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# Ecclesial Practices

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## **Ecclesial Practices**

**Colin M. McGuigan & Brad J. Kallenberg**

### **I. Introduction**

In this chapter, we first provide an overview of the place of practice in some of the most prominent recent epistemologists of religion; second, we give an account of an ordinary practice (engineering) to flesh out a general conception of the importance of practice in training cognizers for skilled perception; third, and last, we connect the results of this inquiry with renewed theological and philosophical interest in the 'spiritual senses' tradition. The upshot of these reflections is the conclusion that an adequate account of social practices already anticipates the possibility that *ecclesial* practice might contribute to an epistemic transformation capable of realizing new (spiritual) perceptual capacities by the transformed.

### **II. Ecclesial Practices in Recent Epistemology of Religion**

In light of its prominence in the recent epistemology of religion, we focus in this section on the epistemological school known as Reformed epistemology. We begin with the dean of that movement, Alvin Plantinga. Though we do not draw on Plantinga to thematize practice, he does help us to recognize certain limits endemic to cognitive life. In particular, he argues for the implausibility of certain requirements that have been laid down in the epistemological tradition, particularly the internalist demand for antecedent justification of the truth-reliability of our cognitive faculties. William P. Alston, to whom we turn subsequently, makes a similar argument

with regard to practices. Just as there is no conceivable alternative but to trust in the veritistic orientation of our cognitive faculties, so Alston argues there is nothing for it but to trust in the reliability of our belief-forming practices. These practices cannot be antecedently justified, but they are justified practically insofar as they do not fail us. After sketching Alston's 'doxastic practice approach to epistemology', we note some reservations that have been raised regarding Alston's project. These reservations concern Alston's reliance on mechanical metaphors in his treatment of religious belief-formation and the role of personal agency in his model of doxastic practices. Although we mostly withhold judgment here about whether these reservations are well-taken in Alston's case, we find that they aim our attention in helpful directions for understanding the epistemic significance of practices.

Plantinga's externalism and epistemological naturalism are apt places to start. Plantinga finds internalist requirements 'a bit on the demanding side, to put it mildly'. Speaking very roughly, the internalist requires that a knower be in possession of good reasons for taking her beliefs to be true in order for those beliefs to qualify as knowledge. Take, for instance, 'the suggestion that I know *p* only if I am able to give a good argument for the conclusion that my cognitive faculties are reliable, without relying on those faculties in giving the argument' (Plantinga 2010a: 173; also see Plantinga 2010b: 696). The problem with such a demand, Plantinga finds, is that it lays down requirements which not even God almighty, omniscient though God be, could satisfy. Accordingly, Plantinga's treatment of epistemic merit pivots from an internalist demand for justification to an externalist account of 'warrant'. On Plantinga's account of epistemic merit, the requisite conditions of knowledge include matters pertaining both to the formation of the knower's sensory and doxastic (belief-forming) experiences and to what the knower *does* in response to her experiences (i.e., form proper beliefs, make right inferences,

etc.). To put this in terms of a metaphor employed by Plantinga, knowledge is a function of conditions both ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ from a knower’s doxastic experience. When things function properly both upstream and downstream, then the resulting beliefs will possess the merit Plantinga calls ‘warrant’. Warrant is the quality of a belief’s being formed by cognitive faculties functioning properly in an environment for which they are well suited according to a design plan that is aimed at truth (Plantinga 1993: 46-7). One result of this account of epistemic merit is that Plantinga can follow a Quinean replacement of epistemic normativity with descriptive psychology because the latter already presupposes the kind of normativity relevant to externalist ‘warrant’ (see Quine 1969). This is a normative concept of ‘ought’ analogous to ‘the use [of “ought”] in which we say, of a damaged knee, or a diseased pancreas, or a worn brake shoe, that it no longer functions as it ought to’ (Plantinga 1993: 45). Accordingly, how we answer questions about knowledge will turn on what we take human knowers and their world to be like. Plantinga thus enables us to recognize the hopelessness of stepping outside of our cognitive faculties and our ways of taking the world to be in order to justify them antecedently. In a similar way, William P. Alston’s ‘doxastic practice approach to epistemology’ helps us to acknowledge the same limit regarding *all* our doxastic practices.

