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GOD'S NATURE AND THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Chris Eberle

If something like Reformed Epistemology is correct, an agent is innocent in regarding certain ways of forming beliefs to be reliable until those ways have been proven guilty. An important species of argument purporting to show guilt (1) identifies the ways of forming beliefs at the core of our cognitive activity, (2) isolates the features of our core practices which account for their reliability, and (3) determines whether or not peripheral practices which ought to have those features enjoy at least their functional equivalents. An example. Sense perception is at the heart of our cognitive activity; a feature of sense-perception which provides us with confidence in its reliability is that we can subject sense-perceptual beliefs to intersubjective criticism — others can check our beliefs. Beliefs about God formed on the basis of religious experience cannot be so checked and therefore lack positive epistemic status.

An important response to such criticism consists of arguing that the difference between two ways of forming beliefs is just what we should expect given some relevant difference between the subject matters of those two ways of forming beliefs. This species of response employs what I call 'the Ontological Principle,' viz., that the nature or characteristics of an object constrain the way an agent ought to form beliefs about that object.

In this paper, I attempt to provide a rationale for the Ontological Principle. I argue as follows. Any epistemic norm which requires of an agent that she enter into causal relations with an object which she cannot in the 'nature' of the case enter lacks epistemic merit — it violates the ought implies can dictum. Because the epistemic norms properly governing the cognitive activity of a given agent are constrained by the causal relations possible between an agent and an object of belief, and because the causal relations possible between an object of belief and an agent are determined in part by the characteristics of the object of belief, the epistemic norms properly governing the cognitive activity of a given agent are determined in part by the characteristics of the object of belief. That is, the Ontological Principle is true.

I

"Reformed Epistemologists" Plantinga, Alston and Wolterstorff have argued, successfully by my lights, for the following position. (1) Every cognitive agent cannot but rely on a set of belief-forming practices, e.g., sense-perception, introspection, memory and testimony, for which she can

provide no non-circular discursive justification. (2) The most powerful and venerable set of restrictions demarcating the belief-forming practices which require discursive redemption from those which do not, viz., classical foundationalism, is self-referentially incoherent, unduly restrictive, or arbitrary. (3) Once the vicissitudes of classical foundationalism are exposed, there is no reason why a religious way of forming beliefs ought not count as one of those practices in which an agent may engage without providing discursive justification for so doing. Religious practices of forming beliefs enjoy a *presumptive innocence*. (4) That a belief-forming practice enjoys a presumptive innocence does not insure those who engage in that practice of "diplomatic immunity" from critical reflection; rather, critical reflection assumes the burden of a proof of guilt. Religious practices of forming beliefs are innocent *until proven guilty*.

Critics frequently attempt to show guilt by *comparison criticism*. The structure of comparison criticism is as follows (we will attend to some of the content shortly). Consider two practices, Alpha and Beta. Suppose that we are justly confident of Beta's trustworthiness, that it gives rise to a sufficiently high proportion of true to false beliefs. We have identified various epistemic excellences which Beta possesses and are justly confident that its possession of those excellences accounts for Beta's providing us with access to reality. Alpha, however, lacks one of those excellences, E, or any functionally equivalent excellence for E. If both Alpha and Beta ought to have some such excellence, we infer (*ceteris paribus*) that the epistemic status Alpha enjoys is lower than that enjoyed by Beta; and if E is a particularly important property, we may conclude that Alpha enjoys no positive epistemic status whatsoever. In short, by comparing what we know about the kinds of activities that put one in touch with the truth with what we know about the way in which practitioners of Alpha form beliefs, we attempt to determine whether or not forming beliefs in the Alpha-type way is a good thing from the epistemic point of view.

Comparison criticism is an important species of argumentation,¹ particularly if the Reformed strategy (or some relevantly similar strategy) is ultimately defensible. Why? Comparison criticism enables us to engage in critical reflection in a principled manner even given the limitations imposed on us by our inability to attain a God's-eye view of our epistemic situation. One who levels such a critique is free to admit what many proponents of "naturalistic epistemology" have been urging, viz., that none of us has any idea of the features of a practice that facilitate reliable belief formation other than by engaging in actual ways of forming beliefs. By engaging in ways of forming beliefs to which we cannot but impute a presumptive innocence, we are able to acquire some understanding of how we can come into contact with reality. We may subsequently employ that understanding to criticize other ways of forming beliefs.

Unfortunately, comparison criticism harbors potential for the uncritical rejection of legitimate practices of forming beliefs. The crucial problem for any such criticism is to show of an excellence E internal to one practice that another practice which in fact lacks E ought to have E. Although E may be crucial to one practice's capacity to put an agent in touch with reality, the very same excellence may be superfluous or even

counterproductive for a different practice. To reject the latter practice because it lacks E would be a travesty.

Many religious apologists attempt to defuse comparison criticism by articulating what they take to be the epistemic constraints imposed on an agent by the nature of that about which they form beliefs. They appeal, in short, to what I shall call the Ontological Principle, viz., that the way in which we form beliefs about an object ought to be constrained by the nature of that object. Whether or not we ought to require of a given practice that it have some excellence E depends, in part, on the nature of that about which members of that practice form beliefs. Now the Ontological Principle has a great deal of intuitive plausibility and, as a consequence, those who employ it do not, apparently, believe that they need to justify that principle. I will attempt to remedy that oversight in this essay.

