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RESPONSE TO CRITICS

I greatly appreciate the kind words from Gale, Tilley, and Schellenberg, and I appreciate even more the care with which they have read and reacted to my book. But my task here is to give my reactions to their reactions.

GALE

I find that Gale has not fully appreciated the distinction between the epistemic status of particular beliefs and the epistemic status of claims for the doxastic practice that gives rise to those beliefs. My position on this is unfamiliar to many people and perhaps not readily graspable. First, we must make a distinction between the epistemic status of beliefs (whether they are justified, rational, or whatever in one or another sense) and the epistemic status of claims about that epistemic status or about what is responsible for that status. Not only that, but the lower level status does not depend on the higher level status. I may be fully justified in, e.g., perceptual beliefs even though I am not justified, or am differently justified, in higher level beliefs about the epistemic status of those perceptual beliefs or about the reliability of perceptual belief forming practices. Indeed, it is not necessary for me to be justified in believing, e.g., that I am in a room containing other people, that I have any beliefs at all *about* that belief or about the reliability of my perceptual belief forming practices.

These claims are, of course, controversial. My aim here is not to argue for them, but only to make clear my position in the book, which is a special application of these claims. However, I will say a word in defence of the position. The most conclusive reason for denying the necessity of any such higher level conditions for epistemic justification is that it gives rise to the necessity of an infinite hierarchy of justified beliefs in order that one be justified in any one belief. Suppose that in order for me to be justified in the perceptual belief that I am in a room with other people I must be justified in supposing that belief to be justified, or in supposing the mechanism that yielded it to be reliable. In that case we must, under penalty of arbitrariness, impose an analogous higher level requirement for the justification of this latter belief. In order for it to be justified I must be justified in a still higher level belief concerning its epistemic status or concerning what gave rise to it. And so for that still higher level belief in turn. Thus in order that the original

belief be justified I must possess an infinite hierarchy of justified beliefs. And that seems a bit much to ask!

I can also point to familiar cases that illustrate my contention, cases in which the positive epistemic status available for beliefs on one level is very different from that available for beliefs on another. Those who think it possible to provide an effective *a priori* argument for the reliability of sense perception (as I do not) hold that the kind of justification we have for the higher level belief that sense perception is reliable is very different from the kind of justification we have for particular perceptual beliefs. Again, if we raise the question as to whether enumerative induction is reliable, either we have no justification for a positive answer, or the kind of justification we have is very different from the justification we have for particular inductive generalizations. (We cannot without circularity show by enumerative induction that enumerative induction is a truth-preserving form of inference.) All this is closely analogous to my view that the kind of support we can give to the claim that SP or CMP is reliable (a practical rationality argument) is very different from the kind of support particular beliefs receive within SP or CMP.

I do not suggest that Gale is unaware of this position and the distinctions involved. But at crucial points his grasp of the point falters. I will illustrate this by looking at his claim that I have sought to show not only that participants in MP are practically (in his terms 'pragmatically') justified in taking it to be reliable, but epistemically justified as well. I have repeatedly denied any such intention. I may, of course, have been deceiving myself, but such a charge would have to be backed by evidence. Let's look at the quotations Gale adduces in support of his allegation. We will see that his reading of the passages in question is vitiated by his missing the level distinction just mentioned.

1. 'It should be clear from the above that... a Christian is epistemically justified (at least *prima facie*) on the basis of mystical perception in holding certain Christian beliefs about God...' Here it is particular beliefs about God that are said to be epistemically justified, not the higher level belief that the practice which engenders those beliefs is reliable.

2. 'None of these considerations [concerning inconsistencies in CMP] are fatal to the epistemic claims we have made for CMP.' This indicates that I have made *epistemic* claims for CMP, e.g. that CMP is reliable. But I do *not* say here that I have provided *epistemic justification* for any of those claims. And the latter is what Gale needs to document his charge.

3. He reports me as speaking of having already given 'epistemic support of religious belief'. Since this concerns particular religious beliefs, the comment on 1. applies.

Thus once we have a firm grip on the distinction between the epistemic status of particular beliefs and the epistemic status of claims about the epistemic status of those beliefs or about factors bearing on that, we see that

Gale has failed to show that I purported to show that we can be *epistemically* justified in supposing CMP to be reliable or to have any other positive epistemic status. To be sure, if such higher level epistemic justification were necessary for the correlated lower level justification, then by virtue of claiming the latter I would be committed to claiming the former. But any such requirement would have to be argued for. And I have just given reasons to refrain from imposing that requirement.

