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The Autonomy and Explanation of Mystical Perception

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Abstract. William Alston has articulated a powerful defence of the claim that mystical perception generates prima facie justified beliefs about God. At the heart of his defence is the claim that mystical perception is 'innocent until proven guilty'; that is, Alston claims that the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of putative perceptions of God should be accorded the same presumptive innocence we accord to other standard ways of forming beliefs like sense perception, memory and introspection. But Alston employs a strategy for defending mystical perception that seems to obviate the possibility of criticizing mystical perception and thus that renders otiose Alston's claim that that practice is innocent only until proven guilty. I argue that this appearance is deceptive; Alston's strategy does not render effective criticism of mystical perception unreasonably difficult. I further argue that granting the legitimacy of Alston's strategy is essential to a fair, measured criticism of mystical perception.

I. Epistemic criteria for evaluating mystical perception

First, a brief overview of Alston's position. According to Alston, each human being engages in various doxastic practices. A doxastic practice is constituted by (1) a family of dispositions to form beliefs with a certain content on the basis of given types of ground[1] and (2) a matrix of beliefs and procedures by which members of a doxastic practice may determine whether or not the beliefs they are disposed to form deserve continued adherence.[2] Thus, for example, each human being engages in the sense-perceptual doxastic practice (SP) in which we form beliefs about objects in our physical environment on the basis of the stimulation of our senses and in which we confirm and disconfirm beliefs by determining whether or not predictions based on such beliefs are accurate. Each human being also engages in other standard practices, namely introspection, memory, rational intuition and testimony.

[1] As I shall use the term in this essay, a 'ground' may be a belief, an experience, or a combination of both; in doing so, I follow Alston. Thus, for example, an agent's having the phenomenological experience as of visually perceiving a computer on the desk counts as a ground for her belief that there is a computer on the desk, as is the experience of recalling that there was a computer on the desk several minutes ago and as is the belief that trustworthy Tom just deposited a computer on the desk.

[2] *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 146–65; 'Belief-Forming Practices and the Social', in *Socializing Epistemology*, Frederick Schmitt, ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1994), p. 31; 'A Doxastic Practice Approach to Epistemology', in *Knowledge and Skepticism*, Marjorie Clay and Keith Lehrer, eds. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), passim; 'Taking the Curse Off Language Games: a Realist Account of Doxastic Practices', in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief*, Timothy Tessin and Mario van der Ruhr, eds. (London: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 34.

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In addition to engaging in standard practices like SP, some agents participate in what Alston calls the Mystical Practice (MP). Such agents appear to themselves to perceive God in generically the same way that they perceive physical objects, namely God is directly present or manifest to their consciousness. (The main difference between SP and MP, over and above their different subject matters, is that, in the former, objects are present to an agent's consciousness only via sensory mediation whereas, in the latter, awareness of God is not normally mediated by sensory stimulation.) Alston calls the beliefs formed on the basis of putative perceptions of God Manifestation-beliefs or M-beliefs for short.[3]

Alston articulates general criteria for evaluating doxastic practices. The following sketch of his criteria should suffice for our purposes.

(1) A necessary condition of the positive epistemic status of a given practice is that it generate a sufficiently high ratio of true to false beliefs. That is, it is reliable.

(2) We are in no position to show of any of our central doxastic practices that they are reliable. That is, we have available to us no non-circular and otherwise acceptable arguments in support of the claim that sense perception, memory, introspection or rational intuition are reliable.

(3) In spite of our inability to show that those practices are reliable, we remain confident that the beliefs we form by engaging in basic doxastic practices are generally true. Hence, we would be guilty of employing a double standard were we to require of non-standard practices that they enjoy discursive redemption. Consistency requires, then, that we regard any given doxastic practice as presumptively innocent.[4]

(4) Presumptive innocence does not render a given practice immune from external critique; if we have good reason to believe that a given practice is unreliable, then we should cease engaging in it. A given practice forfeits its presumptive innocence if it generates a high ratio of inconsistent beliefs or if it generates a high ratio of beliefs which are inconsistent with the beliefs generated by more reputable practices.[5]

According to Alston, basic doxastic practices are 'innocent until proven guilty';[6] although we can provide no non-circular justification for our con-

[3] *Perceiving God*, p. 1; 'Perceiving God', in *Journal of Philosophy* **83** (November, 1986), 655.

[4] In *Perceiving God*, Alston argues that only socially established practices enjoy presumptive innocence and that idiosyncratic practices require discursive redemption. But he has since changed his position: he has dropped entirely the appeal to social establishment. See 'Reply to Critics', in *Journal of Philosophical Research* **49**/3 (March, 1995), 72.

[5] Alston notes a kind of consideration which can bolster a practice's presumptive innocence, what he calls 'significant self-support', which plays little role in my argument and hence to which I do not include substantive reference at this point.

[6] *Perceiving God*, p. 153.