The path we will travel to get to that point, however, will be somewhat circuitous. In the next section, I articulate a familiar comparison criticism of a very common religious belief-forming practice, viz., that of forming beliefs about God on the basis of "religious experience." In the third section, I will relate a powerful response to that criticism, one which essentially employs the Ontological Principle. In section four, I explain what I mean by that principle and then, in section five, provide several illustrations intended to motivate interest in that principle. Only in the sixth and seventh sections do I provide reason to believe that it is true. In section eight, I return to the topic of comparison criticism and attempt to identify the promising strategy the Ontological Principle holds for the religious apologist faced with such a criticism. And in a concluding section, I mention several issues I fail to resolve in the ensuing discussion.

II

William Alston claims that there is a way of forming beliefs, *mystical perception*, in which "the experience, or as I shall say, the perception of God, plays a role with respect to beliefs about God importantly analogous to that played by sense-perception with respect to beliefs about the physical world."² Mystical Perception (MP) is a socially established way of forming beliefs about God on the basis of putative manifestations of God to the believer; MP is what Alston calls a *doxastic practice* (DP). A doxastic practice is constituted both by a family of dispositions to form beliefs with a certain content upon being in a certain kind of mental state as well as a set of beliefs and procedures by which an agent may determine whether beliefs with initial credibility deserve continued adherence. (Alston calls this latter feature of a doxastic practice its *override system*.) Following the Reformed strategy, Alston argues that MP enjoys the presumptive innocence we have no reason not to accord to any and every fundamental way of forming beliefs. Each human being forms beliefs by engaging in the standard package of sense-perception, introspection, rational intuition, and memory; we have as yet no sound, non-circular argument which shows that any of those basic practices are reli-

able; and yet we are epistemically justified in regarding them as reliable so long as we have no reason to think otherwise. Similarly for MP; any agent who engages in MP is entitled to regard it as reliable without argument unless provided with reason to regard it as unreliable.

And attempts to prove its guilt are certainly forthcoming. Consider the following. Alston denies that perception of God is self-authenticating, incorrigible, indubitable, or any other property of that ilk. Any DP worth its salt is one in which agents are capable of determining whether or not grounds which ordinarily indicate the truth of some belief do, in this instance, so indicate. Because our beliefs are defeasible, every legitimate DP must allow for the distinction between *prima facie* and *ultima facie* justification. In order for an agent so to distinguish, she needs to have at her disposal tests whereby beliefs with initial credibility (*prima facie* justification) may be checked for justification all things considered (*ultima facie* justification). That is, every DP must, on pain of epistemic illegitimacy, enjoy an adequate overrider system.

Various critics of MP argue that its overrider system is not an adequate means for evaluating *manifestation beliefs* (or M-beliefs, those formed on the basis of a putative manifestation of God to the believer).³ Why? Compare it to the overrider system of a DP at the core of our cognitive activity and which we are compelled to regard as reliable. Consider sense-perception's (SP) overrider system, as it relates to checking the reports of others that they have perceived some object. When an agent claims to have seen a snark in the woods, we have means of checking her assertion: we follow her trail back to the place where she claimed to have seen the snark, search for evidence of snarks (footprints, stool, cigarette butts, etc.), and make our determination on the basis of what any of us can discern. If her story fails to check out after the appropriate kind of investigation, then we regard her assertion as false, and the utterer of that assertion as deceptive, deluded, mistaken, credulous, etc.

Our confidence in making that judgment is based on the fact that the objects of SP are **publicly available**, i.e., that which one agent claims to have perceived is perceivable (in principle) by any of us and by our employing the same cognitive faculties she would have had to employ were she to have perceived a snark. Because the objects of SP are publicly available, all who engage in SP can in principle agree upon the conditions in which it is possible to perceive them. And because the conditions in which it is possible to perceive objects may be determined by any practitioner of SP, claims about those objects are intersubjectively evaluable. Anyone can evaluate sense-perceptual claims and can evaluate them by appeal to criteria everyone can agree on. In short, because we can "specify conditions under which the experience of one subject is relevant to the confirmation or disconfirmation of the perceptual report of another subject," we are able to engage "in the critical examination of sense-perceptual reports."⁴

That sense-perceptual beliefs are intersubjectively evaluable substantiates our confidence in the presumptive innocence of SP. Why? The heart of the answer is simple: human beings are fallible; by having other agents check our assertions, agents who may lack our particular epis-

temic vices, we raise the probability that a given perceptual belief is true. The public availability of the objects of perception renders us able more adequately to assess the beliefs formed about those objects, and thus increases our confidence in the truth of particular judgments. If, for this reason, we are rightly confident of most of the judgments we make by engaging in SP, we are rightly confident of SP's reliability.

Obviously, those who engage in MP enjoy no such intersubjective evaluation of M-beliefs. Why? Because God is not available under conditions participants in MP may determine as those in which an agent typically perceives God. We have no idea under what conditions God presents himself to an agent's consciousness, and therefore have no idea where, when, and how God manifests himself, and therefore cannot disconfirm an agent's claim that this has in fact happened. And this counts against the epistemic standing of MP: the lack of adequate checks to M-belief formation renders MP suspect.

Clearly, the objection with which Alston is concerned is a species of comparison criticism. Those who engage in MP cannot subject their M-beliefs to intersubjective evaluation, whereas those who engage in SP can. That our sense-perceptual beliefs can be subjected to intersubjective criticism — not to mention that they routinely are and come off pretty well on the whole — confirms the confidence we initially place in its reliability. That M-beliefs are not so subject, and that they lack any functional equivalent for intersubjective criticism, renders MP suspect.

