grounded belief about this. Again, that does not prevent my belief from being justified. It would

seem that there is a strong presumption against luck counting against justification.

This leads naturally into the following question. Suppose that Pasnau is right in holding that an unreliable meta-practice counts against the justification of beliefs formed by a doxastic practice chosen by the meta-practice. The fact remains, as Pasnau acknowledges, that we rarely, if ever, choose doxastic practices by any meta-practice. That being the case, what bearing does Pasnau's thesis have for our more usual doxastic situation? Pasnau raises this question on pp. 27ff. His answer amounts to the following. "Alston is committed to the claim that the A meta-practice is the best way of selecting doxastic practices we have available to us . . . none of our basic doxastic practices can be formed on the basis of a meta-practice any more reliable — so far as we can tell — than the one described in A. Hence behind all our basic doxastic practices will be a meta-practice the reliability of which is at least as dubious as the A meta-practice." (27) Waiving the fact, noted earlier, that A does not describe any meta-practice at all, let's grant the first two sentences. But the third does not follow. At least that is the case on any reasonable interpretation of 'behind'. If the third sentence means that all our basic doxastic practices have been chosen by a meta-practice at least as dubious as the A meta-practice, then it not only does not follow from the preceding claims, but the discussion is proceeding on the assumption that it is false. Perhaps the sentence merely means that for any basic doxastic practice, if it were chosen by a meta-practice, that practice would be at least as dubious as the A meta-practice. But that just repeats what the first two sentences say and leaves us as far as ever from determining what bearing, if any, this has on our actual situation, in which doxastic practices are not chosen by meta-practices.

More is involved here than just some bad reasoning by Pasnau. Consider our actual situation, in which we find ourselves already firmly entrenched in a variety of doxastic practices by the time we arrive at the age of reflection. Let's go a step further and make the plausible assumption that none of our basic doxastic practices have been chosen by any practice at all.³ In that case, if any of those practices are reliable, we are lucky, fortunate that they are. If such luck is incompatible with epistemic justification, then none of our beliefs are epistemically

justified. If any of them are, then being lucky in engaging in reliable rather than unreliable doxastic practices is not incompatible with these practices yielding justified beliefs. And, by a further step, if we should choose a reliable doxastic practice by an unreliable meta-practice — so that we are just lucky that a reliable doxastic practice was chosen — then, again, that luck does not prevent that practice from producing epistemically justified beliefs.

IV

The upshot of all this is that, so far as I can see, Pasnau's arguments leave his targets unshaken. So far as those arguments go, one can continue to regard it as practically rational to engage in, e.g., CMP and to suppose it to be reliable and a source of justified beliefs.

NOTES

¹ The misuse comes from not consistently adhering to Nozick's restriction of his conditions to beliefs that were formed by the use of the "method" in question.

² The hypothesis of level confusion is further supported by the fact that Pasnau regularly speaks of a meta-practice as a practice of forming beliefs. For example: "But as the earlier discussion about the reliability of the A_m meta-practice has shown, *beliefs formed on its basis* would not be mostly true over a variety of situations. (25) (Emphasis added.)

³ A distinction Alvin Goldman makes in *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) is relevant here. Goldman distinguishes between "processes" (roughly, basic, largely innate procedures of belief formation) and "methods" (strategies of belief formation and problem solving that we develop and consciously choose). In terms of this distinction we might say that the "meta-practice" talk is suited to methods but not to processes.

Department of Philosophy
Syracuse University
541 Hall of Languages
Syracuse, NY 13244-1170
USA