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THE COMPETING PRACTICES ARGUMENT AND SELF-DEFEAT

Section I – Introduction

Andy believes that *p* because his tarot cards indicate that *p*. Betty believes that ~*p* because her crystal ball reveals that ~*p*. If Andy and Betty know that they disagree, and disagree because they engage in different practices, is Andy's belief that *p* rational? The answer depends in part on whether Andy has good reasons to think that reading tarot cards is reliable about the topic while reading crystal balls is not. If a person has good reasons to believe that practice P_1 is reliable while a competing practice P_2 is not, then it is not irrational to form beliefs by engaging in P_1. What if a person does not have good reasons to think that one practice is reliable about a topic while competing practices are not, though? In such cases, would Andy's awareness of the existence of competing practices, on its own, be enough to render his belief that *p* irrational?

The import of these questions is hardly isolated. There are various practices for forming beliefs about the divine. Some engage in Christian religious-experience practices (seeing Jesus), some in Buddhist meditation practices, and some in peyote-eating religious practices, etc. Those who engage in these practices often take their experiences to confirm their particular religious worldview. Assuming that the outputs of these practices are consistent with our non-religious practices and are self-consistent, is it rational to form a belief in a Christian God on the basis of religious experiences, despite knowing that there are several competing and equally self-confirming religious practices?[1] More generally, what should we believe if our science were to split into competing methods, each of which delivers a theory that is empirically adequate and of similar simplicity, etc? If one of the post-split scientific traditions claims that a certain type of entity exists, while another denies this, is it irrational to believe that this kind of entity exists?

These issues have an important connection to social epistemology. Competing practices are often *socially* distributed. While I engage in a practice P_1, I am aware that other groups or individuals engage in practices P_2–P_n. These competing practices could be socially entrenched and have a degree of social support. There are communities of tarot card readers, for example, and my reason for trusting tarot cards might depend on the fact that other people have assured me that it is a reliable method for forming beliefs. Our reasons for engaging in a practice are often social; we are sometimes taught by others to engage in practices, and our reason for accepting that such practices are reliable is often the social authority of others. Competing practices might each possess an equivalent degree of social entrenchment or be endorsed by social authorities. Is it rational of me to form beliefs by using one of the competing practices if I have no reason to trust one set of social authorities rather than another?[2]

Here, we will explore the Competing Practices Argument (CPA), which purports to show that a person's belief that there are competing practices sometimes provides a defeater to the rationality of beliefs formed by engaging in any of the practices. Next, we consider an objection to this argument, namely that it can be argued that a person's awareness of competing practices provides defeaters only in cases when the person has available some *external, non-circular* means of assessing the reliability of competing practices (Alston (1991, 271-2)).[3] I will argue that this objection is mistaken once we take into account that an argument may be self-defeating.

Section II – The Competing Practices Argument

A doxastic practice is a function that outputs a doxastic attitude on the basis of mental state

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inputs, sometimes a belief in a proposition (Alston (1991, 155)).[4] A person *engages* in a practice when the practice is causally responsible for some of a person's doxastic attitudes.[5] Two practices are distinct when these practices (a) depend on different kinds of inputs, e.g., vision vs. hearing, or (b) are different functions, outputting beliefs in different propositions on the basis of the same inputs, e.g., induction vs. counterinduction. Two practices *compete* about topic *T* if the practices output beliefs that are logically inconsistent about *T* (either individually or as a set), considering the deductive consequences of the beliefs output by the practices.[6] For example, if those who engage in practice P_1 believe that *p*, but engaging in P_2 would result in the belief that ~*p*, then P_1 competes with P_2 about the truth of *p*. A set of practices are *mutual competitors* when each practice in the set competes with every other practice in the set about *T*.[7]

We need make only minimal assumptions about rational belief. The claim of importance here is that a subject *S*'s belief that *p* is rational only if the rationality of *S*'s belief is undefeated. Whatever extra constraints we place on rational belief (e.g., coherence, etc.), a condition requiring that the rationality of the belief is undefeated is uncontroversial.[8]

Our interest is in situations when a person rationally believes that there are mutually competing practices for forming beliefs about a topic *T*, but the person has only *symmetrical* reasons to think of each of the mutually competing practices that it is reliable. There are three sorts of cases here. (a) A person has symmetrical circular reasons to accept that each of the mutually competing practices is reliable. Maybe each practice outputs the proposition that it is reliable about *T* while the others are not.[9] (b) A person has symmetrical non-circular reasons to believe that each of the mutually competing practices is reliable about *T*. For example, I might have symmetrical empirical reasons to believe that two competing gas gauges are reliable. (c) A person has both symmetrical circular and non-circular reasons to believe that each mutually competing practice is reliable about *T*.

