**Christoph Jäger**

# Religious Experience and Epistemic Justification: Alston on the Reliability of „Mystical Perception“

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## 1. Introduction

A major topic in current philosophy of religion is the question whether, and if so in what sense, religious belief is epistemically justified. One of the most prominent answers to this question is William Alston's claim that certain forms of religious experience can provide a direct or immediate source of justification of religious belief; that "mystical perception" is indeed among the most important bases of justified religious belief. I greatly admire Alston's work on epistemic justification and his epistemology of religious belief. Indeed, I believe that the theories he has developed in these areas are among the most illuminating work contemporary epistemology and philosophy of religion have to offer. However, I also believe that a main step in Alston's argument for the immediate experiential justification of religious belief does not stand up to scrutiny.

In what follows I shall first (section 2) reconstruct some central principles of Alston's theory of epistemic justification. This theory allows for non-propositional justifiers, combines internalist and externalist ideas, and is cashed out in terms of doxastic practices. Next I will outline Alston's famous skeptical argument to the effect that all attempts to show that the practice of basing perceptual beliefs on sense perception (henceforth: *SP*) is reliable are infected with epistemic circularity (section 3). At first sight this seems to be a devastating epistemological result. But Alston argues that it is nonetheless rational to *suppose* that this doxastic practice is reliable. The same, he argues, holds for the less widely distributed practice of basing religious beliefs on "mystical perception". At this point I part company with Alston. If his analysis of epistemic circularity is correct, I argue, there is no bridge between what he calls the *practical* rationality of engaging in these doxastic practices and the rationality of supposing them to be reliable (section 4).

Should we conclude, therefore, that Alston's project is doomed? Yes and no. His attempt to establish the rationality of supposing the mystical doxastic practice (henceforth: *MP*) to be reliable fails. But I will argue for the conditional claim that, *if* he is right in maintaining that there are also no overriding reasons for regarding that practice to be *un*reliable, it is not epistemically irresponsible to engage in it (section 5). Being responsible in forming or holding a belief *B*, however, is not only a kind of positive epistemic status that must be distinguished from basing *B* on what is in fact a reliable, truth-conducive ground. If Alston is right about epistemic circularity, epistemic responsibility does not require either that the subject be in a position to rationally *suppose* that the mode of belief formation s/he employs is reliable.

Before entering into our main discussion I should begin with a few disclaimers. First, I shall start from the assumption that it is indeed legitimate to pursue questions about the justification and rationality of religious belief in terms of *epistemic* justification. There are traditions in the philosophy of religion in which this assumption is rejected or at least treated with great suspicion. In what follows, however, I will not enter into arguments for and against that position but will simply accept Alston's general methodological starting point.[1]

Second, I shall not make heavy weather over Alston's claim that there are such things as non-propositional justifiers. This is a hotly debated topic, but in this paper I shall set it aside and follow Alston, and many others, in assuming that not only judgments and beliefs, but also non-conceptualized mental states such as "raw" experiences and sensations, can justify doxastic attitudes.

Third, I will not have the time to go into related questions about the phenomenology of religious experience. This too is an interesting and important topic, and Alston discusses it at length (1991, chapter 1). But I shall not pursue, e.g., the question whether religious experience really exists as a distinctive kind of mental state. Criticisms that take issue with this basic assumption of Alston's argument, by claiming for example that what the practice in question really amounts to is simply reading one's prior religious beliefs into experiences that would otherwise be cognitively indifferent, will not be discussed.

Fourth, I will not go into problems of religious diversity. Such problems arise from the fact that, for subjects with different religious backgrounds, phenomenally similar experiences produce different, and typically

[1] That this starting point is questionable is argued, e.g., by Friedo Ricken 1995, p. 403, who maintains that ordinary epistemological concepts of rationality should not be applied to religious belief.

incompatible, religious beliefs. This suggests that, as Alston himself acknowledges, the majority of experiential religious practices must be *un*reliable. How, then, can it be rational to favor a particular interpretation of the experiences in question over competing ones? Alston himself regards this as the severest difficulty for his position, and I am not convinced that his attempt to defuse the challenge of religious pluralism is ultimately successful (cf. 1991, chapter 7). For the sake of the argument, however, I shall assume here that challenges from this quarter can indeed be met.[2]

Finally, there are various other (potential) defeaters for the religious beliefs under consideration. Alston explicitly acknowledges that religious experience is not confined to theistic religions (1991, p. 9). Yet he focuses his discussion specifically on the "Christian Mystical Practice" that involves "putative direct experiential awareness of God" (1991, p. 35).[3] In consequence, Alston's account not only confronts general questions regarding the role of culturally shaped background beliefs, but also problems that specifically arise from potential defeaters for those religions whose Ultimate Reality is a personal God. Again I shall assume however, with Alston and others, that none of the traditional potential defeaters of theism – such as problems of coherence, the problem of evil, projection theories à la Freud, Marx, etc. – amounts to a knock-down argument.[4]

To summarize, in this paper I want to meet Alston on his own ground and grant him large parts of his overall picture – except for one crucial step: his argument to the effect that it is rational to suppose that the doxastic practice of basing theistic belief on mystical experience is reliable. In order to understand Alston's complex reasoning leading up to this conclusion, however, we must first turn to some of the main tenets of his general account of epistemic justification.