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viction that, e.g., SP is reliable, we are not epistemically remiss in believing that it is reliable. Parity of treatment requires that we should impute to MP the presumptive innocence we also grant to SP. But that a given doxastic practice is presumptively reliable does not grant it 'diplomatic immunity' from imputations of guilt; that would be unduly conservative. So, in order to counter-balance the conservative 'presumptively innocent' end of the dictum, Alston adds an 'until proven guilty' rider. Hence, even though epistemically upstanding agents need not show that MP is reliable, they need to respond to arguments to the conclusion that MP is unreliable.[7]

II. AN INITIAL CRITICISM

It seems to some of Alston's critics that his employment of the 'innocent until proven guilty' dictum is a protective strategy which, in effect, immunizes MP from external critique. Thus, for example, Matthew Bagger writes,

> The frequent references to the principle of jurisprudence, 'innocent until proven guilty,' signal Alston's … protective intentions. In judicial reasoning we employ this tenet in our system, not because of its *a priori* necessity, but because we wish to *protect* the accused individual as much as is feasible from mistaken prosecution and punishment. … The scholars who propose that we consider religious perception 'innocent until proven guilty' should explain why we should wish to protect religious perception in this manner.[8] (Bagger's italics)

Bagger's concerns are unwarranted. When Alston claims that MP is presumptively innocent, he means that participants may regard that practice as reliable even though they can provide no adequate argument in support of its reliability. But MP is not the only practice for which we can provide no non-circular support: we find ourselves in the same predicament with respect to sense perception, memory, introspection and inference. Hence, we should accord presumptive innocence to any practice whether sacred or profane. The use of legal metaphor, then, does not indicate some intention to protect religious doxastic practices from external criticism. Rather, the legal metaphor is of use in getting the points across that (a) we cannot but engage in certain doxastic practices without already having proven their reliability and (b) that this fact does not render them immune to criticism. Insofar as that is what the 'innocent until proven guilty' metaphor means, I think it entirely defensible.

We can put the point this way. Bagger is correct in claiming that Alston employs the 'innocent until proven guilty' locution with the intention of protecting MP. From what is he intent on protecting MP? From the claim

[7] Actually, if Alston failed to add the 'until proven guilty' rider, then the presumptive aspect of the dictum would lack motivation. After all, if a given practice is not subject to proof of guilt, then it is impossible to remove the presumption of innocence, in which case we might just as well impute innocence straightaway.

[8] 'The Miracle of Minimal Foundationalism', in *Religious Studies* **29** (1993), 303.

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that MP lacks positive epistemic status because we cannot show that MP is reliable. Why is that objection a mistake? To invoke another legal phrase, all practices should enjoy equal protection under the law: we can provide no non-circular and otherwise adequate justification for any of the basic practices in which we engage and should therefore not discriminate against MP on that very account.

A brief digression. Both Bagger (and Dirk-Martin Grube[9]) claim that Alston's 'innocent until proven guilty' doctrine is parasitic on his modest foundationalism and that, were we to adopt some version of a coherence theory of justification, we would be free to deny presumptive innocence to MP (and other practices) and thus skirt Alston's protective intentions. Thus, according to Bagger, Alston and other Reformed Epistemologists propose that 'we (including non-theists) consider perceptions of God innocent (veridical) until proven guilty (non-veridical). The epistemology to which they subscribe, labeled "minimal foundationalism" by Jeffrey Stout, makes their project possible'.[10]

This analysis flies in the face both of Alston's express commitments and the substance of his position. Alston claims that, at the level of the epistemic status of doxastic practices, his 'innocent until proven guilty' approach is tantamount to a version of the coherence theory, namely negative coherentism.[11] Simply put, Alston claims that an agent may rationally engage in any practice which is not massively inconsistent (read: negatively coherent) either internally or with regard to other well-established practices. But that coherence constraint is equivalent to the claim that doxastic practices are innocent until proven guilty.

Alston is, no doubt, a foundationalist with respect to the justificatory status of particular beliefs. But it would be a level confusion to infer from that fact that he is also a foundationalist with respect to the epistemic status of doxastic practices. Nor, even more obviously, does Alston's coherentism with respect to doxastic practices commit him to foundationalism regarding the justificatory status of particular beliefs. So the claim that doxastic practices are presumptively innocent is independent of any commitment to foundationalism and therefore to any of the inadequacies of foundationalism.

Bagger's critique of Alston, then, misses its target. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Alston's critics are understandably concerned about whether or not meaningful, external criticism of mystical perception is possible. (By 'meaningful,' I mean criticism which has the chance of succeeding, which is not ruled out of order from the start. By 'external,' I mean criticism which employs information acquired from other practices to show that a given practice is unreliable. I provide examples shortly.) But the 'innocent until

[9] 'Religious Experience After the Demise of Foundationalism', in *Religious Studies* **31** (1995), 37–52.
[10] 'The Miracle of Minimal Foundationalism', p. 299. See also p. 303.
[11] *Perceiving God*, p. 153.

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proven guilty' dictum is not the source of the problem. As I will attempt to show in the next two sections, Alston's appeal to what he calls autonomy is what seriously jeopardizes external criticism of mystical perception. I will attempt to show how Alston's appeal to autonomy might reasonably be seen to jeopardize external criticism of MP by developing and criticizing Alston's response to explanatory arguments against mystical perception.

III. EXPLANATORY ARGUMENTS AGAINST MYSTICAL PERCEPTION

One of the more important external criticisms of MP hinges on the claim that we can provide an adequate explanation of the formation of M-beliefs without ever having to make reference to an agent's experience of God. The basic structure of such generic explanatory arguments against MP is very simple. An agent perceives some object only if she is causally connected with that object in the appropriate manner; thus, an agent perceives God only if she is in causal contact with God. But we can provide an adequate explanation of an agent's apparent perception of God without having to make reference to God at all. Since we need not have recourse to God's presence in her life to explain why she appears to perceive God, we should not explain her apparent perception as having resulted from God's presence. But if our best explanation of the fact that an agent appears to herself to perceive God does not involve her having causal contact with God, then we reasonably believe that she was not in causal contact with God. Hence, we reasonably believe that she did not perceive God.

