

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 27 | Issue 2

Article 7

4-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Hasker, William (2010) "Alston on the Rationality of Doxastic Practices: A Response to John Turri," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil201027219

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol27/iss2/7>

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ALSTON ON THE RATIONALITY OF DOXASTIC PRACTICES: A RESPONSE TO JOHN TURRI

William Hasker

John Turri claims to have refuted the main argument of William Alston's *Perceiving God*. He contests Alston's claim that "for any established doxastic practice it is rational to suppose that it is reliable." I show that Turri has misinterpreted Alston at several key points, and that his refutation of Alston's argument fails.

Given the magnitude of William Alston's achievement in *Perceiving God*,¹ it is surprising to find an article which in a very few pages both summarizes his main argument and offers a refutation of it. Yet that is what John Turri has done in this journal.² I shall endeavor to be as concise as Turri in explaining why the refutation fails. I shall argue that he has misunderstood Alston at several crucial points; in addition, he has simply failed to grasp the force of a central argument of Alston's.

First, however, a very brief summary of Alston's program in *Perceiving God*. Alston's concern is to argue that the perception of God confers epistemic justification on certain beliefs about God—specifically, upon "M-beliefs," beliefs about the way God is manifesting himself to a subject in a given experience (e.g., comforting or guiding), or about some perceivable property of God (e.g., power or lovingness). Alston approaches this through a "doxastic practice" epistemology, where the central question is which of our doxastic (belief-forming) practices are generally reliable and thus capable of conferring justification on the beliefs formed through them. (Alston in this book adopts a reliabilist view of justification.) Alston maintains that with regard to our basic doxastic practices, we simply are not in a position to establish in a non-circular way that the practices are reliable. However, we are "practically rational" in engaging in any socially established doxastic practice and in regarding it as reliable, in the absence of successful defeaters, given that certain additional requirements (e.g., "self-support") are met. Alston argues that the "Christian mystical practice"

¹William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). References will be given in the text with "A" followed by the page number.

²John Turri, "Practical and Epistemic Justification in Alston's *Perceiving God*," *Faith and Philosophy* 25.3 (July 2008), pp. 290–299. References will be given in the text with "T" followed by the page number.



(CMP), which forms beliefs about God on the basis of the perception of God, meets these additional tests and should be accepted as epistemically rational, and as conferring justification on beliefs about God.

Already with regard to Alston's objective, Turri begins to go astray. He writes, "M-beliefs could be justified only if putative perceptions of God reliably indicate that God is ϕ . In turn, this entails that M-beliefs could be justified only if God exists, for God could be ϕ only if God exists. The stakes could hardly be higher: if Alston's argument succeeds, then he will have established that God exists" (T290).

Now compare this with Alston's own statement concerning his aims:

I do not aspire to *prove* the genuineness of perception of God; that would require that we prove the existence of God and his causal role in producing the experiences in question. The aim is rather to **rebut objections** to the **conviction of the subjects** that they are directly aware of God, and to point out that **if their conviction is correct** they are also properly taken to be *perceiving* God. (A5, bolding added)

The contrast couldn't be clearer: what Turri says Alston will have established, if his argument succeeds, is precisely what Alston says he does not aspire to establish!³ There is another problem with Turri's approach that is closely related to this one: Turri fails to grasp accurately the way in which Alston's argument is directed at different groups of people. Turri observes, correctly, that the argument is directed at the "community of epistemologists and interested parties" (T291), whether or not they are practitioners of CMP. But he fails to grasp the point that, with regard to non-practitioners of CMP, Alston's aim is to "rebut objections" rather than to prove to them that CMP is reliable. He may hope to *persuade* them to accept it as reliable, but he does not undertake to *demonstrate* that it is, as Turri implies.