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[2] For critical discussions of this problem for Alston's account see Schellenberg 1994 and Quinn 1995. Robert Adams 1994, on the other hand, argues that the fact of religious diversity is less problematic for an account along Alstonian lines than Alston himself believes. Such diversities, Adams argues, are restricted to sophisticated theological superstructures and doctrinal systems. One may accept, however, that in some way the basic doxastic practices of different religions are all "in touch with religious reality" and that "there is something cognitively right as well as practically fruitful about them" (p. 890).

[3] Alston prefers to avoid the term "religious experience" in this context because it is too unspecific. In my reconstruction of his argument, however, I shall often employ this more familiar term.

[4] Alston rejects some of the traditional criticisms of the mystical doxastic practice, such as the objection from naturalistic explanations of that practice, in (1991), chapter 6.

## 2. Epistemic Justification

In several well-known articles and books, Alston develops the following principle of epistemic justification:

(A) A belief is epistemically justified if and only if it is based on adequate grounds.[5]

This sounds like a plausible enough claim, but the ideas that underlie this principle are by no means trivial or uncontroversial. The term "ground" is meant to range over beliefs as well as non-propositional mental states such as experiences and sensations. Hence it is to be understood in an "internalist" sense, which in Alston's account means that the ground is, under normal circumstances, "accessible on reflection alone" to the subject. Although such a ground need not be an occurrent, conscious mental state, states of affairs that do not supervene on the thinker's neuro-physiological system are ruled out by this constraint.

Alston allows for "mediate" or "indirect" as well as for "immediate" or "direct" justification. To be mediately justified in believing that *p* is to be justified in so believing by other justified beliefs or items of knowledge. Let us, with Alston, call such mediate justifiers "reasons" and use the term "ground" as an umbrella term that covers both propositional and non-propositional justifiers. A subject *S* is *im*mediately justified in believing that *p* just in case *S* is justified in so believing and this justification is not mediated by reasons. Certain perceptual experiences, for instance, justify me in believing that there is a tree in front of me; others justify me in believing that I am looking at a red tomato, or that someone is playing a trumpet next door, that I'd better go to the dentist, and so on. Alston's case for the justification of basing *religious* beliefs on *religious* experience is thus a case for the claim that religious beliefs can be immediately justified, i. e., justified without being based on other beliefs and discursive reasoning. Hence his account must be sharply distinguished from traditional arguments from religious experience, which typically use religious experience to construct an argument to the best explanation for an Ultimate Reality.

A belief is "based on" a justifying ground, according to Alston, if this ground is something *for which* the belief is held. If something is a ground you merely *have* for a belief, in the sense that it is part of your noetic system, while failing to be "psychologically responsible" for your having the belief, this belief is not based on that ground (1991, pp. 73f.). Suppose you believe you will get the job. Suppose you have received a letter from the Department

[5] Cf. especially Alston 1988a. See also Alston 1985 and Alston 1991, pp. 70–76.

telling you that you will get it, and you have no reasons to suspect that there is anything wrong with your evidence. Now imagine that what makes you believe that you will get the post is in fact not these reasons but one hour of concentrated crystal-ball gazing. In that case, although you would have adequate grounds, you would have failed to base your belief on adequate grounds, and thus you would lack justification for your belief.

Now, when is a ground adequate? What makes something a good ground for a belief? Here Alston balances his internalist account of the notion of "basing a belief on a ground" with an externalist constraint on the adequacy condition. The constraint is that the ground must be an objectively reliable indication of the truth of the belief. Justifiably believing something, says Alston, requires getting into a good position with respect to truth. Since it is not accessible on reflection alone to a subject whether this condition is fulfilled or not, this condition is an externalist component of Alston's account of epistemic justification.

Incorporating these points into our above characterization, we can formulate Alston's theory somewhat more precisely:

(A*) A subject *S* is epistemically justified in holding the belief *B* at a given time *t* if and only if *S* bases *B* at *t* on (propositional) reasons or non-propositional grounds that are sufficiently truth-indicative.

This principle is formulated for individual beliefs. Inspired by Wittgenstein and Thomas Reid, however, Alston recommends that we formulate principles of epistemic justification in terms of doxastic *practices*.[6] A belief is justified if it is based on adequate grounds. But a proper assessment of the question whether this condition is fulfilled for a particular belief *B* must consider the general mode of belief formation that is employed in generating *B*. When a certain phenomenal presentation makes me believe that there is a red tomato in front of me, I will only be justified in this belief if the general practice of basing such beliefs on this kind of presentation can be approved of from the epistemic point of view.

How should doxastic practices be individuated? Alston construes them as families of belief-forming as well as belief-preserving and belief-*trans*forming mechanisms that are bound together by their inputs and outputs and by the functions that connect the two (1991, pp. 153, 165, 185). When I am "appeared to treely," for example, there is a characteristic perceptual input that normally yields as output the belief that I see a tree. Within such a framework, we may also individuate "wider" practices and look for example at the practice of basing perceptual beliefs on sense perception. We may

[6] Alston 1989a; Alston 1991, chapter 4; Alston 1993a.

also individuate doxastic practices with respect to cognitive sources such as memory, introspection, inductive and deductive reasoning, and so-called rational intuition (a practice by which we generate and hold beliefs about self-evident truths). These practices Alston calls the "standard package" (cf., e.g., 1991, p. 176), and his project is to show that *MP* is epistemically on a par with the practices included in the standard package.