III

As I noted previously, the vulnerable step in a comparison criticism will be the claim that a DP which lacks a given feature must have that feature in order to enjoy positive epistemic status. Alston's response focuses on just that step. The objection, according to Alston, is a "glaring example of epistemic imperialism."⁵ The critic proposes to impose on agents who engage in MP procedures for checking beliefs properly required only of SP.

The crucial point is the following. In order to determine which procedures are appropriate for the overrider system of a given DP, one cannot but appeal to the beliefs already formed via that practice. For example, there is no way to determine a priori which procedures will allow us to check beliefs formed about the natural environment without relying on our prior knowledge of what the natural world is like. As a consequence of engaging in SP, we learn that the natural environment is composed of enduring physical objects which casually interact with other physical objects in a lawlike manner. Because we have acquired knowledge of the regularities exhibited by objects in the natural environment, we may therefore isolate the conditions in which it is possible for a given agent to perceive a given object. And having learned that, we justifiably judge that the intersubjective evaluability of claims about the objects of sense perception is a *sine qua non* of any genuine practice of forming beliefs about the natural world. In short, according to Alston, "it is on the basis of what SP has revealed to us about the nature of its subject

matter that we take its deliverances to be subject to assessment in terms of the perceptions of properly qualified others."⁶

Just as with SP, those who engage in MP cannot but, and, therefore, may, legitimately employ that practice to construct an understanding of its subject matter in order to determine what may appropriately be required of their practice's over-rider system. Determining what tests are required in order to corroborate or to discredit M-beliefs is a circular process: agents form an understanding of God's nature and purposes, as well as the way He interacts with those who perceive Him, and on the basis of that understanding formulate procedures for checking M-beliefs. These procedures are subsequently employed to evaluate the M-beliefs of those who engage in MP and, indeed, perhaps those very beliefs on the basis of which a given procedure was deemed appropriate.

Of what relevance is this to the objection at hand? The understanding of God internal to MP is that of a sovereign, immaterial being who presents Himself non-sensorily and (for all we can tell) non-systematically to human beings. While the beliefs formed on the basis of those perceptions reveal that God possesses enduring virtues like compassion and justice, they reveal no dependable regularities in the way God interacts with human beings which render possible predictions of divine manifestations. Indeed, the understanding of God internal to MP provides those who engage in that practice with reason to believe that God's action exhibits no regularities of the sort proper to SP and thus no basis for predictions. Therefore, our being unable to test M-beliefs in the manner appropriate to SP cannot count as a good reason to regard it as unreliable. Rather, the understanding of God internal to MP warrants us in regarding this objection as imperialistic. Alston concludes:

The upshot of all this is that while what we have learned about the physical world from SP gives us the wherewithal to hold particular perceptual reports subject to a decisive test in terms of what relevant others perceive, what we have learned from God and His relations to His creation, from [MP] and other sources, gives us reason to suppose that no such tests are available here.⁷

IV

Alston's response employs what I have found to be a fairly common tactic amongst religious apologists. Alston appeals to what I have called *The Ontological Principle*: the nature of God differs from the nature of physical objects, and that difference justifies us in claiming that M-beliefs ought not be held accountable to the kind of intersubjective criticism properly imposed on sense-perceptual beliefs. Thomas Torrance, another religious apologist who wields the Ontological Principle to defend religious belief, writes,

It is always the nature of things that must prescribe for us the specific mode of rationality that we must adopt toward them, and prescribe also the form of verification apposite to them, and therefore it is a major part of scientific activity to reach clear con-

victions as to the distinctive nature of what we are seeking to know in order that we may develop and operate with the distinctive categories demanded of us.⁸

As Alston employs the Ontological Principle to defend religious experience as a source of justified belief about God, Torrance employs that principle to defend revelation as a source of justified belief about God.

Canonically put, the Ontological Principle is the claim that,

(OP): the characteristics of an object ought to constrain the norms an agent employs to evaluate the beliefs she forms about that object.

Several notes by way of exposition. First, the Ontological Principle, as formulated, is completely *general*. It applies to beliefs about objects of any sort, not just to beliefs formed about God. So, although religious apologists may, and do, employ it to happy effect, those concerned with the epistemic imperialism visited upon non-religious ways of forming beliefs are free to do the same. (I believe that a fuller appreciation of OP would render disputes central to the philosophy of social science and of mind more fruitful.)

Second, by *object*, I do not only mean an independently existing, discrete entity, of the sort paradigmatically exemplified by the typical chair, banana, etc. Mental states are "objects" about which agents form beliefs, as are social institutions, none of which exist independently of human cognizers, and yet their distinctive ontological makeup imposes constraints on the way a rational agent forms beliefs about them. By *object*, then, I mean the *subject matter* about which an agent forms beliefs, or even more prosaically, whatever it is about which an agent forms beliefs.

Third, *characteristics* should be understood broadly, to include not just the ontological makeup of an object of belief, the stuff of which it is composed, but also the form that stuff takes.⁹ Birds and plants may be composed of the same stuff, but, because that stuff is organized very differently in plants than in animals, the way in which a rational agent forms beliefs about them differs significantly. This becomes particularly important when we concern ourselves with the way we ought to form beliefs about God. The characteristics of God which impose constraints on us are not just, though they certainly include, God's incorporeal nature and God's transcendence; they also include the ways in which God has decided to communicate information otherwise unknowable to us. That is, they include the intentions and purposes God, as a free agent, pursues.