In cases (a)–(c), the person can reason as follows: most of the practices must be inaccurate (generating false beliefs) about *T* on this occasion, since I rationally believe that there is a single fact of the matter about *T* and the practices are mutual competitors. I have no basis to rationally believe that one of the competitors is accurate about *T* (on this occasion) while the others are not, since my reasons for believing that each practice is accurate are symmetrical with my reasons for believing that its competitors are accurate. Hence, of each competing practice, I rationally believe that it is probably inaccurate about *T*. If my only reason for believing that *p* about *T* is that it is the output of one of the competing practices, this belief is probably the product of an inaccurate practice. Hence, I should rationally suspend my belief that *p* until I find other relevant evidence.

If two practices are cross-temporally self-consistent in their outputs about topic *T* but also cross-temporal competitors, then at least one of the practices must be *unreliable* about *T*. For our purposes, a practice is unreliable about *T* if its propensity of outputting a true belief about *T* is less than 0.50. Suppose clock *A* is *consistently* one hour behind clock *B*. Then, at least one of the two clocks must be unreliable about the current time. Since we will focus on practices that are cross-temporally self-consistent competitors about a topic, we will formulate the argument in terms of unreliability rather than inaccuracy.[10]

Restating the Competing Practices Argument (CPA) a bit more formally from the first-person perspective, we have:

(1) I form the belief that *p* about topic *T* solely because I engage in practice *P*.[11]
(2) There are cross-temporally self-consistent and mutually competing practices for forming beliefs about *T*.
(3) I have symmetrical reasons to believe that each of the practices is reliable about *T*.[12]
(4) Assuming there is a single matter of fact about *T*, all but one of the mutually competing practices for forming beliefs about *T* are unreliable about *T*. (from 2, 3)
(5) Therefore, practice *P* is probably unreliable about *T*. (from 1, 4).
(6) *Unreliability Defeat Principle* (*UDP*): if a person rationally believes that their belief that *p* is probably the result of engaging in an

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unreliable practice, it is irrational of the person to continue to believe that *p*.

(7) Therefore, if I continue to believe that *p*, my belief that *p* is irrational.

The inferences from (2) and (3) to (4) and from (1) and (4) to (5) both seem fairly obvious.[13] What results is that if I have rational beliefs in (1)–(3), this allows me to rationally infer (5). The argument next invokes the plausible Unreliability Defeat Principle.[14] Hence, an agent, who starts with a rational belief in (1)–(3) and makes the inferences described here, is rationally required to suspend beliefs about *T* which require engaging in *P* (or any of its mutual competitors).

Let's apply the CPA to an example. Suppose I have several thermometers.[15] I immerse them in a liquid I know only to be of constant temperature. The liquid is in a container that has no opening large enough for me to test the temperature of the liquid by using my senses. We can treat forming a belief by reading the first thermometer as engaging in practice T_1, while forming a belief on the basis of the second thermometer as engaging in T_2, etc.[16] I discover that practices T_1-T_n output propositions about the temperature of the liquid which are not even approximately the same and thus inconsistent with one another. Assume that each thermometer is consistent in its outputs about the liquid's temperature across time.[17] What should I believe about the temperature of the liquid? Intuitively, I should suspend belief since my only evidence about the temperature derives from reading the thermometers. I know that nearly all of the thermometers must be unreliable, and I have no good reason to think that any particular thermometer is reliable while the others are not. Of each particular thermometer, I rationally believe that it is very probably unreliable. Thus, if I were to form a belief on the basis of the report of thermometer$_1$, the belief would be irrational. The same reasoning applies to each thermometer. Hence, I am rationally required to suspend belief about the temperature of the liquid. This is intuitively correct, and what CPA yields.