How does Alston respond to such arguments? Suppose that we are in possession of a well-supported neurophysiological explanation of putative mystical perceptions; thus, suppose that scientists are able to isolate those brain-states which induce in an agent apparent manifestations of God. Obviously, such a theory will include no reference to God. Does the fact that we have access to a well-supported theory which provides us with an explanation of apparent perceptions of God but which does not include reference to the putative divine object of perception constitute sufficient reason to deny that participants in MP perceive God? No. Any such explanation of the formation of M-beliefs need concern an agent who engages in MP no more and no less than it should concern participants in SP that the formation of sense-perceptual beliefs is amenable of similar explanation.[12] Why should members of neither practice be concerned with such arguments?

A neurophysiological explanation of mystical perception would at best provide us with some of the proximate causes of apparent manifestations of God. But to provide an explanation of mystical perception by reference to proximate, naturalistic causes fails to show that God plays no causal role in the process of perception. In order for an agent to perceive God, all God

[12] *Perceiving God*, p. 231.

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needs to do is play some appropriate causal role in the production of belief – however remote. Do agents who engage in MP have any reason to believe that a true neurophysiological explanation of the formation of M-beliefs renders impossible a causal contribution of God to the formation of M-beliefs? Not unless critics show that God cannot causally interact with an agent whose putative perceptions of God can be causally explained by 'neurophysiological happenings in the brain'.[13] And there is no reason to think that this case can be made. It is possible that the causal role God plays in the formation of M-beliefs is more remote than that of synaptic firings. In short, 'the mere fact that mystical experience can be explained in terms of causally sufficient, proximate natural factors has no tendency to show that it does not constitute veridical perception of God'.[14]

If Alston is correct, generic explanations of religious belief fail to show that MP is unreliable because they fail to provide us with good reason to believe that God is not among the causes of M-belief formation at all. But this response does not dispose of all explanatory arguments against MP. In particular, it does not address the kind of concern regarding religious belief paradigmatically expressed by the three 'masters of suspicion', Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. The problem that that triumvirate had with religious belief is not that it can be explained by reference to proximate, naturalistic causes; the problem is, rather, that an adequate explanation of religious belief must have recourse to the wrong kind of cause. Among the factors that figure in the generation of M-beliefs are pathological causes. The causal history of religious belief is suspicious.[15] I call such arguments against MP explanatory arguments from suspicion.

Consider a simpleminded version of such an argument.[16] We know that beliefs about independently existing reality tend to be false if an agent's desires regarding some aspect of reality play an inappropriate role in the formation of those beliefs; in particular, beliefs about independently existing realities based on wishes regarding those realities tend to be false.[17] For example, if I greatly desire that O. J. Simpson is convicted, such that I will believe that he is guilty no matter what the evidence, such that I will maintain belief in his guilt no matter how much evidence there is in support of his innocence, then my conviction that he is guilty has been unreliably

[13] *Perceiving God*, p. 231.

[14] *Perceiving God*, p. 232.

[15] The alternation between 'religious beliefs' and 'M-beliefs' in this paragraph is intentional. So far as I am aware, neither Marx, Nietzsche nor Freud singled out mystical experience for explanation; they intended to explain religious social practices generally, and thus religious doxastic practices in general. Of course, that makes their explanations of religious belief applicable to M-beliefs. I continue alternating between 'religious beliefs' and M-beliefs' throughout.

[16] I am not particularly interested in the details of the following argument; I am interested primarily in its structure, in the kind of objection that the Freudian argument exemplifies. If you prefer some other argument, or believe that my account of Freud's is irredeemably simplistic, feel free to supply your own favourite explanatory argument from suspicion.

[17] What discredits a given belief B is not, of course, that an agent wishes B to be true, but that her desire that B is true sustains adherence to B regardless of the evidence for or against B.

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formed. If Freud is correct, regression to infantile states plays a similarly dubious role in the formation of religious beliefs. The believer's desire for a loving, all-powerful father figure plays the wrong role in the etiology of her religious convictions: the religious adherent will maintain her convictions regardless of the evidence for or against those convictions. Given what we know about the reliability of wish-fulfilment, and if Freud's account of the origins of religious belief is correct, we have reason to believe that religious beliefs, and M-beliefs as well, are unreliably formed. The objection to mystical perception is predicated, not on the fact that it has a naturalistic explanation, but that among the proximate causes of mystical perception are what we know to be unreliable factors.

Alston realizes that his objection to generic arguments does not cover all of the important territory and so, in an attempt to dispose of explanatory arguments from suspicion, he supplements that response with an ill-fated argument. At the heart of this response is an appeal to the autonomy of mystical experience.[18] I will deal briefly with autonomy before proceeding.[19]

Most generally, the claim that a given doxastic practice is autonomous is the claim that internal to that practice are standards of evaluation, types of input and output, procedures for evaluating beliefs, that differ from those proper to other practices.[20] We engage in numerous doxastic practices between which there are important and fundamental differences and those differences are legitimate. For example, we base sense perceptual beliefs on a very different type of ground than that on which we base our memory beliefs, and both of those types of ground differ importantly from the type of ground on which we rely when forming beliefs about our moods and desires. Thus, we form beliefs about objects in the physical environment on the basis of sensory stimulation – light waves striking retinas, etc. and we form beliefs about our moods, not via sensory stimulation, but 'inward concentration'. Again, the ways we check sense perceptual beliefs differ importantly and legitimately from the ways that we check beliefs about our feelings and about mathematical theorems. Nothing of epistemic value would result were we to require that sense-perceptual beliefs be based on the same type of ground, or be evaluated in light of the same type of checking procedures, that we employ in forming and evaluating mathematical claims, beliefs about our moods, etc.

