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# PRACTICAL RATIONALITY AND IDIOSYNCRATIC BELIEFS

John T. Mullen

William Alston has defended "Christian Mystical Perception" against the charge of irrationality by claiming that the social establishment of a "doxastic practice" confers what he calls "practical rationality" on those who engage in it. I argue that a thought experiment involving a possible world at which there is no epistemic defeat reveals that social establishment is not a necessary condition for practical rationality (as Alston defines it), and that all belief-formers are *prima facie* practically rational. However, I also argue that the modification to Alston's "doxastic practice" approach to epistemology that is required by this thought experiment does no damage to Alston's subsequent defense of "Christian Mystical Perception." I then address the objection that some beliefs are so repugnant that they should not be regarded as even *prima facie* practically rational, and conclude with a practical benefit that the modified approach enjoys over Alston's original approach.

Chapter four of William Alston's *Perceiving God* is an explication of what he calls "a 'doxastic practice' approach to epistemology."<sup>1</sup> That approach is crucial to Alston's subsequent defense of those who engage in Christian Mystical Perception (of God, usually) against charges of irrationality, where Christian Mystical Perception is conceived as a distinct "doxastic practice." Central to Alston's "doxastic practice approach" is the concept of "practical rationality." Though the name might suggest the ascription of one of the more familiar concepts of rationality (such as fitting means to ends, or having properly functioning cognitive faculties, etc.) to a person in virtue of engaging in a given doxastic *practice*, that is not what Alston has in view. Rather, practical rationality is itself a distinct type of rationality that a believing subject might possess. It is the sort of rationality one possesses when there is "no rational alternative" to forming beliefs in the ways one actually forms them. Alston says that he "calls this rationality 'practical' to differentiate it from the rationality we would show to attach to a belief if solid grounds for its truth were adduced, or to attach to a doxastic practice if sufficient reasons were given for regarding it as reliable" (p. 168). He then goes on to assuage any concerns that might arise from our lack of voluntary control over our beliefs by specifying that practical rationality is the type of rationality we possess when it is rational for us to "stick with what we have, *if we had a choice*" (p. 168). The key to Alston's "doxastic practice approach" then, is his claim that it is *prima facie* rational



(in the sense of practical rationality) for a subject to engage in a doxastic practice just if the practice is "socially established," and it is unqualifiedly rational (in the same sense) to engage in it just if the practice is socially established and "not discredited by being shown to be unreliable or deficient in some other way that will cancel its prima facie rationality" (p. 194). One might think of the latter clause as a "provided nothing defeats" addendum to the claim that the social establishment of a doxastic practice confers practical rationality on those who engage in it. Presumably, one of the "other ways" a doxastic practice might be deficient is that it might be irrational to engage in it according to some other concept of rationality. So if Alston can successfully show (as I believe he has) that Christian Mystical Perception is both socially established and not otherwise deficient, then he has successfully defended those who engage in it against charges of irrationality. All of this is quite familiar to readers of Alston.

One of my two aims in this essay is to show that prima facie practical rationality, as Alston defines it, is possessed not only by those who engage in socially established practices, but by all belief-formers whatsoever. This represents a significant broadening of the scope of practical rationality over what Alston allows. It is meant to include even those who hold beliefs that might be called "idiosyncratic," where an idiosyncratic belief is (let us say) a belief such that the subject cannot classify it as the output of a socially established doxastic practice. However, my other aim in this essay is to show that Alston's "doxastic practice approach" and subsequent defense of Christian Mystical Perception is not at all threatened by this broader scope. Indeed, my argument for the latter claim is suggested by Alston himself in his brief consideration of the possibility that persons with idiosyncratic beliefs might be prima facie practically rational.