Finally, a few words about the notion of reliability. Alston works with an account according to which a belief-forming mechanism is reliable if and only if it would yield mostly true beliefs in a sufficiently large and varied run of employments, where these employments must be restricted to situations of the sorts the epistemic subject typically encounters (1991, pp. 104f., 1993a, p. 9). The restriction to typical situations is required because an unfavorable track record of a mechanism that ranges over unusual situations would clearly not discredit that mechanism. The fact that sense experience, for instance, is not reliable in situations of direct brain stimulation should not be taken as indicating that *SP* is not reliable under normal conditions.

The counterfactual formulation is called for because a favorable track record of actual past employments of a belief-forming mechanism could simply be the result of lucky accidents, as when, for instance, "there have been only five crystal-ball readings all of which just happened to be correct" (1993a, pp. 8f.). Moreover, there could be reliable mechanisms which are never put to work, as when, for instance, someone constructs a reliable instrument that no one ever uses. This consideration suggests that we should not even tie reliability to favorable track records that range over all actual past, present, and future employments of a mechanism.

Alston admits that this characterization is still "less than perfectly precise" (1993a, p. 9). What, for example, does it take for a situation to be "typical" in the appropriate sense? What exactly does talk about "mostly" true beliefs amount to? And when is a chosen run of employments sufficiently large? These questions have no easy answer, but here I will assume that a satisfactory answer may be worked out.

Incorporating this doxastic practice approach into our characterization of Alston's theory of epistemic justification, we may finally summarize the account as follows:

(A**) A subject *S* is epistemically justified in holding a belief *B* at *t* if and only if
  (i) *S* bases *B* at *t* on propositional or non-propositional grounds of type G, and
  (ii) the doxastic practice of holding beliefs of that kind on the basis of grounds type G is reliable.

We are now in a position to look at Alston's central argument regarding the possibility of *assessing* the reliability of doxastic practices and the application of his answer to the practice of basing theistic belief on mystical experience.[7]

## 3. Epistemic Circularity and the Epistemological Status of the "Mystical Perceptual Practice"

A natural question that arises at this point is whether the doxastic practices of the "standard package" *are* reliable; or whether we can show them to be reliable, or at least present good arguments to the effect that they are reliable. Take, for instance, *SP*. Can we show in an epistemically acceptable way that this mode of belief formation is reliable?

No, says Alston, raising the specter of skepticism. Any consideration to this effect, he argues, will be infected with "epistemic circularity" (cf. 1986; 1991, chapter 3; 1993a). This is a malady that an argument for the reliability of a practice *P* suffers from if the reliability of *P* must be assumed at the outset in order to construct that argument. Consider for example inductive test procedures for the reliability of sense perception that simply gather a suitable sample of outputs of *SP* and check it for the proportion of true and false beliefs. Wouldn't favorable track records of this kind provide good evidence for the reliability of sense perception? Maybe we should say so – except that we'd have to concede, of course, that we must rely on sense perception in order to determine whether the relevant beliefs ("this is a red tomato," "this is the sound of a trumpet," etc.) are true. Or suppose that I believe that there is a red tomato in front of me, but someone challenges that belief. I could then check whether the greenhouse is lit by red lights, ask other people whether

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[7] The account of epistemic justification outlined in this section is Alston's account from the 1980s and the early 1990s. It should be noted, however, that in (1993b) Alston drastically departs from his original epistemological program and argues that "we should abandon the idea that there is a unique something or other properly called 'epistemic justification'" (p. 527). "Indeed," he says, "I shall be plumping for dropping the question of the justification of belief altogether" (ibid.). Alston's reason for this is that the persistence of the disputes over adequate epistemic desiderata strongly suggests that epistemologists are talking past each other and that there is no common pre-theoretical understanding of the nature of epistemic justification. I am not sure how Alston thinks this new point of view bears upon his project of justifying the practice of basing theistic belief on mystical experience. But I suppose he could answer along the following lines. Since he argues that, even if we abandon the idea of a unique concept of justification, it is still desirable to satisfy the various epistemic desiderata discussed in the literature, he would only have to salvage the idea that the rationality of supposing the mystical doxastic practice to be reliable is a desirable epistemic status with regard to that practice.

they too believe that there is a red tomato at the place in question, and so on. Such confirmation procedures, however, would obviously have to rely on sense perception. Consider next the idea that the "fruits" of sense perception, in particular the way it puts us in a position to predict and control the course of events, provide us with an argument for its reliability. Again, this sounds like a natural and reasonable proposal – except that we will, of course, have to use sense perception in order to determine whether our predictions are successful.

Alston discusses a great variety of attempts to establish the reliability of sense perception, and he argues – quite convincingly, I believe – that none of them escapes epistemic circularity. He then extends his reasoning to other belief-forming mechanisms of the "standard package" and concludes that we should not expect of *any* of these mechanisms that we can show in a noncircular fashion that they are reliable.

Where does this leave us? And what is the consequence for mystical perception? At first sight we would seem to be in a desperate epistemic situation, both with respect to standard belief-forming mechanisms and to the mystical doxastic practice. However, one consequence of all this, says Alston, is the following. If none of our standard belief-forming mechanisms can be shown to be reliable without our falling into epistemic circularity, then, if this is a problem that arises for *MP* as well, this can hardly be regarded as a good reason for downgrading it in comparison to other, less controversial modes of belief formation. It may be true that the attempt to check the reliability of *MP* must at some point rely on that very practice. However, if Alston is right in his diagnosis of the universal range of the problem of epistemic circularity, that practice would, in this regard, be perfectly on a par with the practices of the standard package (cf. 1991, pp. 143, 184f.). Call this Alston's "parity claim."