MP is a beneficiary of the diversity internal to the standard package; that there are considerable differences between the way we form and check

[18] I believe that Alston's defence of the autonomy of doxastic practices, and in particular of MP, constitutes one of his most interesting and important insights. Alston concurs; he claims that, by advocating the autonomy of distinct doxastic practices, he is contributing to a 'paradigm shift' in the field of epistemology. 'The Autonomy of Religious Experience', in *The International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* **31** (June, 1992), 11.

[19] I have discussed Alston's appeal to autonomy in more detail in 'God's Nature and the Rationality of Religious Belief', in *Faith and Philosophy* **14**/2 (April, 1997), 152–169.

[20] *Perceiving God*, p. 162; 'The Autonomy of Religious Experience', p. 4.

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perceptual beliefs about God and the way we form and check, e.g., sense perceptual beliefs, does not provide us with reason to discount the epistemic status of MP, any more than the considerable differences between the way we check introspective beliefs and sense perceptual beliefs warrant us in discounting the latter. A brief example of an important respect in which MP is autonomous. We expect to be able to provide independent confirmation for ordinary sense-perceptual beliefs: if I claim to see a snark in the woods, and you doubt that I have, we have available resources with which to substantiate my claim. We can both return to the place I claimed to have perceived the snark and set about looking for some indication that the snark was in fact in the area – we look for footprints, stool, etc. If we find some such indication, my perceptual claim is to some degree corroborated. We can provide no such independent confirmation for putative perceptions of God. If God is present to an agent's consciousness, we have access to no resources by which to determine whether or not she has in fact perceived God.[21]

Although various critics attempt to discredit MP on the basis of this difference between MP and SP, Alston has argued, plausibly by my lights, that such attempts fail.[22] Because God is both transcendent and sovereign, because God is manifest at God's own behest and timing, it is not reasonable to expect that M-beliefs are amenable of corroboration via accurate prediction. Because physical objects are enduring objects immersed in a nexus of natural laws, it is reasonable to expect that sense-perceptual beliefs are amenable of such corroboration. Given an adequate understanding of the difference between God and physical objects, we should not expect to be able to evaluate and corroborate M-beliefs in the SP way. Since it is possible that MP is as reliable as you like even though M-beliefs do not enjoy SP-like confirmation, that lack can hardly count against MP. Alston concludes, then, that MP is autonomous *vis-à-vis* SP, at least with respect to the procedures by which agents check M-beliefs.

[21] Interestingly enough, long before Alston concentrated his professional attention on the epistemic status of religious experience, he addressed basically the same objection – the 'consensual corroboration objection' – to the cognitive status of 'First Person Immediate Psychological State Reports'. Because beliefs about our subjective beliefs and feelings are not publically checkable, they are epistemically suspect, or at least, of no use for the genuine, behaviouristic, science of psychology. Alston's position on the matter is basically the same that he takes with respect to religious experience some 20 years later – CMP's (introspection's) checking procedures differ from SP's but the difference is a legitimate one, and therefore cannot count against the epistemic (or cognitive) status of M-beliefs (FRIPSRs). See William Alston, 'Can Psychology Do Without Private Data?', in *Behaviorism* **1** (1972), 71–102.

[22] Alston addresses this objection in *Perceiving God*, pp. 209–222 and 'Christian Experience and Christian Belief', p. 122. For an explication of the objection, see C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), pp. 64–94; Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 285–343; 'Why Alston's Mystical Practice is Subjective', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **54** (December, 1994), 869–875; Anthony O'Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith: an Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1984), pp. 25–55; Michael Levine, 'Mystical Experience and Non-Basically Justified Belief', in *Religious Studies* **25** (1989), 335–45; Evan Fales, 'Mystical Experience as Evidence', in *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* **40** (August, 1996), 19–46.

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Before identifying the implications of MP's autonomy for explanatory arguments from suspicion, note that, to claim that MP is an autonomous practice, as Alston is wont to do, is somewhat misleading. In particular, it obscures the fact that autonomy is both aspectual and comparative. A given doxastic practice is autonomous in certain respects and with respect to specific practices. Thus, MP differs from SP in the respect that participants acquire information about physical objects via sensory stimulation but base M-beliefs on direct, non-sensory awareness of God. In respect of the kind of ground on which participants base M-beliefs, MP differs legitimately from SP.[23] But MP and introspection do not differ in that respect: agents in neither practice base their beliefs on awareness of objects via sensory stimulation. So MP is autonomous *vis-à-vis* SP but not introspection with respect to the role of sensory stimulation in an agent's grounds for belief. At the same time, participants in both MP and SP form beliefs about independently existing realities, both practices differ from introspection in that respect, and so both MP and SP are autonomous *vis-à-vis* introspection in respect of ontological status of their subject matters. In sum, autonomy is aspectual, never complete; aspects of a practice are autonomous, but a completely autonomous practice is purely fictional. Autonomy is comparative, never absolute; a given practice is legitimately different from some, but not other, practices.[24]

Of what relevance is the fact that MP is autonomous to explanatory arguments from suspicion like Freud's? An important and legitimate difference between MP and SP is that the conditions in which an agent reliably perceives God differ from the conditions in which she reliably perceives physical objects. We are familiar enough with this kind of phenomenon in SP. If we want to put ourselves in a strong position to learn about the fine-grained details of a painting, we have to get right up close to the painting, but if we want to discern its overall pattern, we need to view it from a distance. Again, in order to detect the image in a Magic Eye three dimensional illusion, the percipient needs to blur her vision, to attempt not to focus on the image, a perceptual technique that is not very helpful in, say, identifying a physiognomy plastered on a billboard. In each case a perceptual state that aids accurate perception in one set of circumstances hinders veridical perception in another.