Turri formulates Alston's overall argument in a series of fourteen numbered steps. However, only the first two are germane for our purposes, since Turri's objection aims to block the argument early on. Here are those two steps, as formulated by Turri:

- (1) If CMP is a socially established doxastic practice, then it is *prima facie* practically rational to engage in it. (Premise)
- (2) If it is *prima facie* practically rational to engage in CMP, then it is *prima facie* epistemically rational to regard CMP as a reliable doxastic practice. (Premise) (T291)

I believe Turri is generally correct in identifying these as premises of Alston's argument.⁴ Note, however, that in spite of the mention here of

³Later on (T294), Turri admits himself baffled by Alston's admission that "We have not shown the reliability attribution to be rational in a truth-conducive sense of rationality" (A180). But shouldn't this "baffling" remark have led Turri to reconsider his original assessment of Alston's objective for his argument?

⁴Actually I have a small quibble with his formulation of (2). I believe "epistemically rational" in (2) should be replaced simply by "rational"; this would match the quotation from

CMP, the points in contention do not apply to CMP any more than to any other doxastic practice. If premise (2) is flawed, as Turri argues, then the corresponding premises with regard to other practices such as sense-perception and memory will likewise be flawed. What will follow, then, is not that CMP has any special problem but rather that the defense of the rationality of any doxastic practice whatever must follow a different course than the one laid out by Alston.

But why, according to Turri, should (2) be rejected? He makes the point that "There is good reason to deny that practical justification provides evidence for reliability" and goes on to provide examples:

Perhaps some unremarkable people can be happy and successful only if they falsely believe that they possess stunning looks, an incomparable intellect, or devastating charm. . . . [P]ecuniary self-interest no doubt perpetuated the belief among many nineteenth-century slaveholders that black people were inherently inferior, naturally fit for slavery, indeed improved by the institution of slavery. (T292)

Here, however, Turri is guilty of a serious misunderstanding: he is confusing *practical rationality* with *prudential justification*. Prudential justification does indeed encourage beliefs which are conducive to one's self-interest, regardless of their truth or falsity, just as in Turri's examples. It is clear, however, that when we are evaluating doxastic practices from the standpoint of Alston's "practical rationality," the goal we are to have in mind is *truth* rather than self-interest—in Alston's own words, "the aim at maximizing the number of one's true beliefs and minimizing the number of one's false beliefs" (A72). In the discussion of doxastic practices leading up to the introduction of practical rationality (A146–173), one looks in vain for any consideration of self-interest (or any other non-epistemic motive) in contrast with truth as a goal of the epistemic endeavor.⁵ This point is further supported precisely by the relationship Alston asserts (and Turri contests) between practical rationality and the presumption of reliability. Alston is scarcely so negligent as to overlook the fact that sometimes ways of believing that are conducive to self-interest stray far from the truth!

What then is practical rationality, if it does not imply a primary concern for prudential self-interest? Alston does not give an explicit definition, but I believe the following formula captures the idea fairly closely:

(PR) One is practically rational in engaging in a doxastic practice if, even though we are unable to prove that the practice is reliable,

Alston which Turri cites in support of (2): "for any established doxastic practice it is rational to suppose that it is reliable" (A183, cited on T297 n. 5). But this point is not crucial for the subsequent discussion.

⁵Alston states, "I call this rationality 'practical' to differentiate it from the rationality we would show to attach to . . . a doxastic practice if sufficient grounds were given for regarding it as reliable" (A168). Here the difference between the cases is not a difference in the *goals* aimed at—in one case, truth, in the other, self-interest. Rather, the difference concerns the *epistemic support* for the practice in question: whether we are, or are not, able to adduce "sufficient grounds . . . for regarding it as reliable."

it seems to be the most promising available method (or one of the most promising) for getting at the truth concerning matters that are of importance to us.