Fourth, the characteristics of an object *constrain* the norms an agent ought to employ to evaluate her beliefs, but they do not determine exactly what those norms are. Only some of the norms which are improperly employed to evaluate the epistemic status of a given type of belief are rendered improper by the object's nature and characteristics. Some are improper because, for example, an agent does not have access to the cognitive apparatus which is a condition of forming beliefs in the way required by a given norm. (In the terminology developed later, both

practice- and object-imposed constraints exclude epistemic norms.)

Fifth, to affirm of a norm that it is improperly employed to evaluate beliefs of a certain sort is not to claim that beliefs of that sort are subject to entirely different norms than those proper to other practices. It is to claim that there are *some* legitimate differences between one practice and others, not that the former is absolutely different from the latter. All practices, for example, are no doubt subject to the laws of logic; every practice which gives rise to massive amounts of self-contradictory beliefs cannot be reliable and thus is epistemically out of bounds. Amongst the norms internal to the overrider systems of distinct doxastic practices, then, there will be similarity and difference, unity and plurality.

As I noted above, neither Torrance nor Alston provide a rationale for OP; they rely on its intuitive power, even though it plays a crucial role in their apologetic agenda. I will present a rationale for that principle, and, briefly, indicate the way in which it may be employed to diffuse comparison criticisms of religious belief.

V

Before articulating a rationale for OP, I will present several examples I hope will render plausible the claim that *some* such principle is true (whether or not I have successfully identified what that is.)

Suppose that I saw a Venus Flytrap in the forest and I tell you about it, but you don't believe me. I can verify my belief if I retrace my steps until we return to the location at which I claim to have seen the Flytrap. If we cannot find the plant, witness no signs of its removal, and are not delusional or otherwise incapacitated, my claim to have seen the plant will have been compromised. If, however, I claim to have seen a rare species of bird, you don't believe that I have, you insist on returning to the location at which I claim to have seen the bird, you direct your attention to the very branch on which the bird was resting when I saw it, refuse to grant that my belief is true, and cite as grounds that the bird is not where I said it was, you are simply being unreasonable. Why? Plants are stationary; birds move. You insist on employing procedures to substantiate bird-beliefs that are proper to plant-beliefs and the like. We reasonably investigate claims about the latter in ways it would be irrational to investigate the former just because the first kind of object interacts with our cognitive faculties in a different way than does the second.

Consider another example. If there is a God, God is not a physical object. If there is a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri, it is a physical object. In virtue of God's essentially incorporeal nature, God can not reflect light. In virtue of its corporeal nature, the planet orbiting Alpha Centauri can. If we want to determine whether or not there is a planet orbiting Alpha Centauri, we hire an astronomer with an unbelievably powerful telescope; if the telescope is powerful enough, the astronomer skilled enough, and there actually is a planet there, she will detect it. If she doesn't, we conclude that Alpha Centauri is planetless. But no matter how powerful the telescope, no matter how assiduously the astronomer scours the heavens, she cannot expect to detect God amongst the celestial

beings she perceives. If she does not detect God, and thus concludes on that basis that the universe is godless, she is irrational.

Of course, not every example is as clear cut as are those mentioned in the previous paragraphs. For another example, and a more controversial one, consider the longstanding debate between those who believe that human *actions* are events of a sort different than human *behaviors* and that the properties making for that difference impose constraints on the way that we form beliefs about actions, constraints from which we are free when forming beliefs about bodily movements. I can determine without having any knowledge of an agent's intentions or beliefs whether or not water is poured from her hand on to her child's head; I cannot determine without access to her beliefs and intentions whether or not she is baptizing her baby. Because an agent's beliefs determine in part which action she performs, those who form beliefs about another agent's actions must have access to the latter's beliefs. The observer needs to find some way to determine what the actor's beliefs are and that cannot be accomplished merely by observing the relevant agent's physical movements. Thus, in order reliably to form beliefs about an agent's actions, we need to interpret (understand, empathize with, etc.) what that agent does, where interpretation (understanding, empathizing, etc.) is a very different kind of cognitive activity than that in which we must engage in order reliably to form beliefs about an agent's physical movements. Once again, because of a relevant difference between two objects of belief (in this case, two events), the epistemic desiderata proper to beliefs formed about one object properly differ from those formed about the other.

It seems to me that Charles Taylor, in his many writings on the philosophy of social science, theory of interpretation, etc. employs — without explicitly articulating, so far as I can tell — the Ontological Principle in defending the legitimacy of a non-scientistic approach to the way in which we form beliefs about human action. According to Taylor, human beings are very different kinds of entities than are, say, lemmings. Human beings are self-interpreting animals, because our beliefs about ourselves determine in part who we are and what we are.¹⁰ Lemmings lack beliefs about themselves, and hence none of their characteristics depend on their beliefs. This difference has great importance, according to Taylor, for the kind of checks and constraints we employ to evaluate theories about human agents and those we employ to evaluate theories about lemmings.¹¹ Because human beings are self-interpreting animals, the theories that a scientist forms about a human being can change the way a human being thinks of herself, thus altering the object of study in a way that the scientist doesn't alter the lemming when she studies it. As a consequence, the kind of exact prediction proper to theories in the hard sciences is not properly expected of beliefs in the social sciences.¹² Hence, it would be unreasonable to reject a theory formed about persons because it does not admit of disconfirmation through failed prediction. Rather, disconfirmation of social scientific theories ought to be evaluated in light of criteria internal to hermeneutics.¹³ To require of theories about self-interpreting animals that they be subject to

the kinds of checks properly imposed on natural scientific theories would be imperialistic.¹⁴

VI

Each of the preceding scenarios exemplifies the Ontological Principle in action. Epistemic desiderata proper to one doxastic practice are rejected as imperialistic impositions on another, and at the heart of the rationale for such rejection is a recognition of the epistemic relevance of some difference between the objects of belief. Illustrations are helpful, but are there principled considerations supporting the Ontological Principle? I think that there are.