Central to an Alstonian doxastic practice is ‘a system or constellation of dispositions or habits, or to use a currently fashionable term, “mechanisms”, each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an “input”’ (Alston 1991: 153). It should be noted that ‘dispositions or habits’ include not only native human equipment but *learned* habits as well. Most importantly, Alston argues that the belief outputs of doxastic practices are prima facie justified. He essentially extends Thomas Reid’s point—that cognitive faculties are justified practically—to cover every socially established doxastic practice. ‘Reid’s point’, Alston

explains, ‘is that the only (external) basis we have for trusting [our cognitive faculties] is that they are firmly established doxastic practices, so firmly established that we “cannot help it”’. There just are no non-circular evidential supports for any of our ‘sources of belief’, Alston argues, so ‘we take our standing *within* SP [sense perceptual doxastic practice] and other familiar practices that have become firmly established, psychologically and socially, in our lives, and we feel free to use their output’ (Alston 1991: 149-151). It is rational to engage in these practices, and so rational to suppose them to be reliable. Though all doxastic practices may be regarded as ‘prima facie rationally engaged in’, as epistemic agents monitor their belief-formation, they sometimes detect anomalies in the “outputs” generated. Thus doxastic practices include not only the mechanisms of belief-formation but ‘distinctive ways of assessing and correcting the beliefs so formed’, i.e., ‘overrider systems’ (Alston 1991: 153, 158-9, 178). Alston presses this doxastic practice theory into service of justifying theism by claiming for Christian Mystical Practice (CMP), within which practitioners claim to perceive God, a ‘practical rationality’ akin to that possessed by SP: it is rational to engage in CMP and rational to regard its output beliefs as prima facie justified (Alston 1991: 194).

Some—notably, Sarah Coakley—have questioned what contribution Alston’s ‘Theory of Appearing’ is supposed to make to this account of doxastic practices (see Coakley 2011: 306-7). The Theory of Appearing holds that ‘the notion of X’s appearing to S as so-and-so is fundamental and unanalyzable.... For S to perceive X is simply for X to appear to S as so-and-so.... [T]hat is all there is to the *concept* of perception’ (Alston 1991: 55). It might seem that this theory’s purpose is to set perceptual beliefs on unambiguous, indubitable foundations. Perceptual beliefs, on this reading, would not admit of scrutiny because any anthropogenic (e.g., interpretive) element in perception would have been excised. In this case, the theory of appearing

could be said to reduce doxastic perceptual practices to mere mechanical processes. ‘Practice’ here would be a misnomer, though, for practices require *agents*, not mechanisms only. If this understanding of the Theory of Appearing truly got at what Alston was using it for, then in the case of perceptual ‘practices’, there would be nothing for the ‘overrider systems’ to do (other than, say, call to mind how much alcohol has been consumed, etc.). We suspect, however, that this understanding does not get at what Alston enlisted this theory for. Its minimalist role in Alston’s argument comes out subtly in the above quoted passage: ‘that is all there is to the *concept* of perception’, yet apparently not to perceptual *practice*.

We think, rather, that Alston’s purpose for this Theory of Appearing is more modest: it claims the *concept* of perception is irreducibly realist. When one perceives things, they are ‘now *present* to me; they occupy space in my visual [or other perceptual] field. They are *given* to my awareness in a way that sharply contrasts with anything I can do by my own devices to conjure them up in imagination, memory, or abstract thought’ (Alston 1991: 36-7). That is, perception is *not* anthropogenic all the way down. One may lack a concept for a thing, yet that thing will not be missing from one’s perceptual field. Elsewhere, Alston attends significantly to anthropogenic conceptualization in perceptual doxastic *practice* (Alston 1991: 27). According to Alston, for instance, a pervasive characteristic of perceptual practice is the use of various ‘objective concepts’ rather than ‘phenomenal concepts’. That is, people (except very rarely) report what sorts of object (a bald eagle, a white Burgundy, or whatever) are present to them rather than what patterns of sensory qualia are so present (Alston 1991: 44-8). People do so by means of background knowledge and acquired skills of grouping sensory qualia into objective types (Alston 1991: 46 and note 34). This background knowledge and these skills are constituent

‘mechanisms’ of perceptual doxastic practice and so their reliability will be justified, together with the other ‘mechanisms’, *practically* (Alston 1991: 48).

Even though we cannot entirely agree with Sarah Coakley’s criticisms of Alston’s Theory of Appearing, we find that her argument on the matter contains crucial insights concerning the importance of training for perceptual practice. In short, Coakley is dissatisfied with a presumed parity between perception of God and perception of the kinds of middle-sized dry goods to which the Theory of Appearing is suited. Coakley argues that the mechanical kind of passivity she finds the Theory of Appearing asserting of perceivers of dogs or Porsches or trees is not the kind of passivity needed to perceive God, according to the ‘spiritual senses’ tradition to which Coakley has recently been calling attention. The one who perceives a tree perceives it, whether she wants to or not, in virtue of the impact it makes on her perceptual field. *That* is the passivity Coakley regards Alston as asserting of SP. The perceptual beliefs formed within SP are a function of human equipment, operating statically and largely automatically. The one who perceives God, however, on the account of, say, Teresa of Ávila, needs a rather different sort of passivity, indeed a passive receptivity that requires *active* training. This is a passivity acquired through ecclesial practices (Coakley 2011: 294–301, 306–8). We would find Coakley’s criticism well-taken *if* the Theory of Appearing is supposed to be an epistemological or metaphysical theory. But it is not; Alston said so himself (see Coakley 2011: 307n.81). It clarifies what is involved in the concept of perception. However, it does not exhaust what needs to be said about perceptual practices, not even SP.