A typical, and at first sight reasonable criticism of this line of thought is that, even if such parity holds with respect to epistemic circularity, there are *other* epistemic asymmetries. In particular it will be pointed out that *MP* is, unlike *SP* and other practices of the standard package, not universally engaged in by normal human adults. Mystical experience has, throughout the centuries, only been available to a small minority. Does this not cast doubt upon the epistemic value of *MP*?

Alston rejects objections from this direction for two reasons. First, he argues, such objections are guilty of *epistemic imperialism*, i.e., of "unwarrantedly taking the standards of one doxastic practice as normative for all" (1991, p. 199). Forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception is a practice that all normal human adults engage in, all right; but why suppose that this is a feature every respectable doxastic practice must share? In fact, there are many

doxastic practices that are only employed by a small minority, but which we have no inclination to discredit for that reason. Think, for instance, of higher mathematics, or of theoretical physics, wine-tasting, chicken-sexing, and so on.

Second, the objector who is willing to concede the positive epistemic status of "expert practices" also applies an unwarranted *double standard*. He discredits the mystical practice for not being widely distributed, while allowing that other doxastic practices are confined to a certain elite. These considerations show that objections that simply point to the partial distribution of *MP* are far too superficial.[8]

Nevertheless, one crucial question regarding Alston's parity claim is how the conclusion he draws from the observation of the universal range of the problem of epistemic circularity can possibly be regarded as an argument *in favor* of religious experience. "All right," it might be replied, "there may be a parity here, but only insofar as no doxastic practice whatever can get a clean bill of health!" In other words, is not the consequence of all this that the practice of basing religious belief on religious experience is at least as badly off as other belief-forming mechanisms? Alston believes that that would not be an appropriate conclusion and develops an interesting argument for the positive epistemic status both of ordinary and mystical doxastic practices. It is this argument that lies at the heart of his overall defense of basing religious beliefs on mystical experience. Here are the central steps of his reasoning.

(i) For all that has been said about epistemic circularity, it is nevertheless perfectly rational for us to engage in the doxastic practices we do in fact engage in, as long as we lack overriding reasons for regarding these practices as unreliable. True, there does not seem to be any doxastic practice which can be shown in a noncircular fashion to be reliable. Withholding belief altogether, however, is not a serious possibility. And even if we could abandon some or all of our standard belief-forming habits and adopt instead alternative modes of belief formation, how could we establish the reliability of these newcomers? It seems likely that we would run into exactly the same sort of circularity problems that arise for the standard practices. Our human cognitive situation just does not permit our doxastic practices to be assessed "from the outside." But if that is the case, how could it be irrational to

[8] It seems clear, however, that much more must be said in order to offer a satisfactory defense of the parity claim. Evan Fales, for instance, has argued that a crucial problem for Alston arises from the fact that the evaluation resources of mystical practice fail to "display a power, richness, and subtlety at least roughly comparable to those available to *SP*" (Fales 1996, p. 25). I will not go into this question here but instead will in what follows present a problem that arises for Alston *even if* the parity claim is acceptable.

engage in the practices we do in fact engage in, as long as we lack overriding reasons for rejecting them? Given the universal scope of the problem, it seems perfectly rational to stick with what we have (cf. 1991, p. 150). More precisely, says Alston, it is at least *prima facie* rational to engage in doxastic practices that are "socially established," i.e., "established by socially monitored learning" (1991, p. 163). For unlike idiosyncratic doxastic practices (such as, for instance, consulting sun-dried tomatoes to determine the future of the stock market), socially established practices have persisted over many generations and thereby "earned a right to be considered seriously" (p. 170). This status of *prima facie* rationality can be strengthened by two further factors: (a) absence of overriders, such as massive intra- or interpractical inconsistencies; and (b) considerable self-support. If these conditions are fulfilled, a doxastic practice counts as unqualifiedly rational.

(ii) Since it is *doxastic* practices that are under consideration, Alston argues, his argument for the rationality of engaging in socially established doxastic practices also warrants another conclusion. It is this step that relates the results of the discussion of epistemic circularity to the reliability constraint on epistemic justification outlined in section 2. Alston regards his analysis of epistemic circularity as suggesting that it is impossible to *show* in an epistemically acceptable way that the doxastic practices in question are reliable. Yet he constructs an argument according to which the fact that it is, as he believes, nonetheless rational to engage in these practices furnishes us with an indirect argument to the effect that it is rational to *suppose* these practices to be reliable: "in showing it to be rational to engage in *SP*," Alston writes, "I have thereby not shown *SP* to be reliable, but shown it to be rational to *suppose SP* to be reliable" (1991, p. 178). Alston's argument to this conclusion, which is essentially developed in (1991), pp. 178–183, is this.

Just as believing that *p* commits one to the truth of *p*, in the sense that it would be incoherent to believe *p* and abstain from judging that *p* is true if the question arose, it would be incoherent for a subject to engage in a doxastic *practice* and refuse to attribute reliability to that practice if the question arose.[9] "With many sorts of practices," Alston says, "I can take it to be rational to engage in them without supposing them to enjoy the kind of success appropriate to them. I can take it to be rational to engage in playing squash for its health and recreational benefits, without thereby committing myself to the proposition that I will win most of my matches" (1991, p. 179).