Epistemically circular track-record arguments will not prevent the CPA from providing a defeater to the rationality of engaging in any of the competing practices.[18] The following reasoning fails to defuse the force of the CPA: thermometer$_1$ indicates that the temperature of the liquid is ten degrees, and the liquid is ten degrees (on the sole basis of what thermometer$_1$ reads), so thermometer$_1$ is reliable and the other thermometers are unreliable. This sort of reasoning cannot render it rationally permissible to engage in the practice of reading thermometer$_1$ to form beliefs given one's knowledge of the existence of the other mutually competing thermometers. One way of highlighting the problem is that this style of circular argument is available in favor of *every* thermometer in this case. One cannot arrive at a rational belief about the temperature of the liquid in *this* situation by arbitrarily picking a thermometer and forming beliefs on the basis of its readings, and then offering this kind of circular track-record argument.[19]

Section III – An Objection to the CPA

Despite the plausibility of the CPA, there is an argument that the CPA is unacceptable. Before stating this argument, we need to clarify some of its presuppositions. Alston (1986; 1991; 1993) argues that all attempts to provide reasons to think that our *basic* practices (perception, simple reasoning, memory, etc.) are reliable will ultimately become epistemically circular (also Lammenranta (1996)). We will assume this is correct. What this means is that we have at best a circular argument for the reliability of our perceptual practices.[20]

Alston claims the CPA has counterintuitive consequences and is hence unacceptable. He writes,

> *Suppose that in certain cultures there is a well established 'Cartesian' practice of seeing what is visually perceived as an indefinitely extended medium that is more or less concentrated at various points, rather than, as in our 'Aristotelian' practice, as made up of more or less discrete objects scattered about in space. In other cultures we find a 'Whiteheadian' SP [sensory practice] to be equally socially established; here the visual field is seen as made up of momentary events growing out of each other in a continuous process. Let's further suppose that each of these practices serves its practitioners equally*

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> *well in their dealings with the practical environment. We may even suppose that each group has developed physical science, in its own terms, to about as high a pitch as the others (1991, 273).*

Call this type of example the "alien practices" case. Some clarification is necessary. First, these practices are supposed to be mutual competitors. Suppose that outputs of Cartesian and Whiteheadian practices entail that beliefs generated by engaging in the Aristotelian practice that there are physical objects are *false*. The Whiteheadian claims that there are no physical objects, but rather *only* time-slices of the whole world, etc. Second, we are to suppose that each of these practices is equivalently practically useful and symmetrically self-supporting.[21] Note that this example can be easily generalized to apply to inferential and memory practices as well.

Applying the CPA to this example, it is apparently irrational to engage in any of the competing perceptual practices, or to retain beliefs which require engaging in such practices. At most one of the practices could be reliable, since we have stipulated that they are mutual competitors.[22] It is also stipulated that we have symmetrical reasons for believing of each of the competing practices that it is reliable. We should thus conclude of each practice that it is probably unreliable. Even if we have engaged in the Aristotelian practice to form beliefs in the existence of physical objects, the rationality of these beliefs is defeated by the CPA. Hence, given our knowledge of the existence of competing practices, it would be irrational of us to continue to believe in the existence of physical objects.

Alston's (1991, 274) intuition about this case, and one this author shares, is that it would *not* be irrational of an Aristotelian to continue to believe in physical objects.[23] The CPA apparently dictates otherwise. Thus, the CPA faces an important objection.

There are three responses to this problem available: (1) reject the CPA and replace it with a weaker version that accounts for intuitions about the thermometer case; (2) accept that the CPA defeats the rationality of engaging in our basic practices in alien practices cases; (3) argue that the CPA is correct as it stands, but fails to generate a defeater in some alien practices cases. First, let us briefly assess (1) and (2), before turning to our defense of (3) in the next section.

Alston (1991, 271-5) endorses (1), arguing that a person's rational belief in the existence of competing practices is a source of defeaters only in cases when a non-circular external reliability check is available.[24] The CPA should be rejected when it applies to practices for which there is no external check in order to avoid counterintuitive consequences in the alien practices case.

An external check is a non-circular check on a practice. We have external checks for thermometers, for example. We can test a thermometer, e.g., in boiling water at sea level, against our senses, etc. We are not forced to rely on only the thermometers; we can calibrate, test, compare, and adjust our thermometers. There is at least available in principle an external check on the reliability of a specific thermometer, whether a person can actually employ these checks at a particular time or not. So, Alston allows that the CPA does apply in the thermometer case.

Matters are supposedly quite different for practices for which there is no external reliability check. We have no satisfactory capacity to externally assess the reliability of our basic practices.[25] In the tarot card and crystal ball practices case, we probably do have some kind of external means of assessing the reliability of the practices. If these practices output beliefs with empirical content, it is at least in principle possible to assess the reliability of the competing divination practices by using our senses. However, if these practices only output beliefs which cannot be externally checked, these practices suddenly become immune to the CPA according to Alston.[26] For practices that purport to reveal facts about only ethereal worlds, the supernatural, etc., where these facts have no empirical consequences, the CPA fails to apply, since no external check is available.[27]

Alston never explains directly what is mistaken in the CPA when applied to alien practices cases. We can interpret him in two ways. First, maybe one should not infer that a practice is probably unreliable on the basis of the CPA when there is no external check available, but one should make

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this inference when external checks are available. But, Alston offers no explanation of why this should be the case, other than that allows us to avoid the counterintuitive consequences of the alien practices case. The structure of the argument in both cases is the same. Without fuller explanation, Alston's proposal seems *ad hoc*.