A similar level confusion is involved in Gale's statement that since Alston 'was reticent to say that his DP-based vindication of the reliability of MP is an argument', 'to be consistent he must retract his assertion... that it can underwrite claims to know the propositional outputs of MP'. The only way I can make sense of this is to take Gale to be supposing that if there is no way of showing that MP is reliable, we must give up claims that the outputs of MP can constitute knowledge. This is the same failure to recognize that claims on different levels can have different epistemic statuses. Of course, if I cannot show that MP is reliable, it follows that (on my conception of knowledge) I cannot *show* that its outputs can constitute knowledge. But that is not to say these inability prevent me from consistently claiming MP to yield knowledge (and, in particular, supposing that it is practically rational to accept this position).

Another point at which level problems appear is Gale's claim that 'assuming Alston established that we cannot show that SP is reliable, any argument which must employ SP to warrant one of its premises is infected with what I call "epistemic nonwarrantedness"'. Here he supposes that a perceptual belief cannot be justified unless we can show that SP is reliable. This either confuses justification on the two levels or imposes a higher level requirement on justification that I have shown to be self-defeating.

As Gale points out, I do make statements to the effect that the persistent social establishment of a doxastic practice is a (good) reason for supposing it to be reliable. And it looks as if, in doing so, I am violating my own ban on trying to provide reasons for supposing it to be true that a doxastic practice is reliable. But it is only non-epistemically-circular reasons that I have said to be unavailable here. And, at least in most cases, the argument from social establishment to reliability will be epistemically circular, since we will be making use of the practice in question (usually along with others) in determining that the practice is socially established. Hence this argument will fall under my rubric of 'significant self-support'. In the book I made modest claims for significant self support, claiming only that it reinforced the case for practical rationality, not that it sufficed to provide even partial epistemic justification. But it may be that the social establishment argument for CMP, unlike the parallel argument for SP, is not epistemically circular, in which case the deployment of the argument does lend substance to Gale's charge. If so, there is nothing for it but to make a full confession.

In his discussion of the relation of my argument for the practical rationality

of a doxastic practice to the argument Gale purports to extract from the book for the epistemic justification of supposing the practice to be reliable, he relies on the claim that 'whereas it is epistemically rational for everyone to believe a proposition if it is epistemically rational for some one person(s) to do so, the corresponding universalizability principle does not hold for what it is pragmatically rational to believe (or do)'. But the former side of this alleged contrast does not hold. The epistemic status of a proposition can be, and often is, different for different people when they have different reasons, grounds, or evidence available to them. I may be epistemically justified in supposing that Jim and Susie are getting divorced because they have told me, while you are not at all justified in believing this, not having been privy to any such disclosures.

In this connection Gale notes that I take the existence of rival, incompatible forms of MP to pose a difficulty for the epistemic justification of CMP but not for its practical rationality. And he traces this supposed difference to a contrast allied to the one just noted. He takes it that since the competing forms of MP can all be practically rational, religious diversity presents no problem there, but since the suppositions of their reliability cannot all be epistemically justified, the diversity does create a serious problem for that. But this badly distorts what is going on in my discussion. Since the supposed contrast doesn't hold, it could be that participants in all the rival forms of MP are epistemically justified in supposing their own form to be reliable (after all, they have very different experiences and other things to go on). In any event, contrary to what Gale says, I don't take religious diversity to pose a problem for the epistemic justification of the higher level belief in the reliability of CMP, since I don't suppose there to be any such justification. What has thrown Gale off here is the same old level confusion. I do consider religious diversity to pose a problem for the justification of particular religious beliefs by CMP, but, for reasons I have been rehearsing, that does not mean that the problem concerns an epistemic justification for a claim about the epistemic justification of those religious beliefs.

Gale takes my claim that *unresolved conflict between different doxastic practices with quite different criteria of justification is less damaging to the epistemic claims of each than unresolved conflict within a practice* to be 'wildly implausible'. He makes the sound points that the former conflict more seriously divides people than the latter, and that I would be more seriously impugned by a rival of the first sort than of the latter. These points do imply that *interpractice* conflicts are in some ways more extreme than their *intrapractice* cousins. Nevertheless, I stick by my claim that the diminution of positive epistemic status is less for the former than for the latter. Since I don't have anything to add to what I said in the book on this score, I will just repeat it. If there is no neutral procedure for settling the dispute, each party is in a better position to stick by its guns than they would be if there were such a procedure. This is because

in the latter case the most reasonable course would be to suspend judgement until that procedure is deployed. In the other case, since there is nothing analogous to wait for, there isn't the same reason to deny the rationality of each contestant's holding firm.