[9] "When I say that in judging that *p* I am thereby *committing* myself to its being the case that *q*, what I mean is this. It would be irrational (incoherent ...) for me to judge (assert, believe) that *p* and deny that *q*, or even abstain from judging that *q*, *if the question arises*" (Alston 1991, p. 179).

> But to engage in a *doxastic* practice [my italics, C.J.] is to form beliefs in a certain way. And to believe that p is to be committed to its being true that p. [...] But what is true of individual beliefs is also true of a general practice of belief formation. To engage in a certain doxastic practice and to accept the beliefs one thereby generates is to commit oneself to those beliefs being true (at least for the most part), and hence to commit oneself to the pratice's being reliable. [...] The rationality of a practice (action, belief, judgment ...) extends to whatever that practice ... commits me to. [...] But, then, if I have shown, by my practical argument, that it is rational to engage in *SP* I have thereby shown that it is rational to take *SP* to be reliable. For since the acknowledgment of the rationality of the practice commits one to the rationality of its reliability, to provide an adequate argument for the former will be to provide an adequate argument for the latter (1991, pp. 179f.).

(iii) *Pars pro toto*, Alston develops this argument for *SP*, but the suggestion is that the same considerations apply to other belief-forming practices, including the practice of basing religious beliefs on mystical experience. First, Alston tries to make a case for the thesis that basing religious beliefs on mystical experience is in the same boat with other doxastic practices because it is a practice that, although not universally engaged in, can still be regarded as socially established. It is by no means idiosyncratic. For centuries it has been engaged in by a vast number of intellectually highly respectable people, and it is socially acknowledged in various religious traditions, among them Christianity, as an important source of faith. Second, Alston argues that the standard attempts to show that this practice is unreliable fail. Moreover, it seems to exhibit a significant degree of self-support. By the argument sketched in (ii) it follows that it is rational for someone who has the relevant experiences to engage in the practice of basing religious beliefs on these experiences, and hence to attribute reliability to that practice.

What are we to think of this argument? A closer look at it, I believe, reveals some serious problems.

## 4. From Practical to Epistemic Rationality?

Let us summarize Alston's argument as outlined thus far and then analyze it step by step. He believes himself to have shown that, first, despite the problem of epistemic circularity, it is nevertheless rational to engage in *SP* and *MP*. The question is how this result connects up with the reliability condition that Alston found necessary to adopt in his account of epistemic justification. There is a connection, he says, but it is indirect. Engaging in a doxastic practice commits one to attributing reliability to that practice, just as believing that *p* commits one to the truth of *p*. Being thus committed does not

involve consciously judging the practice to be reliable; such a commitment only means that it would be incoherent not to judge the practice to be reliable when the question arises. In a next step Alston argues that, if he has shown that it is *rational* to engage in the practices in question, he has shown that it is rational to suppose these practices to be reliable.

It will be helpful to isolate the various premises and conclusions involved in this reasoning. The first premise is that believing that *p* commits one to attributing truth to *p*. Substituting Alston's characterization of the commitment relation, this gives us:

(1) It is incoherent to believe that *p* and abstain from judging that *p* is true if the question arises.

Next, Alston argues:

(2) Engaging in a doxastic practice is related to judging that practice to be reliable (if the question arises) in the same way as believing that *p* is related to judging that *p* is true (if the question arises).

From these premises he infers:

(3) It is incoherent to engage in a doxastic practice and to abstain from judging that practice to be reliable if the question arises.

Now this interim conclusion does not yet get us very far. For what about wildly irrational doxastic practices? Suppose I decide from now on to determine the future of the stock market by crystal-ball gazing. Then, by the argument just outlined, I would be committed to regarding that practice as reliable. But clearly, something would be seriously wrong with this judgment. What is wrong is of course that it is irrational to adopt that practice in the first place. This is why we need to assess the prior question whether a given doxastic practice is *rationally* engaged in. Now, Alston argues that he has shown that:

(4) Engaging in *SP* and *MP* is rational.

But then, he argues, we can conclude:

(5) These practices can also rationally be judged to be reliable.

There is, I believe, more than one problem with this reasoning. First, as Matthias Steup, who reconstructs steps (1)–(3) along similar lines, has argued, (3) appears doubtful (Steup 1997). Is it really true that engaging in a doxastic practice commits one to its reliability? A positive answer would have the following, highly dubious consequence. If such a claim were true, taking a skeptical stance with respect to the reliability of our standard doxastic practices

could simply be dismissed by pointing out that this would be an incoherent or "pragmatically self-refuting" position. But this would be an inadequate reaction. There may be good ways of undermining skepticism; but if Alston were right the skeptic could be refuted just by pointing out that he himself engages in the very practices he questions. "Well," we could say, "don't you yourself engage in the doxastic practices you dismiss as epistemically 'uncredentialed'? Of course you do, and you cannot do otherwise. But then you are committed to supposing these practices to be reliable. Hence you are not entitled to your skeptical position." This can hardly be the right story. A refutation of philosophical skepticism will, if at all possible, not be *that* easy. And the reason is that the mere fact that one engages, e.g., in *SP* does *not* commit one to judge that practice to be reliable if the question arises. Hence, since (3) follows from (1) and (2), at least one of these premises must be wrong.

