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PERCEIVING GOD: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE. By WILLIAM P. ALSTON. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xii, 320.

William Alston describes his new book as the product of "at least fifty years" of "on-and-off consideration" of the subject of religious experience (xi). The culmination of a series of articles defending the epistemic value of what he calls "the perception of God," Alston's book is easily as provocative as any of the articles; indeed, *Perceiving God* began provoking responses even before its publication.¹ It is a rich work containing sophisticated discussions of topics of interest to religious epistemologists and to epistemologists more generally, including the fundamental nature of perceptual experience, the reliability of sense perception, the importance of "doxastic practices" in the justification of beliefs, and the problems for justified religious belief posed by the diversity of incompatible religious systems. For all that, though, the book may end up disappointing much of its undoubtedly wide readership, especially in view of its long gestation in the mind of a distinguished philosopher and the promises it makes early on. For the promises do not seem to me to be kept.

Alston proposes to show that "a person can become justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about [the existence, attributes, and actions of] God by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing so-and-so" (1). Evaluating his success in this project requires focusing on the particular kind of epistemic justification he has in mind here—the so-called "strong position" conception of justification (73) he defends in various earlier works.² According to that conception, one has a justified belief that *p* only if the objective probability of *p*, given one's grounds for believing that *p* and the circumstances under which one formed the belief, exceeds one-half (74 n. 9). On the

¹Articles written in response to the circulated typescript include Norman Kretzmann, "St. Teresa, William Alston, and the Broadminded Atheist" (forthcoming in a Festschrift for Richard Swinburne); Robert Pasnau, "Justified Until Proven Guilty: Alston's New Epistemology" (forthcoming in *Philosophical Studies*); and Michael Wakoff, "Dim Perceptions or Vivid Beliefs? Alston's Perceptual Model of Mystical Experience." These articles contain more detailed and persuasive criticisms of *Perceiving God* than I can give here.

²See, for example, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," "Justification and Knowledge," and "An Internalist Externalism," in Alston's collection *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

strong-position conception, then, a putative experience of God justifies one in believing, say, that God is loving only if the nature of the experience and its role in forming the belief make it objectively likely that God (exists and) is loving. Thus, for Alston, a putative perception of God as loving justifies one's belief that God is loving only if the belief is, under the circumstances, at least probably true.

By "circumstances," here, Alston means a religious experience that "the subject takes (or would take if the question arose) to be an awareness (perception) of God" (11). The justification of a putatively perceptual belief about God, then, depends partly on whether a religious experience of the sort described makes the resulting belief objectively likely to be true. As he often stresses, Alston's reliabilist view of the justification of belief obviously differs from theories that treat justification in terms of fulfilling one's epistemic duties. On these latter theories, one justifiably believes that *p* provided that, in forming the belief, one violated none of the relevant duties of a rational cognizer. For Alston, by contrast, no amount of epistemic blamelessness will justify a belief "unless the belief's basis serve[s] to render it probably true" (74). So the justification of a theistic belief formed on the basis of a putative perception of God doesn't turn on whether we can properly blame the theist in question for forming the belief in the way she did; surely sometimes we can and sometimes we can't, but none of that, he says, makes a difference to the justification of her belief.

Can Alston show that the sort of theistic beliefs he considers are indeed probably true given their bases? He readily admits that he cannot. But he insists that religious perception is no different in this respect from a host of other "basic doxastic practices," including sense perception, a doxastic practice whose reliability most people regard as secure. Chapter 3 contains Alston's interesting and resourceful argument for the claim that we cannot noncircularly show that sense perception or any other basic doxastic practice (such as "introspection, memory, and reasoning of various sorts") generates beliefs that are likely to be true (103). Some have found that argument unconvincing,³ and I lack space here to give my own view of it. But supposing it's right, Alston seems to have landed us in an epistemically "desperate situation" (146): we cannot noncircularly show that any of our sense-perceptual, introspective, memorial, inferential, or religious-perceptual beliefs are justified.

The best we can do, he says, is to trust in the reliability of those of our doxastic practices which have become "firmly established, psychologically

³See, for example, Kretzmann, n. 15.

and socially" (149)—an “eminently [in fact, the only] *reasonable*” thing to do (150, emphasis Alston’s). The practice of forming beliefs about God based on putative perceptions of God is, says Alston, firmly established in the communities which employ it, and so practitioners of religious perception may reasonably regard their religious-perceptual beliefs as *prima facie* justified. *Prima facie* justified beliefs, in turn, become unqualifiedly justified once they get past the doxastic practice’s “overrider system,” a background set of “beliefs and procedures” by which the practice tests beliefs formed by its use (159).

Again, as with any basic doxastic practice, we cannot noncircularly show that a religious-perceptual doxastic practice, including the “Christian mystical perceptual doxastic practice” (CMP) on which Alston focuses, is reliable. But neither is there good reason, he concludes in chapter 6, for regarding CMP as unreliable, and in the face of that standoff no one can rightly blame practitioners of CMP for continuing to rely on the practice: they remain perfectly reasonable—that is, practically rational (168)—in doing so, making the beliefs generated by CMP at least *prima facie* justified. Notice, though, that this conception of justification based on reasonableness is a far cry from the reliabilist, “strong position” conception in terms of which Alston couched his original thesis.

Alston concedes—even stresses—this discrepancy, but he tries (with another claim about reasonableness) to forge a link between the reasonableness of using an established doxastic practice and the practice’s reliability: “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 . . .” (170). Many who find that supposition reasonable nevertheless judge it to be quite false, a judgment supported by the persistence of such practices as séances, astrology, and the consulting of tribal oracles.⁴ False or not, it seems to me to weaken Alston’s argument so thoroughly that he ends up simply defending the *reasonableness* of his original thesis, a property most would concede it can possess even if it’s utterly false. I found this disappointing in light of the expectation, encouraged by chapter 1, that Alston would give reasons for regarding his thesis as true, not just for the pragmatic blamelessness of those who act as if it’s true. These strike me as very different things, but in view of Alston’s argument in chapter 3 it may be that we have no right to expect reasons of the former kind.

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⁴See, for example, Kretzmann.