A brief thought experiment will be helpful in showing that all belief-formers are prima facie practically rational. Let us imagine a world filled with belief-formers who are very much like ourselves in that they form a great multitude and variety of beliefs, but very much unlike ourselves in that no belief of theirs has ever been defeated. No one in this world has ever had the experience of noting that two of their beliefs contradict each other, thereby forcing a revision. Nor has anyone ever encountered another person who holds a contrary belief. In this world, everyone agrees with everyone about everything. So this world is, as far as its denizens can tell, a world of epistemic perfection. I will therefore call it "Epistopia." Now the epistemologists of Epistopia are well aware of logic and of the *potential* for conflicting beliefs. It is just that this possibility has never been actual for them. They have also reflected a great deal on their belief-forming mechanisms and have been able to classify them into a number of distinct types, all of which are (as far as they can tell) perfectly reliable. They have also noted that they cannot *show* that any of their belief-forming mechanisms are reliable, and they have experienced the same puzzlement as us over what sort of response should be given to those who would question their reliability. Their condition is also like ours in that not all of their beliefs can be neatly classified as products of the distinct practices that they have thus far identified. Every now and then someone has a belief that resists any such classification, but of course the hypothesis is that none of

those beliefs has ever been defeated either. And these latter beliefs, the ones that resist classification as products of an identifiable doxastic practice, fit our definition of an "idiosyncratic" belief. If an individual or small group were to develop a history of forming beliefs in a new, as yet unclassified but nevertheless classifiable way, then they will have established a new doxastic practice in Epistopia. Since this new practice would presumably fall short of social establishment (at least for a time), we may call a practice of this sort an "idiosyncratic practice." Epistopia is, admittedly, a very implausible world, but its logical possibility is sufficient for the purposes of this thought experiment.

Now let us ask whether the idiosyncratic believers in Epistopia are practically rational in holding their idiosyncratic beliefs and in engaging in their idiosyncratic practices.<sup>2</sup> If they are, then *pace* Alston, the social establishment of a doxastic practice is not a necessary condition for practical rationality. We may begin by looking closely at the argument Alston himself gives for the *prima facie* practical rationality of those who engage in socially established doxastic practices. It is a very persuasive argument. Can it be applied with equal force to the idiosyncratic believers in Epistopia? It seems to me that it can. It is found in section (ii) of chapter four (pp. 149-53). I shall present it from the point of view of an epistemologist in Epistopia, and borrow heavily from Alston's own language. But I shall omit his references to distinct practices and substitute instead general references to the belief-forming mechanisms of the denizens of Epistopia. I shall also make occasional modifications to Alston's presentation, as necessary. So, let us imagine an Epistopian epistemologist presenting the following argument:

Let us inquire into what may be said in general about the epistemic status of our beliefs, and the mechanisms by which they form. Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another of our belief-forming mechanisms, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the mechanisms with which we actually find ourselves. We cannot look into any issue without employing some way of forming and evaluating beliefs; that applies as much to issues concerning the reliability of our actual belief-forming mechanisms as to any issue. Hence what alternative is there to employing the mechanisms we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon or replace only with extreme difficulty if at all? The classical skeptical alternative of withholding belief altogether is not a serious possibility. In the press of life we are continually forming beliefs about a great variety of things, whether we will or no. Some of these beliefs fall into distinct categories, and some do not. Among those that do, some are socially established and some are not. But even if we could replace our present belief-forming mechanisms with some others of our own devising, why should we? What possible rationale could there be for such a substitution? It is not as if we would be in a better position to provide a non-epistemically circular support for the

reliability of these replacement mechanisms. The same factors that prevent us from establishing the reliability of our present mechanisms without epistemic circularity would operate with the same force in these other cases. Hence we are just not in a position to get beyond, or behind, our present mechanisms and criticize them from that deeper or more objective position. Our Epistopian cognitive situation does not permit it. Again, we cannot take a step in intellectual endeavors without employing some belief-forming mechanism or other, and what reasonable alternative is there to employing the ones with which we actually find ourselves?

These considerations seem to me to indicate that it is eminently *reasonable* for us to form beliefs in the ways we actually do. If there were some good reason to doubt any of our beliefs, then we would be faced with the painful tasks of distinguishing reliable mechanisms from unreliable mechanisms and of abandoning those we deem unreliable, however difficult that may be. But since we have no such reasons, it is very clear that the reasonable thing to do is to retain all the beliefs we actually have.