Coakley’s critique, however, has the decided value of accentuating the importance of *training* for the perception of God. In Coakley’s judgment, Alston’s attempt to situate epistemology in the practical context of religious belief-formation is hampered by his pervasive

reliance on mechanical metaphors for belief formation (e.g., ‘inputs’ and ‘outputs’, which ‘have the ring of the factory workshop’). In Coakley’s view, the ‘dryly mechanistic’ nature of Alston’s model threatens to occlude attention to the epistemic *nurturing* that occurs in religious practice; to the possibility that meditative, contemplative, ascetical practice might effect an epistemic *transformation* of the knower, capacitating her for ‘new levels of perception and sensation, new ways of “perceiving God”’ (Coakley 2011: 304). In other words, Alston’s mechanical picture disregards the possibility that knowing subjects can grow and mature in ways a machine cannot. With Coakley, we look on mechanistic epistemological models with suspicion. We are skeptical of the idea that mechanism is even the limiting case for socio-organic processes. Mechanistic models are dull to, and so risk occluding attention to, the progressively sensitive attunement of human animals to the subtle warp and weft of the bio-psycho-social world we inhabit, and much more to the hidden presence of God in that world.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued that Alston’s doxastic practice theory remains hampered by regnant epistemological stances that Wolterstorff characterizes as ‘epistemolog[ies] of an immobile, solitary reactor’ (hereafter, EISR). Wolterstorff characterizes EISR in this way:

The picture that comes to mind ... is that of a solitary person sitting in a chair passively receiving such sensory stimulation as comes his way, taking note of the beliefs that that stimulation evokes in him, recalling certain events from his past, observing what is going on in his mind, and drawing inferences. It’s the epistemology of a *reactor*: someone who receives stimulation and then goes off on his own interior line of thought. It’s the epistemology of a *solitary* reactor: almost no attention is paid to other persons – to the role of testimony in our lives, for example. And it’s the epistemology of an *immobile* solitary reactor. ... The



body enters the picture only so far as sensory stimulation requires a body. ...How different is the actuality, which presumably it is the task of epistemology to illuminate. (Wolterstorff 2010: 86)

In Wolterstorff's judgment, Alston's doxastic practice theory is marked by EISR to the extent that it is fundamentally *reactive*. In Wolterstorff's judgment, action enters into Alston's doxastic practices primarily to shore up fundamentally passive processes. Belief formation is governed by 'mechanisms' that the (passive, disengaged) agent *monitors*, and it is only with the corrective 'overrider system' that the agent is voluntarily and actively involved in the knowing process (Wolterstorff 2010: 100-1).

To be fair, Alston does show *some* attentiveness to the ways that active practice can stratify planes (plural) of sensitivity and perception, more so than his governing mechanistic metaphors and his passive Theory of Appearing might suggest. For example:

Why suppose that the outputs of a practice are unworthy of acceptance because it is engaged in by only a part of the population? Why this predilection for egalitarianism in the epistemic sphere, where its credentials are much less impressive than in the political sphere? Why suppose it to be an a priori truth that truth is less likely to be available to a part of the population than to the whole? *We are familiar with many areas in which only a small percentage of the population has developed the perceptual sensitivity to certain features of the world,—for example, the distinctive qualities of wines and the inner voices of a complex orchestral performance.* I can see no good reason for excluding deeply rooted epistemic practices that are engaged in by only a part of the population. (Alston 1991: 169 emphasis added)

This is a very important point: ‘certain features of the world’ are imperceptible to some, many, or most people. This is not because their perceptual fields lack these features, but because they have not been trained to *attend* to these features in the relevant ways. This will be a crucial point for subsequent sections of this essay.