In addition to this, a serious problem for Alston's account arises from his problematic and unclear use of the term "rationality." Exactly what kind of rationality is at issue? While often talking about rationality simpliciter, Alston also says that, strictly speaking, it is some kind of *practical rationality* that attaches to the doxastic practices in question. How, then, does he think of that practical rationality? It is practically rational to engage in *SP* and other established doxastic practices, Alston argues, because there is no alternative:

> What alternative is there to employing the practices we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon or replace only with great difficulty if at all? The classical skeptical alternative is not a serious possibility. In the press of life we are continually forming beliefs about the physical environment, other people, how things are likely to turn out, and so on, whether we will or not (1991, p. 150, cf. also p. 168).

The idea here seems to be that, first, it is practically impossible not to engage in the doxastic practices of the standard package. Second, "what possible rationale could there be for [...] a substitution?" (p. 150) We would not be in a better position, Alston says, when trying to provide non-circular support for the reliability of alternative doxastic practices (ibid.).

Now consider, not the rationality of *engaging* in a doxastic practice, but the rationality of *judging* such a practice to be reliable. Take, for instance, *SP*. It is, Alston admits, "only that same *practical* rationality that carries over, via the commitment relation, to the judgment that *SP* is reliable" (1991, p. 180). The same holds for other doxastic practices. But then what (5) really says is this:

(5*) It is *practically* rational to judge that *SP* and *MP* are reliable.

Now, the fact that it is practically rational to engage in a doxastic practice, says Alston, arises from the fact that there are no alternatives and, even if there were alternatives, there would be no rationale for adopting them. Hence if that kind of practical rationality carries over to the *judgment* that *MP* is reliable, one would expect that judgment to share these two features. But it doesn't.[10] For, first, there *are* alternatives, namely judging the mystical practice to be unreliable, or at least suspending judgment on this question. Second, it is not at all clear that we should not at least adopt this second course. Alston's whole analysis of epistemic circularity seems to give us good reasons to do this.

Finally it should be noted that none of this tells us very much about the crucial question how exactly the practical rationality at issue is to be construed. What exactly does it mean to say that it is "practically rational" to make a *judgment*? I find Alston hard to understand on this point. The problem is this.

Alston explicitly admits that he has shown "at most, that engaging in *SP* [and the other practices in question, C.J.] enjoys a *practical* rationality; it is a reasonable thing to do, given our aims and our situation. [...] We have not shown that it is rational in an *epistemic* sense [to believe(?), C.J.] that *SP* is reliable, where the latter involves showing that it is at least probably true that *SP* is reliable. This must be admitted" (1991, p. 180). However, in the very same paragraph he goes on to say that his argument is by no means without "epistemic significance." For if

> we are unable to find noncircular indications of the truth of the reliability judgment, it is certainly relevant to show that it enjoys some other kind of rationality. It is, after all, not irrelevant to our basic aim at believing the true and abstaining from believing the false, that *SP* and other established doxastic practices constitute the most reasonable procedures to use, so far as we can judge, when trying to realize that aim" (ibid., my italics).

These remarks are puzzling. First, if the kind of rationality under consideration *is* relevant to the aim of believing what is true and not believing what is false, then why are we not dealing with some form of epistemic rationality? Isn't it precisely these aims that distinguish epistemic rationality from other kinds of rationality?

Second, what rationale is there for the claim that supposing *SP* to be reliable is rational with respect to the truth goal of believing? Alston's whole case about epistemic circularity seems to show that there isn't any such rationale. The situation seems to me to be this. (i) Either the "practical

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[10] Steup 1997 was the first to call attention to this problem as well.

rationality" of supposing *SP* and *MP* to be reliable has nothing to do with getting into a good position with respect to the truth of that supposition. (Alston, as we have seen, explicitly denies this, even though he also denies (inconsistently, I believe) that the rationality in question is some form of epistemic rationality.) (ii) Or the rationality in question does have something to do with truth. Alston explicitly endorses (ii). In that case, however, what is at issue *is* a form of epistemic rationality. But there seems to be no good reason for the conclusion that this status really does attach to "supposing *SP* (and *MP*) to be reliable."

In fact I believe that (ii) is the correct way of looking at the matter. For as Alston himself acknowledges, practical rationality, whatever exactly it is, must be defined with respect to aims. What, then, is the aim of engaging in a *doxastic* practice? It would seem to be the aim to generate (and preserve) true beliefs and not generate (and preserve) false ones. But this is precisely the aim that defines epistemic rationality. The problem is that an epistemic subject situated in what we may call the "informed epistemic position," i.e., a position that acknowledges the problem of epistemic circularity, has no reason to assume that s/he pursues that aim when supposing *SP* or other doxastic practices to be reliable.

For these reasons, and the problems mentioned earlier, I conclude that Alston's central epistemological argument must be rejected. It does not warrant the conclusion that it is rational to suppose that the doxastic practices of the standard package and the practice of forming religious beliefs on the basis of mystical experience are reliable.

What overall conclusion should we draw from this? Should we conclude that Alston's project is entirely lost, and that his account has no bearing whatever on *de-jure* questions about experientially based religious belief? I do not think so, and in the remainder of this paper I will outline an account which I believe can salvage some of Alston's main ideas.