Perhaps we have concluded too hastily that we have no reasonable alternative to forming beliefs according to *all* the belief-forming mechanisms with which we find ourselves. Why shouldn't we take our stand on one or more of those *types* of mechanisms that are firmly entrenched (i.e., socially established) in our lives, and hold the others (especially those that produce beliefs that seem to resist classification into distinct practices) subject to judgment on that basis? But those who would do this are vulnerable to the charge of "undue partiality." Why should we hold some mechanism or type of mechanism under extra suspicion simply on the basis of its relative rarity? Why is that a cause for any special concern about its reliability? We have no reasons to doubt any of them, and they all "came out of the same shop" (as an Epistopian wise man of old once said). If one of them is suspect so are all the others. Where it is reliability that is in question, we lack sufficient excuse for treating different mechanisms in a fundamentally different way.

Thus we should follow the lead of the wise man of old and take all our belief-forming mechanisms to be acceptable as such, as innocent until proven guilty. They all deserve to be regarded as rationally engaged in, pending the acquisition of reasons for disqualification. But we Epistopians have no such reasons.<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear to me that this argument should be just as convincing to the Epistopians as Alston's original argument is to us, if not more so. But if that is correct, then it looks as if the idiosyncratic believers in Epistopia are practically rational. They have "no rational alternative" to forming beliefs as they do. And if that is so, then it is *not* the social establishment of a doxastic practice that confers practical rationality on those who engage in it. Rather, that work is apparently being done by the very act of forming a *belief*. Or, if one prefers, one might say that belief formation in general is a practice or activity such that all who engage in it are *prima facie* practically

rational in doing so. The utter absence of defeat in Epistopia seems to show that social establishment is, for *us*, not a *source* of practical rationality, but rather a very powerful and important *preserver* of rationality. Or, more standardly, one might say that the *lack* of social establishment functions for us as a very powerful defeater. Social establishment seems to be a test that *we humans*, in response to our epistemically imperfect condition, apply to our beliefs very shortly after they have formed. The application of this test may be both unconscious and involuntary, but that is of course no reason to think that we do not apply it. But passing the test of social establishment merely *preserves* the practical rationality that we already possess simply in virtue of having formed a belief. And of course there are, as Alston says, many other tests that must be passed in order for one of us humans to be unqualifiedly rational in our believings. We humans, in *sharp* contrast to the Epistopians, have acquired very good reasons to be very suspicious of our idiosyncratic beliefs and practices, and so the *lack* of social establishment functions in *our* lives as an extremely powerful undercutting defeater. Indeed, it is so powerful as a defeater that we might easily be led to mistake it for the very source of practical rationality. But a little reflection on the condition of the Epistopians, I think, reveals that it is not a source, but merely a preserver.

In a footnote near the end of his argument Alston describes this “innocent until proven guilty” attitude as “a kind of ‘negative coherentism’ for socially established practices,” and then adds that he is “not at all tempted by a negative coherentism with respect to beliefs” (p. 153, n. 10). However he does not supply us with an argument at that point. We are left to wonder why we should not take the same attitude toward all our beliefs. Presumably, there is something very uncomfortable about regarding ourselves as *prima facie* practically rational in *all* of our believings, and Alston may be concerned that this discomfort (whatever it amounts to) will in some way threaten his “doxastic practice approach” as a whole and, as a consequence of that, undercut the very effective use he has made of that approach (i.e., his defense of Christian Mystical Perception). Or it may be that it just seems too counter-intuitive. But what is the source of this discomfort, exactly? If we could identify it more precisely, we would be in a better position to determine just how much damage this thought experiment has done to Alston’s approach and defense.

The only modification of the approach that seems required of us thus far is that we must now regard social establishment as a preserver of practical rationality, and not as a source of it. Is this modification the source of the alleged discomfort? I cannot see why it should be. It does not seem to have any effect at all on Alston’s defense of Christian Mystical Perception. We may still distinguish one doxastic practice from another, just as we did before making the modification. Similarly, every belief must be the product of a socially established doxastic practice in order for the subject to be *unqualifiedly* rational in holding it, and that too represents no change from our situation prior to making the modification. And it is very hard to see how this modification would require Alston to change anything he has said about either the social establishment of Christian Mystical Perception or the lack of any disqualifying deficiencies with respect to it. Thus far, it

seems to be a very benign modification.