"Practical" here has to do with the "practical decision" to engage in the practice, rather than adopting some competing practice or refraining altogether from forming beliefs about the subject-matter in question.⁶ (Alston considers the objection that in the case of some practices, such as sense-perception, we are actually unable to refrain and have no competing alternatives available to us. He replies that it suffices that we can imagine competing practices, even if, for various reasons, these practices would be impossible or forbiddingly difficult to implement (see A168).) The importance of a practice being socially established consists in (at least) two factors: On the one hand, "It is a reasonable supposition that a practice would not have persisted over large segments of the population unless it was putting people into effective touch with some aspect(s) of reality and proving itself as such by its fruits" (A170). Furthermore, it is a large advantage that the practice is "available" in one's culture, so that if one is not already skilled in it, there are established practitioners who can instruct one in its use. (The importance of the latter point becomes apparent when one considers the immense labor often required to develop a new doxastic practice, for example modern experimental natural science.)

These considerations show that the beliefs cited by Turri are not effective counterexamples to (2). To be sure, it is conceivable that someone might initially take the doxastic practices that generate those beliefs as practically rational. Eventually, however, sufficient defeaters will no doubt emerge that show those practices to be unreliable, and at this point the judgment of practical rationality will have to be withdrawn. Nevertheless, it certainly is not Alston's view that every socially established doxastic practice is reliable; astrology and divination would be relatively uncontroversial examples to the contrary. At this point, then, we need to look at Alston's affirmative case for (2). According to Alston, "in judging SP [sense perception] to be rational I am committed to judging it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable" (A180).⁷ (Sense perception is merely an example here; the same principle applies to any doxastic practice, and in particular to CMP.) If someone denies this in a specific case, Alston argues, he is in a situation comparable to "Moore's Paradox," where a person says, "p is true, but I don't believe p." There is no contradiction here; there is nothing absurd about there being a truth that some person fails to believe. Nevertheless, one who affirms "p is true, but I don't believe p," is guilty of a serious conceptual confusion. One might say that in affirming (sincerely)

⁶"A question of practical rationality arises only when we are dealing with what we *do*" (A174, italics in original).

⁷There is a nice point here. The practitioner of SP need not *actually judge* SP to be reliable; she may have no thoughts about the matter at all. Nevertheless, she is *committed* to "judging it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable," in that, *if the question should arise*, she cannot consistently refuse to make the judgment in question.

that p is true, I *display* my belief that p ; if then, in the next breath I *deny* (again sincerely) that I have this belief, I must be deeply confused.

Turri has no problem with Moore's Paradox arguments as such, but he finds himself at a loss to discern how such an argument comes into play in this case. He asks us to

Consider:

(15) It is practically rational to engage in α .

(16) I believe that α is reliable [or: α gives rise to mostly true beliefs].

Assenting to (15) while denying (16) does not suggest an epistemic failure. Neither does it strike me as odd or infelicitous. We as observers can concede that α is a long-standing, socially established, widely accepted doxastic practice, and that people in certain circumstances can have overwhelming practical reason to participate in α How does this relate to whether the resulting α -beliefs are appropriate from the *epistemic* point of view? As far as I can see, it is irrelevant. Perhaps α prescribes hasty generalization or prejudicial bias, and neither procedure appears likely to generate true beliefs. (T293)

Now, what Turri says here is so far true. We *as observers* may see that a particular doxastic practice is socially established and so on, and so might conclude that *for its participants* it is practically rational to engage in. And we might still conclude that the practice is unreliable, for the sorts of reasons Turri cites. So far, nothing is logically amiss. However, all this is beside the point, because Turri has mistaken the target of Alston's argument. As we saw above, Alston's aim is to defend the rationality of the *participant* in CMP (and in other doxastic practices), and the Moore's Paradox argument has to be read *from the standpoint of the participant*. Turri's objection, given above, is stated from our standpoint "as observers." But "we as observers" do *not* in this case "judge the practice to be practically rational," *full stop*. What we judge is that it is practically rational *for its participants*, persons who presumably are not aware of the reasons for which we rightly conclude the practice to be unreliable. But for us enlightened observers, the practice would *not* be practically rational.⁸ The reference to Moore's Paradox should have been enough by itself to show that Turri's objection is misdirected. There is, after all, nothing at all paradoxical about a person's asserting, " p is true, but *you* don't believe p ."