If we are to form our beliefs in such a way as to achieve our central epistemic aim, viz., to achieve a high ratio of true to false beliefs, we must acquire information about the objects of our belief. The beliefs we form about an object must be generated from information about that object if our believing truly is not to be a lucky accident and thus a failure to discharge our central epistemic aim. We engage in various practices by which we gather information and thereby form beliefs: sense-perception, testimony, introspection, memory. Constructed as she is, the typical human being is capable of acquiring information about objects in her vicinity via the stimulation of her visual receptors by light generated or reflected by those objects, of her auditory receptors by sound waves reflected by those objects, of her olfactory receptors by odoriferous particles emitted by those objects, etc. Our five senses are not our only sources of information. We acquire information about our feelings, beliefs, desires, and the like not by sensory stimulation but by introspecting. And although memory and testimony are parasitic on other belief-forming practices for their inputs, and thus are not basic sources of beliefs, they are basic sources of epistemic justification.¹⁵ That is, memory and testimony are sources of information inaccessible to an agent unless she engages in those practices.

To be sure, if there are some objects discoverable by a sixth sense forever unattainable by those endowed with a constitution like ours, then it is impossible for us reliably to form beliefs about those objects. If some kinds of emotion are detectable only by the empathetic powers enjoyed by (so far as we know) science fictional characters, then agents (like us) who lack those powers are unable to acquire trustworthy information about those kinds of emotion. Although by rank speculation we may happen upon some truth or two, the means at our disposal are not conducive to an agent's discharging her central epistemic obligation with respect to those emotions.

That we are capable of engaging in certain practices but not others, then, imposes constraints on the way in which we can form beliefs. As finite epistemic agents, we can engage only in certain practices and thus may reliably form beliefs about only certain kinds of things. A bit of terminological legerdemain: I shall call any such constraint a **practice-imposed constraint**. A practice-imposed constraint is any limitation on the way in which an agent can acquire information to which she is sub-

ject in virtue of the belief-forming practices available (or unavailable) to her.

There are various sources of practice-imposed constraints. The most important source is an agent's constitution. Those outfitted with a well-functioning visual apparatus but not the means to form beliefs via sonar cannot form beliefs in the way that bats form beliefs. Human beings form beliefs about other people's beliefs principally by relying on testimony; those with the capacity to read minds are not so limited. Of course, an agent's constitution may be both extended and altered. An agent may employ her visual apparatus to form beliefs about subatomic particles by employing an electron microscope, a possibility foreclosed to those without the requisite technology. Those who enjoy the fruits of such technological sophistication have open to them possibilities inaccessible to the less fortunate. And it is but a short step from extending an agent's physical constitution to altering it. Perhaps future scientists, either via genetic engineering or some drastic operation, will be able to equip human beings with the ability to generate beliefs via sonar in addition to their normal visual capacities. The moral of the story is simply that every cognitive agent (save perhaps God) is subject to practice-imposed constraints but that we ought not be too confident about what those limitations are.

For certain of our core doxastic practices, the transmission of the information from that about which we form beliefs to our capacities requires that we be causally related to those objects. In order to acquire the information required to form our beliefs reliably, we must enter into causal relations of some sort with that about which we form beliefs.¹⁶ (I realize that these are treacherous waters, but there is nothing for it but to swim on, leaving the requisite qualifications for another venue.) Our intuitions about particular doxastic practices bears this out. Whatever the difficulties of the causal theory of perception, that an agent is causally related to the object putatively perceived is a necessary condition of any genuine perception of that object. An agent who forms a true belief about an object *O* on the basis of sensory impressions which accurately represent *O* does not succeed in perceiving *O*, and thus in reliably forming a perceptual belief about *O*, if *O* does not play a suitable causal role in the generation of her belief. Thus, suppose that I am seated in front of a large black-bellied stove, that I am having a visual experience as of such a stove, an experience generated by the stimulation of my visual receptors by light reflected from that stove, and that I thereby form the belief that there is in fact a large stove in front of me. So long as nothing bizarre occurs in the transpiring of those events, I no doubt form my belief reliably; so long as I have no reason to believe that anything fishy is going on, and so long as nothing fishy in fact occurs, I can hardly be anything but justified in forming beliefs as I do. But if someone, unbeknownst to me, slips an incredibly lifelike painting of the stove in between me and the stove, so that my visual perception of the painting gives rise to a visual experience phenomenologically indistinguishable from the visual experience I would have had when actually perceiving the stove, then I can hardly be said to be perceiving the stove and cer-

tainly not forming my beliefs reliably. The break in the causal chain originating with the stove and terminating in the stimulation of my sensory faculties precludes my having the kind of purchase on an object requisite for information gathering and thus reliable belief formation.