## 5. Religious Experience and Epistemic Responsibility

Alston's reasoning, I argued, does not license his conclusion that one can rationally suppose *MP* to be a reliable doxastic practice. But perhaps it supports a different conclusion. Perhaps it supports the conclusion that engaging in that practice enjoys some other kind of positive epistemic status. A status that seems to me to be a good candidate is *epistemic responsibility*. Let us say that:

(R) A subject *S* is epistemically responsible in generating or sustaining the belief *B* at *t* if and only if
  (i) in generating or sustaining *B* at *t* *S* engages in a doxastic practice that does not violate any reasonable epistemic norms that *S* is able to conform to at *t*, and
  (ii) *S* is generating or sustaining *B* at *t* because *S* conforms to the relevant norms at *t*.[11]

In the remaining pages of this paper I shall flesh out this definition, incorporating what I take to be some of Alston's main epistemological insights.[12]

First, some general comments. The reason for saying that the norms must be such that the subject is able to conform to them is that epistemic responsibility is an internalist notion of epistemic justification. It has something to do with holding beliefs conscientiously, i.e., in a way that is right *so far as the subject can tell*. Hence norms to the effect that one should hold beliefs that originate in objectively reliable doxastic practices are ruled out, for whether this condition is fulfilled or not is beyond a subject's epistemic perspective. We cannot deliberately follow externalist norms of epistemic excellence.[13]

The reason for saying that the subject must hold the belief *because* it conforms to the relevant norms is that it does not suffice for responsible belief formation that the belief is merely in *accordance* with the relevant norms. This has been pointed out by John Greco (Greco 1990, p. 255f.). Compare the Kantian distinction between doing something merely in accordance with the moral law, which can be a lucky accident and is independent of moral motivations, and doing it *for the sake of the moral law*. Just as it is only the

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[11] For a similar idea cf. John Greco's account of epistemically responsible belief, as developed in Greco 1990.

[12] Norman Kretzmann offers an analysis of Alston's argument that goes in a similar direction as the one I am suggesting. Kretzmann, too, believes that Alston's practical rationality argument does not warrant the desired conclusion, but that it is dependent on some kind of deontological concept of justification. Kretzmann, however, seems to think of that concept not in terms of epistemic, but in terms of practical justification. In order to bring home his point about rationally supposing the mystical practice to be reliable, Kretzmann argues, Alston would have to admit that Natural Theology is needed. Cf. Kretzmann 1995.

[13] Pollock and Cruz 1999, chapter 5, argue that on closer inspection it becomes clear that an internalist interpretation of the notion of an epistemic norm is the only acceptable interpretation. I cannot go into the arguments for this position here, but my reason for explicitly saying that it must be possible to deliberately act in conformance with the norms is that *prima facie* there is also an "objectivist" reading of the concept of a norm, according to which we may say, for instance, that generating perceptual beliefs on the basis of *un*reliable mechanisms falls "outside the norm."

latter kind of action that is morally praiseworthy, it is only the formation of belief in such a stronger sense of *conformance* with the relevant norms that makes a doxastic process responsible.

What makes an internalist epistemic norm reasonable? This is a complex question that cannot be fully answered in the remaining pages of this paper. I want to conclude, however, by outlining a few desiderata that are strongly suggested by the foregoing discussion. At least the following conditions should be integrated into those norms.

1. *Grounds must exist.* First, if we accept, with Alston, that epistemic justification requires that there *be* internal grounds for a belief, i.e., other beliefs or non-doxastic mental states that serve as justifiers, then holding a belief without having any such grounds is epistemically irresponsible. The set of reasonable epistemic norms will have to include the requirement that a belief *B* be supported by reasons or non-propositional grounds.

2. *The belief must be based on grounds.* Second, for reasons mentioned in section 2, the norms we are looking for should include the postulate that beliefs be *based* on reasons or non-propositional grounds, in the sense that they function as psychological motivations for holding the beliefs. Thus our first two conditions exclude two different kinds of situations. Case one: *S* does not have any grounds at all for holding a given belief – the belief is literally groundless, it has just come to *S*'s mind. Case two: *S* "has" an internal ground, in the sense that there are other beliefs or non-propositional grounds in *S*'s noetic system that *could* function as justifiers, but *S* does not base the belief on these grounds.

3. *The subject need not be able to show in an epistemically non-circular way that the doxastic practice s/he engages in is reliable.* This is a crucial point. If Alston is right in his analyses of epistemic circularity, the norms in question should *not* include any requirements to the effect that the subject has good non-circular reasons for supposing the relevant doxastic practices to be reliable. If that is impossible, it cannot be a reasonable normative requirement to have such reasons. Still, it may be asked, how can it possibly be maintained that it is not epistemically irresponsible to engage in a doxastic practice that one has no non-circular reasons to regard as reliable? Is this not a highly counterintuitive claim? I do not think so. Compare a situation where your choice is limited to a number of actions each of which is *morally* just as bad as any other. If there is no better alternative, it is not irresponsible for you to choose one of these actions, even if you would wish there were a better one.

4. *The subject must believe that there are no overriding grounds for supposing the doxastic practice to be unreliable.* It is epistemically irresponsible to engage in a doxastic practice that one believes to have overriding reasons for rejecting as unreliable. If, for instance, *S* realizes that a doxastic practice yields significant intra- or interpractical inconsistencies, it would be epistemically irresponsible for *S* to engage in that practice.

Much more would have to be said about each of these desiderata, and the list is by no means exhaustive. But in the present context I must leave matters at this point. I want to conclude with a few remarks on three potential objections to what has been said in this section.