Alston helps us to realize that we have no alternative but to trust our belief-forming practices and allow them to be justified by their success practically. However, for reasons that will become apparent in the next section, we prefer Wolterstorff’s epistemological model for the way that it accentuates epistemic agency and progressiveness. In this regard, Wolterstorff’s epistemological work represents a promising move away from EISR and toward ‘an epistemology of the socially engaged mobile agent’ (Wolterstorff 2010: 90-1). The key concepts of this move are ‘ways of finding things out’ and ‘practices of inquiry’ (hereafter, WoFTO/PoI). WoFTO/PoI are so named from sequences of actions that one could use to find something out. But Wolterstorff stresses that ‘WoFTO/PoI’ are really only infelicitous shorthand for several doxastic practices, not just for finding out *facts*. Wolterstorff also includes ways of remembering and attending to things under these shorthand terms. We might, for instance, learn to attend sensitively to the baffling films of Terrence Malick, and this would be a WoFTO/PoI on Wolterstorff’s definition. Moreover, WoFTO/PoI comprehend ways of acquiring ‘apprehensions of things, acquaintances with things: apprehensions of unfamiliar things, more discriminating acquaintances with familiar things’. These may not aim at knowledge or belief production as their goal but rather some other goal, for example, aesthetic appreciation (Wolterstorff 2010: 93). Nonetheless, such practices are WoFTO/PoI, for they bring knowers into more comprehensive, or deeper, or more sensitive, cognitive contact with their world. In a highly suggestive move, Wolterstorff looks to Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory of social practices to better understand (thus

broadly construed) doxastic practices. We should now like to explore the implications of this opening to the epistemic significance of social practices.

### **III. MacIntyrean Practices**

#### **A. An Example MacIntyrean Practice: Engineering**

Our account of ‘practices’ here will extend Wolterstorff’s notion of WoFTO/PoI in a way that does justice to the complex, chaotic, entropic reality of living systems. We aim to show that the kind of ‘practice’ we have in mind *precedes* the act of perception. We proceed in two steps. First, we describe an everyday practice whose reliable belief formation no one questions. Second we will generalize our description by referring to Alasdair MacIntyre’s definition. Our final section will suggest that ecclesial practices, like all practices, train bodies to see what the untrained are unable to detect. Our conclusion will be that ‘the trained eye’ of the practitioner (e.g., the engineer) may be a better analog to perceiving God than perceiving a tree. We proceed first simply to sketch the practice nature of engineering according to some of its characteristic marks: *wicked problems, dynamical similarity, design reasoning, satisfactoriness, tacit knowing and skilled perception*, notions which have analogs in *all* practices, including ecclesial practices.

The practice of engineering is not reducible to theoretical sciences (Vincenti 1982). In fact, scientific theory often *follows* engineering breakthroughs rather than predicts them. For example, James Watt had a working steam engine prior to thermodynamics explaining *how* such a thing was possible. But if engineering is not merely applied science, what is it? Engineering is the ongoing cooperative attempt to respond to an entropic world. In other words, engineering is a social form of coping with a gritty world in which things tend to bend, bind, break, rust, melt and generally fall apart (this description of engineering derives surprisingly from 13<sup>th</sup>-century theologian, Hugh of St. Victor; see Kallenberg 2013: 248-75). One longtime insider to the

practice has aptly described engineering as a “strategy for causing the best change in a poorly understood situation within the available resources” (Koen 2003: 9). Note the emphasis on limits: engineering must not only make do with limited resources, but also do so within situations that are inherently poorly understood. It is the opacity of its problems that makes engineering akin to aesthetics; the longer one looks, the more there is to see. This is unlike mathematics: re-doing a problem will not improve on an already true answer! Yet in engineering, one returns to problems repeatedly—not simply because the conditions of the problem have changed (there is no one-size-fits-all solution), nor only because the field will have surely advanced, but also because the engineer herself at a later time may be able to *see* something new in the problem and/or has gained skills enabling her to generate an entirely innovative response.

For engineering design problems there is never a single solution to a problem that stands alone as *the* ‘right’ answer. This is not to say that anything goes, for some proposals (for example, those that do not work or cannot be built) are rejected out of hand. But for the very large number of live options remaining on the design table, each proposal must be judged for its fitness against its rivals. And yet, contrary to popular opinion, this urgent choice between rivals is not resolved by mathematical proof that yields a single, ‘right’ answer.

Engineers frequently face design problems that are ‘wicked’ (Rittel and Webber 1984). One mark of a wicked problem is that it does not reduce to a common denominator in terms of which rival proposals can be adjudicated. For example, if a problem can be addressed *chemically* or *mechanically*, in what terms can “better” be spelled out? Yet decisions must be made. The trickiness of comparing apples to orangutans means that the sort of modeling employed within engineering is what Heinrich Hertz called ‘dynamical’, which is to say, crucially dependent upon the highly nuanced *dunamis* (powers or, better, *skills*) of the modeler (Kallenberg 2013: 121-146;

Sterrett 2002 and 2006).