Similarly with other DPs. Suppose that ego stoked the fire in the pot-bellied stove, that alter saw him stake the stove, that as a consequence alter believed that he stoked the stove, and that alter continues to believe the same because she remembers that ego stoked the stove. Once again, barring bizarre circumstances, alter no doubt forms her beliefs reliably and justifiably. If, however, alter's memory of the event was wiped out as a consequence of severe brain damage suffered in a car accident, a further consequence of which is that she seems to recall vividly many events which never in fact occurred, and if alter recalls vividly that ego in fact stoked the stove, but does so as a consequence of her abnormal neurophysiological condition, then she has not in fact formed her beliefs about that event reliably. The requisite causal connection between past events and present recollection has been severed, rendering unreliable what would normally have been a reliable indication of the truth.

Or suppose that ego stoked the stove and mentioned that fact to several other folks who related the story to alter, who thereby formed the belief that ego stoked the fire. So long as the "transmission chain" linking alter to ego wends its way through the requisite competent authorities, alter's belief most likely enjoys justification.¹⁷ Suppose, however, that during the transmission of testimonial authority, an English speaker fully in mastery of her native language, utters to a French speaker that "Ego stoked the stove." If the latter lacks the capacity to understand any language other than her own, she cannot testify authoritatively to the claim that ego stoked the stove. Suppose that the French speaker enjoys the way "Ego stoked the stove" sounds, and persists in repeating it whenever she is addressed by English speakers. If alter happens to see her, and believes that she knows something about the event in question, and thus asks her if Ego stoked the stove (in English), and if our French speaker responds by uttering the sounds "Ego stoked the stove," the belief that alter forms thereby does not count as epistemically justified. Although there is a connection of some sort between ego's stoking the fire and alter's believing that ego stoked the fire, the connection is not of the appropriate sort; it is not the sort of causal connection between the object of belief and the believer which undergirds our testimonial DP.

So, then, if an agent is to form beliefs reliably, she must be capable of acquiring information about the object of her beliefs. The ways she has of requiring information are constrained by the DPs available to her. In order for the DPs available to her to enable her to acquire information, she must be causally related in an appropriate way to the object of her belief. No causal relation results in no information, and thus arbitrary belief.

If the ways in which we can reliably form beliefs are constrained by the kinds of causal underpinnings internal to the DPs available to us, they are further constrained by the kinds of causal relationships into which different objects of belief can enter. Given that human beings have the capacity visually to perceive physical objects, the characteristics

of different physical objects constrain the ways in which human beings can reliably form beliefs about those objects. Birds move around a lot; plants are stationary. In virtue of that difference, beliefs formed about birds must be checked very differently than those about plants. It isn't possible for an actual human being reliably to form beliefs about both birds and plants if she insists on checking both kinds of belief by employing the same set of procedures. Reliable belief formation is constrained by the characteristics of the object of belief.

Consider another example. Suppose that there exists a very strange artifact, the Holy Grail, which has the property that any cognitive agent who perceives that object is afflicted with permanent amnesia about its existence and location upon forming any belief about it. In virtue of its having that property, the Grail would be unable to enter into those causal relations partly constitutive of both our mnemonic and testimonial DPs. Clearly any objects about which we have amnesia are those about which we can form no reliable memory beliefs. And any object which no-one can remember is one to which no-one can testify. No doubt the Grail remains "undiscovered" because it has some such property.

Defenders of MP, like Alston, will be quick to point out that God, if God exists, cannot reflect light, emit odors, resist the touch of a hand, reflect sound waves; hence God cannot be tasted, seen, smelled, heard or touched.

Some more terminological legerdemain. An **object-imposed constraint** is a limitation on the way in which cognitive agents of a certain sort can reliably form beliefs about a certain kind of object, a limitation which obtains because of the kind of causal interactions into which that object's characteristics enable (or do not enable) that object to enter.

VII

Reliable belief-formation requires causal connection of some sort between objects and agents with the requisite causal properties. So long as it is possible for an agent to form beliefs about an object reliably (e.g., agent-imposed constraints do not render that object inaccessible), then any epistemic norm which requires of an agent that she enter into causal relations with that object into which she cannot enter because of object-imposed constraints is epistemically indefensible. And this for two reasons.

First, to require of an agent that she forms beliefs about an object in a reliable manner whilst evaluating her actions in light of epistemic norms which presuppose that she can enter into causal relations with that object into which she cannot enter is to require the impossible. But ought implies can; it is irrational to require of an agent that she perform an action she cannot perform. Hence, any norm which presupposes of an agent that she can enter into causal relations into which she cannot enter is irrational. Rather, an epistemic norm is rationally defensible only if it requires of an agent that she perform those actions it is possible for her to perform.

To require of an agent that she evaluate bird-beliefs in light of the checking procedures apposite to the checking of plant-beliefs presup-

poses that she can enter into the kind of causal relationship to birds which is a condition of the possibility of reliably forming beliefs about plants. But because birds move around a lot, no actual human being can relate to birds like she can relate to plants. (Unless, of course, the birds about which she forms beliefs are deceased.) Similarly, to require of beliefs about God that they be based upon grounds of the sort on which we ought to base our beliefs about planetary objects would be to require of an agent that she enter into causal relations with God she cannot, quite literally, in the nature of the case enter. God, not being a physical object, cannot reflect light and thus cannot stimulate our visual apparatus in the manner appropriate to planets and stars.