Gale employs his favourite Titanic metaphor to poke fun at my admissions that this or that reduces the positive epistemic status of religious perceptual beliefs, while also admitting that there is no way to say how much. This obviously doesn't satisfy him. I can understand the dissatisfaction, but I'm afraid that it just reflects the human condition and hence is nothing it is prudent to brood over. To indicate the pervasive nature of such inabilities, consider the fact that practically any of our doxastic practices could be better than they actually are from an epistemic point of view. Go back to our old friend, SP. It is by no means infallible. People make mistakes in reporting what they perceive. Its outputs sometimes come in conflict with each other. Our senses give us relatively superficial information about physical things, rather than their inner essences or micro fine structure. Sense perception has frequently been bad mouthed by rationalists for these and other reasons. Without going to the extremes of Parmenides or Plato we can see that it is rational to accord perceptual beliefs a less high epistemic rating than we should if it were more consistent, more accurate, and more penetrating in these respects. How much lower a rating than the highest possible should we settle on? We don't know how to answer such a question. We can only say that the beliefs it engenders are, by and large, justified enough for our needs. Would we like to say something more precise? Sure. But since we can't, let's be grateful for what we have.

One final point. Gale expresses puzzlement at my holding that my doxastic practice approach does not constitute an argument for the existence of God. He supposes that I must be 'upholding an eccentrically severe standard for a good argument'. But none of the three passages he cites are concerned with my doxastic practice approach, and a different point is made in each. On p. 3 of my book the point is simply that people who take themselves to be perceiving God typically already believe that God exists. On p. 222 it is that in claiming that mystical experiences render certain kinds of belief about God *prima facie* justified I am not mounting an argument from the existence of the experiences to the existence of God. And on p. 284 I only say that the book is concerned with the justification of beliefs about God, not with what else it takes to have knowledge. To clear the air a bit, I can say that I do hold that mystical experience can render one *prima facie* justified in believing, *inter alia*, that God exists, but that this is not the sort of thing that is typically regarded as an 'argument for the existence of God', whether from religious experience or from anything else.

TILLEY

Tilley makes some important points concerning the role of 'mechanisms', procedures and authorities' in doxastic practices, especially religious ones, and he emphasizes the distinction between traditions, institutions, and communities in religions. He is quite correct in pointing out that I do not make explicit use of these distinctions, and he provides a useful supplement to my treatment. Nevertheless, I cannot follow him in all the implications he draws from this.

Tilley claims that recognizing the above distinctions will lead to splitting CMP up into many different mystical doxastic practices. 'Alston can make "main stream CMP" appear to be a unified practice only because he focuses on the resources and neglects the mechanisms and institutional authorities constitutive of an effective overrider system.' I have no real quarrel with this. I considered the possibility of a multiplicity of Christian MP's on pp. 192-4 and opted for working with a 'mainline' CMP unified by what Tilley calls the 'resources' of the tradition from which the overrider system is drawn. But I never supposed that there is one unique, right way of individuating doxastic practices. I agree that for some purposes it is useful to think of (some?) Baptists and (some?) Roman Catholics as belonging to different MP's. However, I balk at the suggestion that Tilley's preferences constitute the only right way of cutting up the pie. To delve a bit more deeply, we should recognize differences of degree, along a number of different dimensions, in the extent to which a group of people shares a common practice. Some of these differences are larger than others. That between Christians and Buddhists is larger than that between Roman Catholics and Anglicans. Even within the Anglican communion, even within the American Episcopal Church there are differences as to how to regard the Scriptures and how to use them as authoritative. There is no one right answer as to how much difference is compatible with sharing the same practice. We can draw the boundaries in the way that best serves one or another theoretical purpose. I believe the boundaries for CMP I roughly indicated in the book give us a unit that is workable for my purposes.