If Alston is correct, the subjective states in which an agent is most receptive to God's presence will undoubtedly be different from those in which she is best able to perceive ordinary physical objects. The former, for example, might include the percipient's being in a state of child-like trust, whereas no such state is included in the latter. Thus, Alston writes, 'Why suppose that

[23] Only the grossest parochialism would discount mystical perception just on the basis of the fact that it does not typically involve sensory mediation.

[24] Since repeated mention of autonomy in certain respects and with respect to particular practices is quite cumbersome, I will continue to refer to MP as autonomous. The reader should keep the comparative and aspectual nature of that property clearly in mind, however.

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the conditions that make for accurate (inaccurate) perception of the physical environment also make for accurate (inaccurate) perception of God? On a typical hot sunny day in the Arizona desert a pair of sun glasses is an aid to accurate observation; but they have quite the reverse effect on a cold foggy day in the Aleutians. And surely God is more different from the Aleutians than the Aleutians are from Arizona.'[25] Alston forthwith applies this general claim to the Freudian critique: just as wearing sunglasses aids visual perception on a sunny, but not on a foggy, day, it is possible that regression to infantile states aids perception of God even though it normally blinds us to reality. To assume that regression to infantile states renders beliefs about God unreliable on the grounds that we would draw the parallel conclusion with respect to sense perceptual beliefs is an instance of epistemic imperialism, that is, of inappropriately imposing on one doxastic practice the norms and expectations rightly employed in another.[26]

It does not seem too difficult to generalize Alston's mode of argumentation so as to render it serviceable for responding to other explanatory arguments from suspicion. All MP requires for its defence is the claim that, since God is very different from anything about which we naturally form beliefs, any way of forming beliefs about God might be just the way we should form M-beliefs, even if that would involve us in forming beliefs on the basis of what would normally be unreliable grounds. The defender of MP may then employ the possibility that MP is legitimately different from other doxastic practices to fend off objections to MP that trade on differences between MP and other practices that reflect poorly on MP. Thus, if significant doses of ideological legitimation (Marx) or ressentiment (Nietzsche) figure among the proximate, natural causes of putative perceptions of God, we may explain away the dubious epistemic features of those factors by claiming that God has so set matters up that the presence of such factors is essential (or conducive) to genuine perception of God.

IV. ON THE USE AND MISUSE OF AUTONOMY

It is this sort of response to criticisms of mystical perception that should engender suspicion about the protective implications of Alston's appeal to autonomy: the strategy Alston employs to defuse explanatory arguments from suspicion has as a consequence that no external criticisms of MP have a chance of succeeding. The argument in support of this claim has two steps.

The first step articulates what I take to be an indispensable assumption of any external criticism. A condition of the possibility of external criticism is that lessons learned regarding reliable belief-formation in one practice carry over to other practices: because our belief-forming activity is not divided up into hermetically sealed modules, we can expect that the wisdom acquired

[25] *Perceiving God*, p. 233.

[26] *Perceiving God*, p. 199.

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in one practice regarding what makes for unreliable ways of forming beliefs guides us accurately in other practices as well. Thus, for example, if wish-fulfilment is an unreliable basis of beliefs regarding physical objects, then we may presume that it is unreliable as a basis of beliefs regarding one's moods and intentions. If casting lots is not a reliable way of determining what God wants us to do, then casting lots is not likely to tell us very much about what our compatriots want us to do either. For ease of exposition, I call the assumption that what makes for (un)reliable belief-forming activity in one doxastic practice is also likely to make for (un)reliable activity in other practices the Carry-Over Principle.

The second step is that Alston's appeal to autonomy in his response to explanatory arguments from suspicion undermines the Carry-Over Principle. I take this consequence to be fairly straightforward. The mere fact that God is different from other objects of cognition provides Alston with what he takes to be adequate grounds for presuming that MP might be legitimately different from other doxastic practices, even if we have learned that those distinctive respects render unreliable beliefs formed in other practices. If the fact that God is different from ordinary objects of cognition implies that any way of forming beliefs might be reliable, and if that possibility allows us to disregard evidence acquired from other practices that MP is unreliable, then it is clear that Alston has in hand a strategy for discrediting any external criticism of MP whatsoever. Appeal to other practices to discredit MP is doomed from the start.

I take it that this consequence of Alston's appeal to autonomy is unacceptable. But we should not throw the baby out with the bath water: that Alston's use of autonomy has epistemically libertine implications does not discredit all claims to autonomy. There is a perfectly legitimate sense in which practices like MP are autonomous and a perfectly legitimate manner of appealing to autonomy to undermine external criticisms of MP. Even if Alston's appeal to autonomy is (sometimes) defective in execution, it is correct as a matter of principle. The task before us is to distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate uses of autonomy. I will attempt to do so now.