When called upon to respond to a wicked problem, engineers employ ‘design reasoning’. Design reasoning is externalist, active and cooperative. It is measured against the metric of logic, but only in part and negatively: a ‘good’ designer must not trespass the canons of logic. Yet logic is powerless to *compel* the choice of one proposed design over another. So then, engineering is a matter of personal taste? No. The important, hard work of design happens in the middle, between the dual myths: the Scylla of ‘only one right answer’ and the Charybdis of ‘anything goes’. Anthony Kenny has dubbed the primary metric governing the middle as ‘satisfactoriness’ (Kenney 1976). Satisfactoriness is a slippery concept indeed, for no one size fits all and it very often cannot be spelled out in advance of ‘looking and seeing’. In deliberating over the relative degree of satisfactoriness of a given proposal, contextual details matter in ways that they do not matter within arguments of deductive logic. If ‘all men are mortal’ and ‘Socrates is a man’, it does not affect the conclusion to learn that ‘Socrates has a pug nose’. But if ‘seeking shelter in this cave’ is an otherwise satisfactory response to an impending downpour, it matters enormously whether a bear already occupies the cave. Reliance on details does not make design reasoning *less* logical than theoretical reasoning, nor *illogical*, but simply logical in a different way. Design reasoning constitutes a different mode of being rational, which of course Aristotle called ‘practical’ reasoning (for a clear and accessible account of practical reasoning in the sense that we are using ‘design reasoning’, see McCabe 1986).

Of course, not every detail is relevant (the cave may be inhabited by a moth rather than a bear). Therefore, one of the most important questions facing the practical reasoner is this: how does one reliably spot just those details that are relevant? If a violinist played with one string badly out of tune, we’d charge him with an unsatisfactory practical response to the occasion of a

concert. If he said he did not notice the tuning problem, we'd be doubly horrified: first because a skilled player is expected to spot tuning as relevant, and second because even we as mere listeners *know* that good music *ought* to be in tune.

Ordinarily epistemologists want to take as baseline the perceptions of the ordinary person whose sensory and cognitive faculties are in good working order. But our argument leans the other way. More often than not, people lie along a continuum, with the most opaque claims being made by practitioners who operate at the *upper* edge of what is known, in which arenas it is sheer folly to say, 'We ordinary folk all know how it should be ...' The illustration of the shoddy violinist trades on a widely shared *general* knowledge of music. That the audience can spot shoddiness simply shows the extent to which the player is one of us and not yet a 'violinist'. In truth, spectators cannot share a practitioner's knowledge. Therefore, we who lack adequate engineering training cannot supply a ready-made *engineering* example of 'details relevant to a design problem'. This is not very satisfying. And it leaves our sense of democracy entirely offended. But so it is with *all* practices. There are *countless* domains of knowledge that (more or less) elude the spectator because they are accessible only to those who have gone through the paces to be trained within the correlative practice. Even within such a practice 'knowledge' is not shared evenly throughout the population. There always remains a small class of expert practitioners who alone are in the best position and condition to recognize which details are relevant, what counts as justification, and so on. These experts are unable to convey by means of propositions what it is that they know in ways that would enlighten the novice, much less the *untrained* spectator. Some knowledge the experts possess falls into the class of knowing called 'tacit' (Gascoigne and Thornton 2013; Toulmin 2001: 102-37).

By 'tacit knowing' we mean knowledge possessed by one's body that *cannot* be conveyed

by means of propositions (Damasio, 2005). Granted, words may be used to label an experience (for example, “the smell of coffee brewing”), but one could not by means of labels convey the *smell* of coffee to one who has never before smelled brewing coffee. Likewise, ‘partial differential equations’ means *something*—but only to those who have first learned to solve ordinary differential equations.

Granted, sometimes tacit knowing has theoretical equivalence. An experienced structural engineer may ‘eyeball’ the proper width of an I-beam, but she might also arrive at the same dimension by doing the calculations. But important for our case is the fact that it is logically possible for there to be occasions in which what is known is simply unutterable. On the centrality of ‘feel’ to engineering judgment, Robert Zussman’s view is typical:

To argue, as I have . . . that engineering skills are rarely theoretical and often not even technical is different from arguing that engineering is unskilled work. To the contrary, engineering often involves highly complex skills, many of which are learned only through industrial practice and over the course of a long career. But these skills require experience and a “*feel*” for things—for a particular machine or process, for an organization and its personnel—as much, if not more, than scientific training (Zussman 1985: 75).