I must protest against Tilley's statement that 'By ignoring the institutional element, Alston is covertly proposing "Christian individualist mystical practice" as his prime example (which ignores institutional authority in an overrider system and makes each individual her own final judge)'. That was certainly not my intention. On more than one occasion I pointed out that the community will refuse to accept a particular report of perception of God because it runs into conflict with the background belief system, whatever the individual says. I didn't make explicit the aspect of institutional authority, but recognizing it is quite compatible with what I did say.

Tilley raises an important issue concerning the situation of a person who

deviates from some basic doctrines of a religious community to which he had been committed. Tilley then asks: 'How can he follow Alston's good advice to sit tight? Has he developed a new practice or not?' Having already declined to give a recipe for the one right way of differentiating doxastic practices I will not undertake to answer the second question. But this kind of case does bring out that my account was designed to deal with 'normal science' in which the parties concerned intend to be following the established rules, procedures, and background belief system. When we are confronted with 'scientific revolutions' we have a different ball game on our hands. Here there is no (complete) established overrider system accepted by the revolutionaries. For the nonce it is every person for him/herself.

Moving to other matters, I was surprised to find Tilley characterizing my argument as directed against scepticism and my account a 'defensive counter to scepticism'. My position was not primarily intended as a response to scepticism. It is not 'directed against scepticism' any more than any other epistemological position that claims certain humanly attainable conditions to be sufficient for knowledge or justified belief. Nor do I understand why it should be branded as 'defensive'. Perhaps Tilley is using that term with a meaning that would be better expressed by 'internal'. My argument for the rationality of (certain) perceptual beliefs about God is 'internal' rather than 'external', in that it does not aspire to establish that rationality on grounds that are wholly outside the doxastic practice in question. In fact, it is a central contention of the book that such purely external arguments for the rationality of some broad domain of belief are unsuccessful everywhere. Tilley charges, on grounds that are obscure to me, that my position is 'like fideism'. In view of the many and often obscure meanings attached to 'fideism', I will not attempt to respond to that allegation. A more serious criticism of what he calls 'defensive accounts' is that they 'seem to leave those who are forced to choose with the dilemma of having to choose on nonrational grounds among practices which generate incompatible, but *prima facie* justified, beliefs for those who participate in them'. It is quite true that my argument for the rationality of participation in, e.g., CMP, provides no grounds for signing on with that practice rather than with some alternative form of MP that is not disqualified in ways I discuss. I myself think that the phenomenon of *choosing* between different religions is one that is seldom if ever exemplified, but let that pass. Tilley's complaint could be reformulated as directed to the failure of my account to show, on neutral grounds, that one form of MP is more likely to give us true beliefs than others. To this I plead guilty. Indeed, in Chapter 7 I was at pains to emphasize that point. But that has to be taken in connection with the thesis that the ground of religious belief with which the book is concerned – mystical perception – is only one among a variety of grounds, the interrelations of which are briefly discussed in Chapter 8. There was no claim that mystical perception does the whole job, quite the contrary.

Moreover, Tilley ignores the fact that the discussion of religious diversity in Chapter 7 was carried on in terms of a 'worst case scenario', according to which there are no other sufficient grounds for taking one form of MP to be more reliable than its rivals. I do not believe this to be the case, but even if I could show it not to be the case it was no part of my programme there to do so. What I set out to do was to show that even if there are no other grounds that do the job, the participant in a particular undiscredited form of MP is justified in taking the outputs of that practice to be *prima facie* justified. I felt that I had my hands full defending that relatively modest conclusion. But I did not imply or suggest that more could not be done by way of showing one form of MP to be more rationally engaged in than its competitors.

SCHELLENBERG

The problem of religious diversity, touched on by the other two papers, is the sole concern of this one. It is not surprising that this topic is seized on by all three critics, for, as I say in the book, it seems to me the most serious difficulty faced by my position and the one with my answer to which I am least satisfied. Nevertheless, I cannot see that Schellenberg, any more than his fellow critics, has shown the difficulty to be fatal.

Schellenberg concentrates on my argument against the claim that the existence of uneliminated incompatible competitors knocks out any justification CMP might otherwise provide for its products. As he points out, the argument depends on displaying a disanalogy between the religious diversity case and cases in which it is clear that *prima facie* justification is eliminated by competitors. The point of disanalogy concerns whether the competition occurs *within* a doxastic practice, where there are known resources for determining which of the competitors is in the right. This condition holds for the non-religious cases in question but not for the case of religious diversity. I take this to blunt the force of the claim in application to the latter. Schellenberg supposes that I am assuming that the condition just mentioned is necessary for a loss of justification, and he proceeds to argue against that assumption.