Note, first, that epistemic evaluation, as with all rational evaluation, is governed by the principle of generality. The principle of generality expresses a widely shared intuition regarding what makes for consistency in our judgements: we should treat similar things (actions, practices, objects, etc.) similarly unless there is some relevant difference between those things which warrants differential treatment. Thus, if two students submit term papers that are, by some bizarre accident, word-for-word identical and I give the papers different grades, I have acted arbitrarily; were I required to defend my differential evaluation, I would be at a loss, for there is no relevant difference between the two papers which merits the variation in grades. There are, of course, plenty of irrelevant differences between the two papers:

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they may be printed on different types of paper; they undoubtedly are printed on different pieces of paper; they may have been submitted in differently coloured folders, etc. Grading the papers properly requires that I am able accurately to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant differences.

The principle of generality (1) provides us with a clear rationale in support of the Carry-Over Principle, (2) enables us to identify what is wrong with Alston's appeal to autonomy and (3) indicates a more adequate approach to justifying claims to autonomy.

(1) If we learn that it is unreliable to form beliefs about, say, physical objects, on the basis of our wishes regarding those objects, and if we acquire that knowledge by engaging in SP, then the principle of generality requires that we carry over that prejudice against wish-fulfilment to relevantly similar doxastic practices. That is, unless there is a relevant epistemic difference between physical objects and God, it would be arbitrary for us to discount beliefs about physical objects that are based on our wishes but not to discount similarly based M-beliefs. More generally, anything we learn regarding what makes for reliable belief-formation should be applied generally, to any and every doxastic practice, unless we have sufficient reason to believe that carrying over a lesson learned from one practice to another would have unacceptable epistemic consequences.

(2) The principle of generality provides a basis for identifying what is wrong with Alston's appeal to autonomy. All objects of cognition differ in some respects, and the fact that two things differ in some respect is not by itself sufficient grounds for treating those things differently. That two doxastic practices differ in some unspecific respect does not render any of the differences between those practices legitimate. If it were, then the distinction between differences and relevant differences would collapse. This has direct application to Alston's argument. The only feature of God Alston cites in support of his claim that, although wish-fulfilment in normally unreliable, it is not unreliable in MP's case, is that God is 'Wholly Other', vastly different in some unspecific sense from ordinary objects of cognition. As a consequence, his defence of MP degenerates into the vacuous and protective: God is different from ordinary objects of cognition and we are therefore warranted in concluding that it is possible that any way at all of forming beliefs about God is reliable, no matter how much evidence we have garnered from other practices that so forming beliefs is unreliable.

(3) If appeal to unspecific differences between practices is insufficient to justify excepting a given practice from otherwise generalizable epistemic wisdom, what is sufficient? We must be able to specify the features of a given doxastic practice P that warrant us in overriding the presumption of applying to P our knowledge about what makes for (un)reliable belief-formation that we have acquired in other practices. Thus, although we expect sense-per-

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ceptual beliefs to be amenable of independent confirmation via accurate prediction, the distinctive features of the object of mystical perception – in particular, God's transcendence – render that expectation futile in the case of M-beliefs. What warrants us in rejecting the claim that SP-like confirmation of beliefs is *de jure* for MP is that we can identify specific features of MP that render SP-like confirmation inappropriate for MP. We know that, even if MP is reliable as you like, we would be compelled to conclude that it is unreliable were we to stipulate that M-beliefs must be subject to SP-like confirmation; since God isn't the sort of being who appears to us in the way God would need to appear to us in order for SP-like confirmation procedures to aid us in forming true beliefs about God, requiring SP-like confirmation for M-beliefs lacks a defensible epistemic rationale.[27] We are therefore entirely reasonable in claiming that, with respect to its confirmation procedures, MP is autonomous *vis-à-vis* SP.

This kind of appeal to autonomy is very different from the libertine use of autonomy Alston employs in responding to explanatory arguments from suspicion: our reason for imputing autonomy to a given practice depends on our ability to identify epistemically relevant differences between the subject matters of distinct practices. Recall the distinction between complete and aspectual autonomy. Alston's appeal to unspecific and undifferentiated differences between the Wholly Other and ordinary physical objects to justify the various important differences between MP and SP makes it seem that Alston imputes complete autonomy to MP (with the exception of the universal ban on generating a high proportion of contradictory beliefs). Insofar as claims to autonomy are cut free from their mooring in determining the features of a given practice, they tend to elide into claims to complete autonomy. But, in fact, only certain aspects of MP are autonomous. In order to determine what those aspects are, we need to identify relevant respects in which MP differs from SP. If we are to show that some aspect of MP is autonomous *vis-à-vis* another practice, and in particular, if we are to show that a consideration which counts against the reliability of beliefs formed in one practice does not count against the reliability of beliefs formed in MP, then we must identify some specific feature of MP that accounts for that difference.

V. HOW DO WE ESTABLISH CLAIMS TO AUTONOMY?

If the condition on proper appeals to autonomy I articulated in the prior section is correct, then we are faced with an important question: on what basis do we judge that the presumption of carry-over is overriden in a given

[27] This statement presupposes that whether or not a given requirement has a defensible epistemic rationale depends on whether or not our adhering to that requirement would enable us to achieve our central epistemic aim, namely to believe the true and avoid believing the false.

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case? To what sort of evidence may we appeal in substantiating a claim that epistemic lessons learned in one practice fail to carry over to another? How do we determine whether or not MP differs from, say, SP, in an epistemically relevant respect?