In such cases, words that accompany tacit knowledge function as ‘heuristics’, which is to say prescriptions for acting in a manner such that the novice may, over time, be likely to gain the knowledge (Koen 2003: 26-58). How did our parents impart to us the knowledge of balancing on two wheels? Ironically by telling us what was counter-intuitive at the time: *go faster!* (For it’s impossible to balance at slow speeds.) It is this whole complex of mentor-guided activities directed toward the end of tacit learning that makes up, at least in part, the practical nature of

engineering.

To say that tacit knowing is ‘bodily’ is to claim that an analogy exists between the kind of perceptual capacities that Plantinga takes as fundamental to *properly functioning* humans and the kind of perception enjoyed by a *properly trained* engineer. When an engineer judges a bridge to be dangerous, it is not an instance of *seeing-as*, as though she could opt to see it otherwise. Nor is the engineer’s judgment a deductively formed conclusion that follows from major and minor premises. Rather it is an act of perception akin to sensory perception in its immediacy but differing because the practitioner’s faculties have been more intentionally *trained*. She has been trained to attend to the bridge’s features in ways the non-practitioner is unable to, and so her perception has acquired greater depth than the untrained spectator. She sees more. It is the perception of something real, as real to her as the cup that I perceive on the table is to me. Just as listeners are right in general to trust the virtuoso’s highly trained ‘ear’, consumers are equally rational to deem trustworthy the engineer’s ‘eye’ (Koen 2003: 34).

This summary of engineering aimed to make explicit what seems commonly assumed, namely that our world has endless ‘aesthetic’ depth that unfailingly repays repeated looks. We do not read the useful bits off the *surface* of the world. Rather, we become practitioners who through training grow capable of perceiving what was once undetectable but is now seen in the hues of our particular practice(s). So numerous are these practices and so variously embedded are we in one or more of them, that our conclusion in this essay is that *trained* perception is the epistemological baseline. In other words, the more plausible analog for ‘perceiving *Deus absconditus*’ is not ‘a certain determinate configuration of specific sensory qualia’ (Alston 1991: 155) but rather ‘a faulty bridge’ as perceived by the trained eye of the structural engineer.

## **B. MacIntyre’s Definition**



Human beings are *homo prudens*, the *practical* animal. Crusoe may have survived the desert island by his wits alone (though not without first salvaging well engineered artifacts from the ship's wreckage!), but our survival as an animal species has much more to do with our ability to join with others in applying our collective wits to the uncertain task of coping with our highly contingent environment. This social art of coping takes many unique forms; medicine, carpentry, farming, hunting, and architecture are all practices. Thus MacIntyre's definition of practice:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre 1984: 187)

Three observations suffice. First, practices as whole social enterprises are marked by progress (as in the case of internal medicine) or alternatively of decline (alchemy; the basic Hegelian-Darwinian story line is clear. For an insightful account of the training of spiritual senses that fits within a framework of evolutionary biology, see Coakley 2012). The progress of a practice entails the possibility of progress by each human practitioner in terms of improved 'powers to achieve excellence' and clarification of the 'conceptions of the ends and goods' sought for by the practice. Yet this is not mechanical; progress is not automatic. Second, the notion of practice entails the timefulness of coming-to-know. The question 'How do I know?' is answered very differently for the novice than for the expert practitioner. For the bulk of the population (who admittedly are novices to all practices but their own), the question is answered simply: 'Follow the prescribed path!' Of course, as MacIntyre is quick to point out, the rejoinder

‘But which path?’ is forever premature. For only as one gains skills by following diligently in the prescribed way will one eventually become skillful enough to deliberate whether another path may be ‘better’. Such adjudication is itself a socially deliberated issue and thus always beyond the ken of the lone novice.

Third, the development of the agent, that is his or her growth in the skills of perception, is never reducible to mere ideational development. MacIntyre strongly resists the modern penchant for bifurcating knowing and doing. Rather, all knowing (believing) is a doing, and all doing is bodily in nature. This is decidedly not a concession to the trivial fact that corpses do not calculate sums. Rather, thinkers from Aristotle to MacIntyre are making the more profound point that even the doing of sums involves bodily tasks, not the least of which is perceiving *which* are the relevant details (such as counting each item only once, knowing the difference between counting musical notes (or the years of a monarch’s reign) and counting apples, and so on).