Alston is himself sympathetic to this verdict, though he ultimately rejects it. He briefly considers the objection that his approach, as it stands, is "not permissive enough." His initial response is that "we will almost always have something against idiosyncratic practices; and in that case it would do no harm to let all of them in as *prima facie* acceptable" (p. 170). However, he then supplies us with an argument against this "alternative":

Nevertheless there is a significant reason for doing it my way. When a doxastic practice has persisted over a number of generations, it has earned a right to be considered seriously in a way that [others have] not. 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. But there are no such grounds for presumption in the case of idiosyncratic practices. Hence we will proceed more reasonably, as well as more efficiently, by giving initial, ungrounded credence to only the socially established practices. Newcomers will have to prove themselves. (p. 170)

Alston seems to be assuming here that we have some sort of choice about whether or not we should make the modification in question. I take it, however, that consideration of the Epistopians *shows* that we *must* make it, i.e., that all belief-formers are in fact practically rational simply in virtue of forming a belief. If this is so, it would seem to trump any pragmatic reasons Alston might have for "doing it [his] way."

Nevertheless, we may wonder whether Alston is in this passage identifying the source of the alleged discomfort. If so, then I think the discomfort can be assuaged. When Alston speaks of "earning a right to be considered seriously," or of having "grounds for presumption" that a given practice is reliable, he is laying down a condition of rationality that is perfectly appropriate for those of us who live in a world where most idiosyncratic beliefs and practices *are* defeated. In short, he is explaining why it is that the lack of social establishment functions as an appropriate defeater for *us*. It is because our experience is such that we have acquired very good reasons to think that our idiosyncratic beliefs and practices are not reliable, and that is precisely why we insist that "newcomers" must prove themselves. Our experience has transformed a presumption of reliability into a presumption of unreliability for idiosyncratic beliefs and practices. Or to put it another way, once we are forced by our experience to attempt to distinguish reliable practices from unreliable practices, we find that the idiosyncratic practices are the first to go. And this presumption against the idiosyncratic has now become (quite appropriately) entrenched within us, so that we scarcely notice it any longer. Thus Alston's remarks are perfectly sensible for those of us who live in *our* epistemic conditions. But a little reflection on the Epistopians should reveal that his remarks do not apply in that world, and the Epistopians are indeed practically rational in extending the "innocent until proven guilty" presumption to "newcomers" as well.

Finally, we must consider one more possible reason for being very

uncomfortable with this modification to Alston's "doxastic practice approach." It is beyond doubt that some people form very repugnant beliefs. Examples might be multiplied, but I will content myself with just two. Let us first consider someone named Sam who believes that God told him to shoot all of his co-workers to death. Such beliefs reek with irrationality. But now it looks as if we must say that Sam is at least *prima facie* practically rational simply in virtue of forming this belief, and many may react viscerally against this conclusion. Sam, in forming *this* belief, should not be regarded as rational in *any* sense, one might think. My response to this objection is that our visceral reaction will be fully accounted for if we can show that Sam is not *unqualifiedly* rational, according to *some* sense of rationality. Rationality, let us remember, is a slippery and multifarious concept. An individual may be rational in one sense and simultaneously irrational in another. For our second example, let us consider someone named Sue who believes that freezing to death is good for her. Sue is therefore perfectly rational, according to a "fitting-means-to-ends" concept of rationality, if she believes that she should stand outside all night in sub-zero temperatures with no clothes on. However, most of us would judge her belief that freezing to death is good for her to be irrational in some other sense of rationality (perhaps a "proper cognitive function" sense). But we need not judge her to be irrational in *every* sense in order to account for our overall negative judgment of her rationality. Identifying just one failure of rationality is sufficient for that. And Sam's case, I think, can be handled in the same way. Even if we leave social establishment aside, we may presume that there is a *moral* defeater mechanism that *ought* to be operative in Sam, but is not.<sup>4</sup> The modification we must make to Alston's approach does require us to regard Sam as *prima facie* practically rational, but it certainly does not require us to regard him as unqualifiedly rational. The failure of a defeater mechanism in conditions where it ought to be operative is sufficient for us to judge Sam as irrational in this belief, and the latter judgment is sufficient to account for our visceral reaction. Also, the fact that it is a *moral* defeater mechanism that has failed in Sam probably has a great deal to do with the strength of our emotional response. But to demand that Sam be judged irrational in *every possible* sense is simply to demand too much. Sam's case, and others like it, do not give us a reason to refrain from making the modification to Alston's approach that the Epistopian thought experiment seems to require. I confess that I cannot think of any other reason not to make it. It is a harmless modification.