Before looking at this argument I must lodge a protest against his way of setting up the situation. He takes me to be offering a deductive argument that runs as follows.

1. If justification for belief is removed in *r* [the religious diversity situation], then *C* [the condition mentioned above] obtains in *r*.
2. *C* does not obtain in *r*.
3. Therefore, it is not the case that justification for belief is removed in *r*.

But that is not the way I conceived the argument. I was responding to an argument from analogy that took *r* to be analogous epistemically to certain

other sorts of cases in which one's position or method is faced with incompatible alternatives between which there are no sufficient neutral grounds for a rational choice. My response consisted in pointing out a disanalogy, a non-satisfaction of a condition (C) in *r*, a condition that, so I claimed, was crucial *in the analogues* for their exhibiting the epistemic feature in question – loss of justification. I was *not* assuming that condition C is *generally necessary in all cases* for a loss of justification. There was no need for such an ambitious assumption. It is enough for my purposes that the satisfaction of C is crucial *in these cases*. Hence I am not committed to premise 1. that Schellenberg ascribes to me.

But getting this straight does not dispose of Schellenberg's criticism. For he will, no doubt, still claim that the condition he goes on to introduce is generally, indeed necessarily, necessary for epistemic justification, and that it is not satisfied either in *r* or in the analogues. Let's look at that. The condition (for S's being justified in believing that *p*) is:

- (D) For any proposition, *q*, known by S to be entailed by *p*, S has justification for believing that *q*.

Note that in *r*, as I am construing it, S, a participant in CMP realizes that in rival forms of MP participants have beliefs (that *s*, *t*, etc.) each of which contradicts S's CMP derived belief that *p*. That is, S realizes that *p* entails not-*s* and not-*t*. Schellenberg then argues that in *r*, by my own account, S has no justification for not-*s* and not-*t*. Hence condition (D) is not satisfied in S's case, and hence S's *prima facie* justification for believing that *p* is wiped out after all.

Now Schellenberg recognizes that there are reasons for denying or doubting that (D) really is necessary for justification. But he does not deal, at least not directly, with what I consider to be the fatal objection to his argument, namely, that he is not justified in claiming that (D) is not satisfied in *r*. I can introduce that objection by noting that if (D) does not hold for *r*, on my construal, then the last clause has to be understood as 'S has *independent* justification for believing that *q*'. For it is obvious that *if* S is justified in believing that *p* *and* realizes that *p* entails not-*s*, then S has justification for believing that not-*s*. What is built into my portrayal of *r* is that S lacks any sufficient 'neutral' basis for rejecting *s*, any basis that does not depend on taking CMP as a reliable source of belief. But it doesn't follow that S has *no* justification for believing not-*s*. For, to repeat the point, *if* S is justified in believing that *p* *and* realizes that *p* entails that not-*s*, that *does* constitute a justification he has for believing that not-*s*.

'But hold on', Schellenberg will say, 'You can't just assume that S is justified in believing that *p*. That is just the point at issue.' True enough. But by the same token, Schellenberg cannot assume that S is *not* justified in believing that *p*. Either assumption would be begging the question. Therefore Schellenberg is in no position to assert that S is not justified in believing

not-s, or the denial of any other product of competing forms of MP. And so his application of (D) to the religious diversity case does not go through.

It is interesting to compare this objection to Schellenberg with the G. E. Moore response to the sceptical deployment of (D) that he does consider. Take a sceptic who uses (D) to argue that I am not justified in any perceptual beliefs because, as I can see, any such belief entails that I am not a brain in a vat, and I am not justified in believing that. The G. E. Moore response is to use *modus ponens* instead of *modus tollens*. Rather than arguing that since I am not justified in believing q I am not justified in believing p, he argues that since I *am* justified in believing p I am justified in believing q. Schellenberg disallows that move here because each MP participant is faced with competitors that have the same sort of basis for their beliefs that she does for hers, whereas the sceptic has no grounds of any sort for supposing that I am a brain in a vat. That is a good point. But my response to Schellenberg, as I have already emphasized, is not to claim that S is justified in believing that p and to argue from that, but rather to make the more modest claim that Schellenberg cannot suppose that S is *not* justified in believing that p (and hence is not justified in believing that not-s) without begging the question.

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