#### **IV. Ecclesial Practices and Epistemic Transformation**

So far, we have taken from Plantinga and Alston that it is hopeless to expect to prescind from our cognitive faculties and our doxastic practices in order to justify their truth-reliability antecedently. We rather trust them, make use of them, correct them as we go along *in medias res*. From Wolterstorff, we have taken the understanding that doxastic practices need not aim at knowledge or belief-production per se and include in fact any practice that affects our ability to apprehend features of the world. Seizing on Wolterstorff’s suggestive association of doxastic practices with the social practice theory of Alasdair MacIntyre, we have so far argued that (1) practices are extremely widespread in human community, (2) bodily formation-for-perceiving is how practices function, (3) by bodily training practitioners grow to see/perceive (*aisthesis*) what was heretofore *invisible*. (Because of this continuum of seeing, philosophers cannot simply step

lightly from ‘I can’t see it’ to ‘therefore it doesn’t exist!’ (Wykstra 1990)). Accordingly, it is plausible that some sort of practice—call it ‘ecclesial’—offered to novices by practitioners (viz., ‘saints’) who claim to perceive will indeed turn out to be a means by which novices may grow to perceive the ‘invisible’. Ecclesial practices must be entertained as logically possible means of ‘epistemic transformation’, to use Sarah Coakley’s idiom. In arguing for dependence on saintly practitioners, we are strongly agreeing with virtue epistemologist Linda Zagzebski’s conclusion, in her discussion of religious knowledge, that

we acquire many kinds of knowledge, including religious knowledge, by imitating those who have it, the people whose wisdom we admire. ... This is the way we learn a specialized field of learning or a skill.... There are methods developed by the best practitioners of each field that are transmitted to the next generation during the course of the practice of the field. The same point applies to methods of meditation and contemplation. With luck, imitating an exemplar of spiritual wisdom can result in acquiring some of the most important truths a human being can learn. (Zagzebski 2011: 397-8)

We should only like to clarify that the knowledge so acquired through imitation of ‘exemplars’ is not limited to important propositional truths only. Of course spiritual exemplars *may* instruct or remind the less mature of many such sentential truths, but we are more concerned here with the kind of knowledge that Gilbert Ryle called ‘knowing-how’ (Ryle, 1945).

In the present context, we use the phrase ‘know-how’ to indicate a tacit perceptual knowing acquired through such mentored practices as prayer, contemplation, fasting, and mercy; a knowing-how to attend to God’s presence in the world. Acquiring this know-how is internally related to deepening acquaintance with the divine other. This brings us to the ‘spiritual senses’

tradition, a strand of Christian thought and practice, stretching back through Origen to Scriptural antecedents, which has held all along that human beings, when transformed through ecclesial practices, become progressively capable of perceiving God. According to Olivier Clément, the difference brought about by this transformation of bodily patterns of action (i.e., by taking on the virtues of Christ) yields a difference in *attention*. ‘Let us be attentive,’ the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom exhorts. So Clément, relying on Evagrius, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac of Nineveh and Maximus the Confessor, tells us that ‘[c]ontemplation begins only after the completion of ascetical exercises (*praxis*), the aim of which is the achievement of interior freedom (*apatheia*), that is to say, the possibility of loving’. When we can give creatures ‘a little loving attention in the light of the Risen Christ’, we will see the Logos hidden in all created things, and, as Isaac tells us, our hearts will break and our eyes weep for all their sufferings. Clément quotes from Maximus: ‘When he [the Logos] rises in a mind that has been purified, he makes himself seen in addition to the *logoi* of the objects he has created’; the Logos, ‘while hiding himself for our benefit in a mysterious way, in the *logoi*, shows himself to our minds to the extent of our ability to understand. ... Thus he gathers us together in himself, through every object ... enabling us to rise into union with him’. Moreover, Clément suggests that the *direct* contemplation of God comes after, and stands in continuity with, this loving attention to God in creatures, ‘the giver through the gift’ (Clément 1993: 210, 213–227).

In a similar vein Sarah Coakley argues that perception, like referring, does not name one essential thing but is rather a layered, family resemblance concept. Perception admits of depths (Coakley 2002: 135, 45). As one can be trained to see ‘with practice’, as we argued in section III, so Coakley suggests spiritual training may be prerequisite for seeing spiritual things. This training corrects (in part) sin’s noetic effects; integrates the knower’s intellect, affections, and

senses ('the noetic and the erotic'); cultivates the knower in a posture of epistemic receptivity (in Coakley's view, the 'ostensibly "feminine" posture of virgin/lover'), and thereby opens the knower to dispossession by the Spirit (Coakley 2002: 137; Coakley 2008: 313-4; Coakley 2011: 294, 300, 304). By such means, the knower becomes disposed to perceive (not by cognitively grasping but by being graciously grasped by) God—in Eucharistic bread and wine, in faces of the poor, in her own reflection, in the starry heavens above, in trees, and birds, and all things. This modality of transformed perception, Coakley points out, is open to analysis in Plantinga's idiom of proper functioning, and its progressive nature renders it akin to recent virtue epistemology. 'Cognitive contact with reality', to borrow Zagzebski's phrase, does not lie upon a 'flat plane', but is expandable, perfectible, divinizable. As we have argued here at some length, pre-theological perception already admits of depth, already does not lie upon a 'flat plane'. Spiritual epistemic transformation, then, might have its analogue in the practiced attention of the engineer, or doctor, or carpenter, or farmer, or architect, or for that matter, a parent of young children.