On this point, I believe that Alston has provided sound advice. Given our lack of a priori insight into the way we should go about forming and evaluating different sorts of belief, we have little choice but to formulate our epistemic criteria only after we have already acquired a considerable amount of information about the beliefs we wish to evaluate. We acquire an understanding of the subject matter of a given practice by engaging in that practice, and only then are we in a position to determine how we best to go about forming and evaluating beliefs about that subject matter. Thus, for example, we learn by engaging in SP that physical objects are stable, enduring entities enmeshed in a nexus of natural laws; as a consequence, we learn that we can evaluate beliefs about those entities by determining whether predictions based on those beliefs are accurate. Again, we learn by participating in SP that physical objects are not sensitive to our wishes regarding those objects; as a consequence, we learn that beliefs based on wish-fulfilment are unreliable.

Parity of treatment requires that we proceed similarly with respect to MP. Hence, it would be inappropriate to require that our justification for denying carry-over from SP to MP has to be acquired independently of MP. Members of MP need provide no external justification of claims to autonomy. Rather, when the critic asks for a justification, for evidence, that God is accurately perceived in what would normally be an unreliable way, she should be asking for an internal justification of that claim. Given the understanding of God internal to MP, why should we believe that God is present only to those who regress to infancy? What features of God (as we learn by engaging in MP) render us incapable of perceiving God in more like the normal way? Only if Alston can provide some such an internal justification does his defence of MP avoid becoming the vacuous: God is different from other objects of cognition; hence it is possible that any way at all of forming beliefs about God is reliable and, thus, any evidence that M-beliefs are unreliably formed which we acquire by carrying over lessons learned in other doxastic practices may be written off with impunity.

This turn in the argument may raise concerns, once again, about the protective implications of appeals to autonomy for external criticisms of MP. After all, if it is appropriate for members of MP to fend off objections to MP on the basis of the understanding of God's nature and activities internal to that practice, then the very individuals who have a vested interest in MP's reliability are allowed to trump their critics if only they are clever enough in concocting internal justifications. Moreover, it is appropriate for members of clearly objectionable doxastic practices to use the same defensive manouevre

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to fend off objections to their practices if only they are clever enough. Thus, Dirk-Martin Grube writes,

> An equally clever defender of the existence of Satan could argue along similar lines and claim the existence of special criteria to judge Satan experiences. She could then proceed to invoke the particular nature of the belief in Satan for the purposes of explaining why the postulated Satan experiences have to differ from sense experiences in the way they do. She could conclude that, given the specifics of belief in Satan, the differences between Satan experiences and sense experiences do not indicate the Satan experiences' unreliability.[28]

If appeal to autonomy, and thus to the understanding of the subject matter internal to a given practice, permits Devil Worshipers to vindicate their commitment to the existence of Satan, then something must be wrong with appeal to autonomy. That Alston's strategy for defending MP has such epistemically libertine consequences constitutes a *reductio* of Alston's position. Moreover, these libertine consequences certainly indicate the protective intentions of appeals to autonomy: any strategy for defending MP that can also be employed to defend belief in the Devil is a strategy that undermines any effective critical analysis of doxastic practices.

Grube's objection seems to me to avoid the central issue that Alston's appeal to autonomy raises. We cannot but assume that at least some of the doxastic practices in the standard package are reliable; each of us is committed to the general reliability of SP, memory, introspection, inference and testimony. But the practices constitutive of the standard package display considerable diversity. Memory differs in important aspects from sense-perception, both from introspection, and all three from inference. If such diversity inhabits the core of our cognitive endowment, if we tolerate considerable autonomy within the standard package, we have no justification for not tolerating autonomy outside it as well.[29]

No doubt, allowing for the possibility of autonomous, non-standard doxastic practices makes epistemic evaluation more complicated than we might wish. It is true that Satanists can appeal to autonomy as effectively as can Christians and those who engage in SP. But that possibility constitutes much less a decisive objection to Alston's position than a complaint about the human situation. Given the human condition, given the plurality of doxastic practices in which we cannot but engage, consistency in judgement requires that we allow for the possibility that the formation of beliefs about Satan differs as much from the way that we form beliefs about physical objects than the way we form beliefs about physical objects differs from the way we form beliefs about our moods, mathematical feelings, philosophical theories, moral obligations, and the like. To deny the Satanist an argumen-

[28] Dirk-Martin Grube, 'Religious Experience After the Demise of Foundationalism', p. 41.

[29] More precisely, although we may have political, social or moral reasons to refuse to grant autonomy to non-standard practices for which we can provide no non-circular justification, perhaps on the grounds that doing so would be politically dangerous, we lack epistemic reason for doing so.

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tative strategy to which we cannot but help ourselves is to commit ourselves either to bad faith or a procrustean attempt to eliminate autonomy in our core doxastic practices

Perhaps avoiding both the inauthentic and the procrustean paths paved by the denial of autonomy requires that we risk some degree of epistemic liberality; perhaps we will find ourselves unable to construct fair criticisms of apparently dubious doxastic practices. But allowing for some degree of liberality does not mean that 'anything goes', namely that effective external criticism of autonomous doxastic practices is impossibly difficult. That 'something goes' for one practice, say astrology, that does not 'go' for another, say SP, does not entail that 'anything goes' for SP (or for astrology for that matter). To see this, return one last time to Freud's critique of religious belief.