## 6. Mistaken Objections against the Notion of Epistemic Responsibility

"The account of epistemic responsibility you present," it may be criticized, "is a deontological account of epistemic justification. But for familiar reasons, accounts of this family must be rejected." Well, I don't agree that deontological notions of epistemic justification should be rejected *tout court*. The most influential objections to such notions are these. (i) The fulfillment of deontological requirements does not suffice to turn a true belief into knowledge; (ii) there are kinds of mental states to which such requirements cannot be applied; (iii) deontological theories of epistemic justification imply an untenable commitment to doxastic voluntarism.[14] None of these points undermines the position I have advocated.

First, knowledge has not been at issue. Following common practice, I have indeed been talking about *epistemic* justification, and this term, to be sure, is etymologically rooted in the notion of knowledge. This should not obscure the fact, however, that our topic has only been what, perhaps more appropriately, may be called *doxastic* justification. The question was what kind of valuable status certain beliefs might have, independently of the question whether that status suffices to turn these beliefs, if true, into knowledge.

The "objection from inapplicability" fails as well. This objection draws upon the fact that deontological concepts of epistemic (or doxastic) justification presuppose that the subject has a choice when forming a belief. But this, it would seem, is often not the case. Consider, for example, beliefs I form about my own conscious mental states. Such states are "self-

[14] The first two objections are, e.g., extensively developed in Plantinga 1993, chapter 2; the classic presentation of the objection from doxastic voluntarism is Alston 1988b.

intimating": when I have a certain perceptual experience I just can't help believing that I have it. But how, then, can such beliefs be formed responsibly or irresponsibly? That is indeed a problem for an unrestricted deontological account of epistemic justification. But again, this problem has no bearing on the topic of this paper. For what is at issue is not people's beliefs to the effect that they have certain experiences, but the epistemic legitimacy of moving from certain experiences to the belief that it is some supernatural reality that causes them. And, as argued earlier, as regards such moves there certainly is a choice, namely to withhold a religious interpretation of these experiences or even to believe that they have no super-natural cause.

Finally, what about doxastic voluntarism? Here the challenge is defused by the fact that we are dealing with doxastic *practices*. It seems clear to me that we have at least considerable indirect control over our belief forming habits. I could easily train myself, for example, not to be too gullible regarding the stories my neighbor to the right tells me about my neighbor to the left. Contrary to what some epistemologists claim, we can even influence our perceptual doxastic practices. Consider Alexius Meinong's example of the aging Austrian.[15] A man has been living for many years next to a garden where, when the wind blows, an Aeolian harp is whistling and thereby keeping the birds away. The man's hearing deteriorates, but at the same time he develops, unbeknownst to him, a tendency to have auditory hallucinations. It thus happens that he sometimes hallucinates the sounds of the harp just when it is actually whistling. Now, I agree that this example (which is a kind of Gettier-case) undermines the idea that deontological justification suffices to turn a true belief into knowledge. As pointed out above, however, knowledge is not our present concern. Our focus is on doxastic justification. Suppose that one day our aging Austrian is presented with good evidence to the effect that in fact he cannot hear the harp any more, and that, unfortunately, all the auditory experiences he still has are hallucinations. In that case it would be epistemically irresponsible for the man not to change his auditory doxastic practices, and I cannot see what would prevent him from doing so. Why should it be beyond his powers to train himself from now on to abstain from moving from the characteristic auditory experience to the belief that the harp is whistling? In general it seems that we *can* voluntarily revise or abandon a doxastic practice, and we should do so if we have good reasons for revising or abandoning it.

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[15] Meinong 1906, p. 398. This example has been rediscovered for epistemological discussions by Roderick Chisholm 1989, p. 92.

## 7. Conclusion

I have argued that Alston's argument for the rationality of supposing that the doxastic practice of basing theistic belief on mystical experience is reliable fails. I have argued for the conditional view, however, that, *if* it is true that, even when being in an "informed position" regarding epistemic circularity, people have no overriding reasons for believing that practice to be unreliable, they are epistemically responsible when forming religious beliefs on that basis. Whether the antecedent of that conditional is true is a complicated and controversial question. But if it is true, the mystic is within his epistemic rights. He cannot be blamed for engaging in that practice, because he acts responsibly from an epistemic point of view.

Alston insists that he has shown "that it is rational to take *SP* and other established doxastic practices to be reliable" and hence rational to suppose that beliefs formed within these practices "are justified in the stronger, truth-conducive sense" (1991, p. 183). I have argued that this conclusion is unwarranted. On the other hand, Alston explicitly agrees that his results may also "be couched in terms of a weaker, non-truthconducive concept of epistemic justification." "I have no objection to doing so," he writes, "provided the rest of the picture is not neglected" (1991, p. 182). It is just such a weaker concept of epistemic justification with which Alston began his examinations of the epistemology of religious belief in the 1980s.[16] I am happy to conclude, therefore, that the argument developed in this paper does not amount to a root-and-branch dismissal of everything Alston has ever said about the epistemology of religious experience. Instead, it can be read as a defense of a position Alston himself favored in the early 1980s against a position he adopts ten years later.[17]

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[16] Cf. Alston 1982 and Alston 1983.

[17] For helpful discussions or comments on an earlier draft of this paper I am grateful to Thane Naberhaus and Richard Swinburne.

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Carlos Ulises Moulines /
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