## **V. Conclusion**

We have so far advanced a modest claim: that it is logically possible that ecclesial practices are means of epistemic transformation disposing practitioners to new modes of graced spiritual perception. This theological-epistemological possibility is opened up for us by the Reformed epistemologists' displacement of epistemology as first philosophy. If our faculties and doxastic practices justify themselves practically, we can see our social doxastic practices as properly antecedent to, and formative for, epistemic assessments of their reliability. Accordingly, social doxastic practices need not wait for permission from a positive probability assessment in order for engaging in them to be rational (*pace* Swinburne 2005). Moreover, the possibility of

graced spiritual perception is anticipated at the pre-theological level in the pervasive phenomenon of social practices, wherein practitioners (socially, timefully) are trained in modes of attentiveness wherein their perceptions acquire new depth.

We conclude by observing that many voices in the Christian tradition go well beyond our modest claim—that training for spiritual perception is not impossible—and exhort their interlocutors to take on ecclesial practice, as the chief means by which they might ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Ps 34:8).

The spiritual sense tradition has forever maintained that the quality of one’s knowledge of divine things—in contemporary epistemological idiom, knowledge by acquaintance—is a function of the quality of one’s character, which is to say one’s regular (habitual) bodily activities. Such a view is evident in the Hebrew Bible as well as the Christian Scriptures. For example, the author to the Hebrews wrote: “But solid food is for the mature [cognate of *telos*] who through practice [*hexis* = steady state; the ultimate endpoint of character formation] have trained [cognate of ‘gymnastics’] their senses [cognate of *aisthesis*] to discern good and evil” (Heb. 5:14; NASB; see also Ez. 12:2; Lk. 24:30–31; Mk. 8:17–18; cf. Jer. 5:21f; 2 Cor. 3:18). Writers such as Athanasius in the West were echoed by theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius in the East. Isaac of Ninevah is particularly poignant: ‘Especially those who are *trained in praying* unto Him and who bear suffering for His sake, *see clearly in colors*’.

Let excellence be reckoned by thee as the body, contemplation as the soul. The two [form] one complete spiritual man, composed of sensible and intelligible parts. And as it is not possible that the soul reach existence and birth without the accomplished formation of the body, so it is not possible that contemplation, the second soul, the spirit of revelations, be formed in the womb of the intellect which

receives the fullness of spiritual seed, without the corporeal performance of excellence, the dwelling place of the knowledge which receives revelations.

Isaac generalizes his maxim, '*Spiritual knowledge is posterior to the performance of excellence*' (Isaac of Ninevah 1939: 2, 12, 21).

Likewise in the West, we read Blaise Pascal's advice:

Endeavor then to convince yourself, not by increase of proofs of God, but by the abatement of your passions. You would like to attain faith, and do not know the way; you would like to cure yourself of unbelief and ask the remedy for it. Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe.... (Cited in Tilley 1995: 23).

Terrence Tilley helpfully comments on the logic of this passage that one who takes on the practices of faith 'will naturally develop beliefs about God and God's worshipfulness ... not because more arguments pile up, but because the interlocutor will become, through engaging in religious practices, a rather different person'. That is, she 'will become a person who can be awestruck by *les espaces infinis* and see through the book of nature to the Mind that wrote it' (Tilley 1995: 24). Practices change the epistemic agent, and the change (to throw this into Plantinga's expression) ripples both 'upstream' and 'downstream' from the agent's doxastic experience. This essay has been concerned principally with effects 'upstream'. (For consideration of the effect of ecclesial practice on matters 'downstream', i.e., of ways that the socially-cultivated 'illative sense' informs theological judgment, see Aquino 2004: chs. 4 and 5). That is, what the epistemic agent perceives, how the world seems to her to be, have been

transformed by the renewal of her body and mind through ascetic discipline resulting in loving attentiveness. She or he has, in the words of Pseudo-Macarius that follow, become all gazing: ‘The prophet Ezekiel speaks of the four Living Creatures harnessed to the Lord’s chariot. He says that they had countless eyes. In the same way the soul that seeks God – rather I mean the soul that is sought by God – is no longer anything but gazing’ (Clément, 1993, 185).<sup>1</sup>

### **Suggested Reading**

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