Fortunately, Turri goes on to suggest that "Alston might have a point to make regarding a slightly different question, a 'quasi-external' question: why should we suppose that engaging in α will make it epistemically irrational *for the participants* of α to deny that forming beliefs within α is likely to result in true beliefs?" (T293) Now, this is more promising. I believe, for the reasons given above, that this is the *only* question Alston means to

⁸This may involve once again the error noted earlier: since he confuses practical rationality with prudential justification, Turri may not recognize that known unreliability is a defeater for practical rationality.

address with his Moore's Paradox argument. But regardless of that, now that Turri has come around to considering the question, what does he make of it? Alston states,

It is irrational to engage in SP, to form beliefs in the ways constitutive of that practice, and refrain from acknowledging them as true, and hence the practice as reliable, if the question arises. (A179)

In this case, says Turri,

the analogy with Moore's Paradox should consist of the following propositions:

(15') It is practically rational *for me* to engage in α .

(16') I believe that α is reliable [or: α gives rise to mostly true beliefs].

But there is no pragmatic implication here either. Suppose Smith recognizes that he has overwhelming practical reason to engage in α , thus assenting to (15'). Now suppose that the canons of α make no pretension to reliability. The guiding epistemic principle of α is to believe in accordance with the available evidence. Yet the canons of α also caution that we have no evidence whatsoever that believing in accordance with the evidence is robustly truth-conducive. . . . In other words, we have no evidence that evidence is reliable, so we should suspend judgment on whether α is reliable. Accordingly, Smith denies (16'). Yet Smith is not thereby epistemically irrational. (T294)

Here Turri seems to have forgotten that α is supposed to be a *doxastic*—that is, a *belief-forming*—practice. Now, believing a proposition is equivalent to believing that the proposition is *true* (given that we, like Alston, understand truth and belief in a realistic way). So in the envisaged scenario we have Smith forming a large number of beliefs by engaging in α —that is, there are a large number of propositions he has arrived at by following α , concerning each of which Smith believes that the proposition in question is *true*—and yet he demurs from the claim that α gives rise to mostly true beliefs. If that isn't irrational, what does it take?

Perhaps the most charitable way to view this situation is to suppose that Smith's attitude towards the propositions in question is one not of *belief* but rather of *acceptance*. That is to say, he will include these propositions in his theories, will draw inferences from them, and may in many contexts act *as if* he thought them true, but in fact he has no positive belief one way or the other as to their actual truth. His attitude thus resembles that of some scientific anti-realists toward the propositions delivered by scientific inference. If so, there need be no irrationality on Smith's part. But then the status of α as a doxastic practice needs to be re-examined. If the attitude Smith takes towards the propositions generated by α is the one recommended by α itself, then α is not, properly speaking, a *doxastic* practice at all; perhaps we could term it an "acceptance practice." If on the other hand α does recommend that the propositions it generates be believed, we must conclude that Smith isn't actually following α ; perhaps

we could say that he is following “quasi- α .”⁹ (And here his attitude may resemble that of some who engage in religious practices, whose attitude towards religious doctrines is one of acceptance rather than of belief.)

Either way, however, we must conclude that Turri’s critique of Alston’s Moore’s Paradox argument is a failure. And since that is the case, his attack on Alston’s premise (2) also fails. To be sure, this does not mean that Alston’s overall argument is home free. There are many additional points at which his argument can be questioned—and of course, has been questioned. But premise (2) is secure against Turri’s attacks. One cannot adopt a belief-forming practice and use it to arrive at many beliefs one regards as true, and yet rationally deny that the practice is truth-conducive and reliable.¹⁰

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⁹There may be a third possibility: perhaps the “canons of α ” contain *both* the injunction to believe the propositions delivered by α and *also* the stipulation that we should suspend judgment on whether α is reliable. In that case, the practitioner of α , if he wishes to remain rational, is forced to choose which of these instructions to accept.

¹⁰My thanks to the editor and to two unnamed referees for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.