At the heart of Freud's explanation of religion is the claim that religious belief promises to the believer the (illusory) satisfaction of desires she cannot satisfy: religion is wish-fulfilment. We learn from SP that beliefs about independently existing objects that are proximately caused by wish-fulfilment tend not to be true. Given the principle of generality, we have prima facie reason to believe that M-beliefs are unreliably formed. Of course, it is possible that wish-fulfilment is reliable in the religious case. Perhaps MP is autonomous in just that respect. But perhaps not. In order to determine whether it is in a non-question-begging way, we need good reason to believe that MP is autonomous in the relevant respect; what feature of God renders it appropriate for us to form beliefs by wish-fulfilment? And to answer that question, we have little recourse but to consult MP.

The concern under discussion is that determining whether or not MP is autonomous by reference to MP undermines effective external criticism of MP. Is that a reasonable concern? Does the fact that we determine whether or not MP is autonomous with respect to wish fulfilment by consulting MP deny the Freudian critic a fair hearing? Well, if we consult MP, what do we find? Does our understanding of the subject matter of that practice provide us with (internal) reason not to discount mystical perceptions even if based (proximately) on our wishes? Answering that question is complicated by the fact that there are various versions of MP – Christian, Jewish, Islamic, etc. To simplify matters, suppose we confine our attention to what Alston calls the Christian Mystical Practice. (Alston, for reasons of personal familiarity, focuses on the Christian version of MP.) Does Christian theology provide us with any (internal) reason to expect that agents who form beliefs about God are constrained to form them on the basis of their wishes? Is there, perhaps, some important connection between trinitarian theology and regression to infantile states, just as there seems to be an important connection between God's lack of spatial location and our inability to subject M-beliefs to the kinds of tests to which we routinely subject sense-perceptual beliefs? Just to

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ask the question seems to me to provide the answer: of course there is no such connection. A Christian understanding of God's nature and intentions provides us with no reason to believe that the conditions in which agents are constrained to perceive God are those in which they regress to infantile states.

Where does this leave MP? If we can provide no internal reasons for supposing that MP is relevantly different from other practices in which wish-fulfilment is unreliable, the remaining issue between Alston and Freudian critics of religious belief is an empirical one: is it in fact the case that wish-fulfilment plays an inappropriate role in the formation of M-beliefs? If it does, then we have good reason to believe that MP is unreliable. If it does not, then the Freudian objection falters.[30] What is clear, however, is that the mere fact that participants may appeal to the understanding of God internal to MP to vindicate claims to autonomy does not have as a consequence that effective external criticism of MP is impossible or unreasonably difficult. The understanding of God internal to MP is not a wax nose that participants may twist in any way they wish; it has a stable and determinate content which makes possible principled grounds for claims to autonomy – but not just any old claim to autonomy. No matter how clever defenders of MP may be, their theological commitments provide no aid and comfort to those whose M-beliefs are implicated in wish-fulfilment. As a consequence, given the availability of the appropriate evidence, we may well reasonably conclude that MP is unreliable.[31]

VI. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Alston's appeal to autonomy gives rise to the understandable reaction that he is attempting to insulate mystical perception from external critique. It is easy to get the impression that Alston is playing a rigged game of 'king of the hill': he deposits MP on the top of the epistemic mound by defending the claim that MP is innocent until proven guilty, and then fends off all comers with the claim that any feature of MP that reflects poorly on MP is, after all, just one of the respects in which MP differs legitimately from other practices that lack that feature. Alston's response to explanatory arguments from suspicion provides some substance to that impression. And if that charge is correct, Alston's defense of MP is seriously suspect; to gloss MacIntyre, 'it is yet another mark of a degenerate [doxastic practice] that it has contrived a set of epistemological defences which enable it to avoid being put in question, or at least to avoid recognizing that it is being put in question, by

[30] Alston, by the way, makes it clear that he does not believe that we have anywhere near the sort of evidence required by the Freudian objection or, for that matter, other explanatory arguments from suspicion. *Perceiving God*, p. 233. That we lack such evidence is his primary reason for rejecting Freudian objections to religious belief.

[31] For a more serious attempt than the Freudian argument from wish-fulfilment to construct an explanatory schema that undermines the putative reliability of MP, see the recent articles by Evan Fales, 'Scientific Explanations of Mystical Experience, Parts I and II', in *Religious Studies*, vol. 32.

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rival [doxastic practices]'.[32] If Alston's strategy for defending MP immunizes that practice from critique, then we should reject it.

As understandable as this concern is, I think that it is premised on a faulty understanding of Alston's strategy: at the heart of his defence of MP is an insistence that evaluation of MP be fair and, thus, that evaluation of MP be consistent with the principle of generality. This applies first and foremost to his claim that MP is presumptively innocent. Thus, because SP and MP are exactly similar in the respect that we can provide no non-circular justification of either, it would be arbitrary for us to deny presumptive innocence to the latter but to grant it to the former. Alston's appeal to autonomy, when carefully employed, also serves to insure that evaluation of MP is fair. The claim that a practice is autonomous is, or at least should be, equivalent to the claim that it is relevantly different from some other practice, that we can identify the respect(s) in which it is relevantly different, and thus that some expectation we legitimately have of the latter is not reasonably to be expected of the former. Fairness, as expressed in the principle of generality, requires that we evaluate relevantly different practices differently; and if Alston is correct, MP is different from other practices is important respects.

[32] 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative, and the Philosophy of Science', in *The Monist* **60** (1977), 461.

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