Second, it is unreasonable to require of agents who engage in a DP that they adhere to norms in light of which the beliefs so formed cannot but be judged as epistemically unjustified, even if those beliefs have been highly reliably formed. The norms in light of which we evaluate our beliefs must be sufficiently sensitive to enable us to detect whether those beliefs have been reliably formed or not — what other epistemologically sound justification could we produce for such a norm? Evaluating beliefs formed in a DP in light of norms they cannot but fail even if that DP is reliable is hardly an adequate way of discriminating between reliably and unreliably formed beliefs! But this is precisely what the critic does when she does not allow “the characteristics of the object to constrain how cognitive agents form beliefs about that object.” Even if an agent is forming beliefs about an object in the appropriate manner, and thus is causally related to the object of belief in the manner apposite to objects and agents of that kind, the critic requires of her that she adhere to norms which would rule reliably formed beliefs out of epistemic bounds. To rig the game so that it is impossible for beliefs formed in a practice — even if reliable — to pass evaluative muster lacks any epistemic merit.

What is the relevance of the two previous points to the status of the Ontological Principle? If certain norms lack epistemic merit because they require of an agent that she perform the impossible, and if what is impossible by way of reliable belief formation is determined in part by an object’s characteristics (capacity to fly, incorporeality, essential subjectivity, etc), then the fact that certain norms lack epistemic merit is a consequence, in part, of an object’s characteristics. But that is just a longwinded way of claiming that the Ontological Principle is true.

Let me sum up by laying out in its essentials the argument in support of the Ontological Principle.

- (1) In order reliably to form beliefs about a given object, an agent must acquire information about that object.
- (2) In order to acquire information about a given object, an agent must be causally connected to that object.
- (3) Hence, in order reliably to form beliefs about a given object, an agent must be causally connected to that object.

- (4) In order for an agent to be causally related to a given object, that object must have the requisite causal properties and she must have access to the requisite doxastic practices.
- (5) Hence, in order for an agent reliably to form beliefs about a given object, that about which she forms beliefs must have the requisite causal properties and she must have access to the requisite doxastic practices. (Reliable belief-formation requires causal connection between objects and agents.)
- (6) If reliable belief-formation requires causal connection between objects and agents, then any epistemic norm which requires of an agent that she enter into causal relations into which she cannot enter, whether because of practice or object-imposed constraints, is epistemically indefensible.
- (7) Hence, any epistemic norm which requires of an agent that she enter into causal relations in which she cannot enter is epistemically indefensible.
- (8) If the causal relations into which an agent can enter are determined in part by the nature of a putative object of belief, whether or not an epistemic norm is epistemically defensible depends in part upon the nature of that about which an agent forms beliefs.
- (9) Hence, whether or not an epistemic norm is defensible depends in part upon the nature of that about which an agent forms beliefs.

VIII

Return to the topic with which we began this essay. Comparison criticism of religious belief proceeds by way of (1) identifying those practices at the core of our cognitive life, (2) isolating those features of our core practices which account for their reliability, and (3) determining whether or not other practices which ought to have those features have at least their functional equivalents. The danger with this kind of argument is that we risk imposing on one practice the expectations legitimately required only of other practices. Otherwise put, the drawback with comparison criticism is that we have a very difficult time determining whether or not a feature indicating reliability for one practice indicates unreliability for those which lack that feature.

The Ontological Principle provides us with some principled guidance for resolving disputes over that matter. Reliable belief-formation requires causal connection between knower and known. Because different kinds of object enter into different kinds of causal relation, the kind of relationship between knower and known required for reliable belief-formation varies from one practice to another. We may determine whether or not a given epistemic norm is properly imposed on a given practice by asking (1) is it possible for

an agent who forms beliefs about an object to enter into a causal relationship with that object of the sort presupposed by the norm in question?; and (2) would an agent who adhered to that norm be forced to conclude that she was forming beliefs inappropriately whether or not she was in fact forming her beliefs reliably? If “no” in the first case and “yes” in the second, then the norm in question lacks epistemic merit.

And this provides the apologist with a strategy for defending religious practices from comparison criticism. Faced with such a critique, and thus with the claim that a practice lacks features it ought to have if it is to provide access to the truth, the apologist may show that the deficiency seized upon by the critic as an indication of unreliability is a legitimate difference in virtue of its being a natural consequence of the nature of that about which she forms beliefs. The “deficiency” is in fact a legitimate difference; things may be going just as they epistemically ought if God is as practitioners of that practice believe God is.

IX

I do not want to pretend that all of the issues raised in this essay have been resolved successfully. There are numerous questions which remain. Three are crucially important. First, are there more general grounds for the claim that reliable belief-formation requires a causal relation between subject and object other than the ad hoc considerations I mentioned above? For example, could we show that at least *de re* belief requires causal relations between believer and believed since, to believe anything of an object at all, an agent must be able to refer to that object, and the reference of *de re* beliefs is fixed by causal relations of some sort?

Second, the causal relation requirement only explains the legitimate differences between the kinds of beliefs which require causal relations; some kinds of belief do not seem to require causal relations and yet the doxastic practices on the basis of which we form these beliefs are legitimately different from other doxastic practices. How do we account for those legitimate differences? Moral knowledge would not seem to require of an agent that she be causally related to some object; hence we cannot explain the difference between the way in which we ought to form moral beliefs and the way we ought to form sense-perceptual beliefs by appeal to some difference in the causal properties of the objects of moral beliefs and those of sense-perceptual beliefs.