Can we identify a *benefit* to regarding all belief-formers as *prima facie* practically rational? Are there any possible cases such that the modified approach seems to give the intuitively correct answer, but Alston's original approach does not? I think there are some cases of this sort, though they are perhaps not very plausible.<sup>5</sup> Let us consider a society that has no history of forming beliefs about God. The formation of theological beliefs in this society is not a socially established practice. And now suppose that God desires to be gracious to a given individual in this society, let us call her Jane, by revealing Himself to her in some way. If there is any cognitive component to this revelation at all, then Jane must form a theological belief. Alston's original approach entails that Jane cannot be even *prima facie* rational in

forming this belief. Therefore, God cannot be gracious to Jane in this way without simultaneously rendering her irrational. But the modified approach entails neither of these conclusions. If it seems to us that God ought to be able to preserve Jane's rationality *and* be gracious to her in this way, then we have another reason to prefer the modified approach. To be sure, something must be said about how Jane's rationality is to be preserved against the force of epistemic defeat that is, even on the modified approach, generated by the lack of social establishment. I do not know how to solve this latter problem, so I will content myself with the conclusion that the modified approach at least allows us to consider it as a legitimate problem that we should try to solve, whereas Alston's original approach will not allow us to take even that very modest view of it.<sup>6</sup> On the original account, we needn't bother with it at all. Jane cannot be rational, and that is that. So cases of this sort do seem to lend a small amount of intuitive force to the view that the original approach is "not permissive enough."

But even if there are no practical differences at all between the two approaches, the case of the Epistopians reveals that the modified approach is indeed correct. All belief-formers are *prima facie* practically rational, simply in virtue of forming a belief. And we may acknowledge that fact without doing any damage at all to Alston's defense of Christian Mystical Perception.<sup>7</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 146-83. All subsequent page references refer to this volume.

2. There is no need to distinguish between *prima facie* rationality and unqualified rationality here, because by hypothesis there is no defeat. Thus all *prima facie* rational beliefs are unqualifiedly rational beliefs, regardless of the type of rationality in view.

3. It seems to me that the Epistopians could also present a persuasive argument analogous to the one Alston gives at the end of chapter four (pp. 178-83) for the conclusion that they are practically rational in taking every one of their beliefs to have been formed by a *reliable* mechanism. They would thereby be practically rational in taking themselves to be justified in their beliefs, and that according to a very strong reliabilist sense of justification. However, I will not press this point because it is not needed here.

4. Those who do not like the mechanistic language here may regard this case as one of those rare cases where we might have direct voluntary control over our beliefs. The repugnance of Sam's belief may then be explained by his failure to exercise his moral freedom in such a way as to render a correct moral judgment on this belief.

5. Though the implausibility of the following hypothetical case (about "Jane") would not affect the conclusion I draw from it, I do not wish to assert that it *is* implausible. Indeed, one might reasonably think that such cases have been *actual* at some time or other, and that some such cases are even recorded in Scripture. Abraham's call to leave Ur of the Chaldees, Moses at the burning bush, and Saul on the road to Damascus come immediately to mind as *possible* cases of idiosyncratic belief formation, although a considerable amount of historical research is required

to come to any firm conclusion regarding the degree of social establishment in any particular case. Nevertheless, if it were established that these biblical figures were not engaging in any socially established practice, then Alston's original account would entail the unwelcome (for Jews and Christians) conclusion that they were irrational. But the modified account I have presented here would entail only that their rationality depends upon overcoming the epistemic defeat that arises from the lack of social establishment. For this point (and two of these examples) I am indebted to comments by William Hasker.

6. I suspect that a solution to this problem lies in the fact that any epistemic defeater (in this case the lack of social establishment) can itself be defeated.

7. I am very grateful to Tom Kennedy, Sandra Visser, and Heath White for constructive comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.