Third, does employment of the Ontological Principle risk epistemic anarchy? If the nature of an object constrains the way we ought to form beliefs about it, who is in a position to determine what the nature of a given object is? Trivially, only those who form beliefs about it. But that means that the very people who have a vested interest in the epistemic respectability of some doxastic practice determine which standards are appropriately employed to evaluate that practice (albeit indirectly). And that is problematic because it would inhibit any significant external critique of a given doxastic practice.

NOTES

1. Thus, it seems to me that the most interesting of the supposed conflicts between "religion and science" hinge on some supposed difference between the way in which scientists form their beliefs and the way religious believers form their beliefs; the conflicts that get the most press, like the creation-evolution debate, hinge on a putative incompatibility between religious doctrines and the assured results of modern science, but are of comparative unimportance because the religious tradition party to the incompatibility can always revise their theological truth-claims. It is only when that kind of revision is impossible that the conflict between science and religion can seem intractable.

2. William Alston, "The Perception of God," in *Philosophical Topics* 16 (Fall, 1988): 30.

3. As is argued by C.B. Martin in *Religious Belief*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), pp. 64-94; Charles Daniels, "Experiencing God," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 49/3 (March, 1989): 489-499; Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1984), pp. 25-55; David Conway, "Mavrodes, Martin, and the Verification of Religious Experience," in *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 2/3 (Fall, 1971): 156-71.

4. William Alston, "The Autonomy of Religious Experience," in *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 31 (June, 1992): 71.

5. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 216.

6. *Perceiving God*, p. 218.

7. *Perceiving God*, p. 219

8. *Theological Science*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. viii. Cf. pp. 168-69. Torrance is more self-conscious about his employment of the Ontological Principle than is Alston. Thus, Torrance writes, "the fundamental principle that I have been concerned with is a very simple one, but its implications are deep and far-reaching when worked out consistently over the whole range of human knowledge. We know things in accordance with their natures, or what they are in themselves; and so we let the nature of what we know to determine for us the content and form of our knowledge." *The Ground and Grammar of Theology*, (Charlottesville, VA.: University Press of Virginia, 1980), p. 8.

9. Torrance and Alston both claim that an object's *nature* does the constraining. But unless God's intentions, and more specifically, God's chosen mode of communication, are part of God's nature, then both Alston and Torrance assume that it is more than just God's nature that constrains the way we ought to form beliefs about God. More accurate, though less stylish, is *characteristic*. Whenever I use "nature," I intend to be understood as meaning "characteristic."

10. "A fully competent human being not only has some understanding (which may be also more of less *mis*understanding) of himself, but is partly constituted by this understanding. ...Our self-understanding essentially incorporates our seeing ourselves against a background of what I have called 'strong evaluation,'" that is, a set of "distinctions between things which are recognized as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value." Charles Taylor, "Introduction," in *Human Agency and Language*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 19. Taylor explains what he means by strong evaluation in *Sources of the Self*,

(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 3-52, especially pp. 19f... and 30f.; and what he means by the self-constitutive nature of human personhood in "Self-Interpreting Animals," in *Human Agency and Language*, pp. 45-76.

11. Naturalistic science, according to Taylor, aspires to explain human action "absolutely," that is, without taking into account properties which exist only in the experience of human beings (e.g., secondary qualities, self-conceptions). Continuing the train of thought quoted in the previous footnote, Taylor writes, "A being who exists only in self-interpretation cannot be understood absolutely; and one who can only be understood against the background of distinctions of worth [strong evaluations] cannot be captured by a scientific language which essentially aspires to neutrality. Our personhood cannot be treated scientifically in exactly the same way we approach our organic being. What it is to possess a liver or heart is something I can define quite independently of the space of questions in which I exist for myself, but not what it is to have a self or be a person." "Introduction," pp. 3-4.

12. Cf. "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 55f; and "Social Theory as Practice," in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, pp. 91-101.

13. "Social Theory as Practice," p. 111; "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," p. 53.

14. To multiply examples further would be tedious, but not impossible. John Searle, it seems to me, uses the Ontological Principle to defend his account of the nature of the human mind. "In spite of our modern arrogance about how much we know, in spite of the assurance and universality of our science, where the mind is concerned we are characteristically confused and in disagreement. We let our research methods dictate the subject matter, rather than the converse. Like the drunk who loses his car keys in the dark bushes but looks for them under the streetlight, "because the light is better there," we try to find out how humans might resemble out computational models rather than trying to figure out how the conscious human mind actually works. I am frequently asked, 'But how could you study consciousness scientifically? How could there be a theory?'" *The Rediscovery of the Mind*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 247. The parallel with the religious question is obvious. Again, "the epistemology of studying the mental no more determines its ontology than does the epistemology of any other discipline determine its ontology. On the contrary, in the study of the mind as elsewhere, the whole point of the epistemology is to get at the pre-existing ontology." *Ibid.*, p. 23.

15. Robert Audi, *Belief, Justification and Knowledge*, (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983), p. 38.

16. The locution "causal relations of some sort" is intentionally vague; I claim only that reliable belief-formation requires causal connection between knower and known without committing myself to any particular analysis of causation, nor to an account of the different kinds of causation apposite to different kinds of belief-formation. I have no idea what difference there is between the kind of causal connection properly obtaining between an event that occurs in the past and an agent who recalls that event, and the kind of causal relation properly obtaining between a crater in the moon and an agent who sees that crater. I suppose that identifying those differences falls to physiologists, psychologists and other types of scientist. My point is simply that an agent who is causally connected to a given object in no way, shape, or form cannot form beliefs about that object in a reliable, responsible manner.

17. C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).