An alternative interpretation of Alston is that we should reject the UDP.[28] We can then understand his proposal as replacing the UDP with the weaker External-UDP (E-UDP):

> *(E-UDP) If a person rationally believes that their belief that p is probably the result of engaging in an unreliable practice for which it is in principle possible to provide an external check, then it is irrational of the person to continue to believe that p.*[29]

This is also a strange result. The UDP is plausible in its original form. Why should the availability of external checks itself make so much difference to this style of argument, except that the E-UDP provides one way of accounting for our intuitions about the alien practices cases? This proposal also seems *ad hoc*. If we can find another solution that retains the CPA but can avoid counterintuitive consequences, this solution is preferable.

Second, we might accept the CPA, and argue that in the alien practices case we are rationally required to suspend all beliefs in physical objects (e.g., Wainwright (1995, 185)). This is unattractive for two related reasons. First, this alternative has counterintuitive consequences in alien practices cases. Second, it risks global skepticism. If we encounter competing perceptual, reasoning, memory, etc. practices, and have only symmetrical reasons to think that these competitors are reliable, then *no* belief turns out to be rational. This is a potentially high cost for this option.

Section IV – Self-Defeating Arguments and the CPA

We should seek another solution to the alien practices objection to the CPA. We think that the CPA is acceptable because it does *not* entail the putative counterintuitive results in the alien practices case. Some tokens of the CPA are self-defeating when embedded within a particular doxastic system. If a token of the CPA is self-defeating, and the agent employing the argument recognizes this, the agent, if rational, will not infer from this token of the CPA that their own practice is probably unreliable. If a person rationally refuses to make this inference, the person will not have a defeater to the rationality of engaging in their own practice. But, the CPA is only self-defeating in special cases, and for human beings the CPA can provide defeaters to engaging in some practices for which there are no external reliability checks available. Hence, we can accept the CPA, account for our intuitions about the alien practices cases, and still adopt a view that allows the CPA to defeat the rationality of engaging in some practices for which there are no external reliability checks available.

For arguments in which the subject must have rational beliefs in all of the premises and all of the inferences must be rationality-conferring if the argument is to produce a rational belief in its conclusion, the following is a sufficient condition for being a self-defeating argument:

> *(SDA) A token argument is epistemically self-defeating for a subject S if: given how S has formed beliefs in the premises, if S believes the conclusion on the basis of the argument, then S's belief in the conclusion defeats either (a) the rationality of believing at least one of the premises of the argument or (b) the rationality of making one of the inferences in the argument.*[30]

If a belief in the conclusion of a token argument is a defeater as per (a) or (b), then the argument cannot produce a rational belief in its conclusion for the person employing the argument. Note that an agent may not always realize that an argument is self-defeating. We do not doubt that even careful, intelligent people can sometimes be "taken in" by self-defeating arguments. But, if an agent notices that an argument is self-defeating, he will not believe the conclusion on the basis of that argument, since he recognizes that the belief would be irrational. Below, the discussion assumes that the agent employing the argument notices that the token argument is self-defeating.[31]

Let us apply this condition to two arguments that are both plausibly self-defeating when

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embedded within an agent's perspective. Consider the following:

(A)
- (1) Induction has been generally unreliable in the past.
- (2) Therefore, induction is generally unreliable.

(B)
- (3) Research reported in the newspaper indicates that human vision is globally unreliable.
- (4) Therefore, human vision is globally unreliable.

(A) requires us to make an inductive inference. The UDP tells us that if we have good reasons to think that a practice is unreliable, then it is irrational to engage in that practice to form beliefs. In both (A) and (B), if we come to believe the conclusion on the basis of the argument, then, according to the UDP, this belief is irrational. In (A), if we believe (2), then according to the UDP it is irrational to make inductive inferences. But, we cannot arrive in a rational belief in (2) on the basis of (A) without making an inductive inference. Thus, (A) is a self-defeating argument. In (B), we must engage in our perceptual practice to learn what the newspaper says. If we believe (4), then, according to the UDP, our belief in (3) is irrational. But, if our belief in (3) is irrational, we cannot rationally infer that (4). Hence, (B) is a self-defeating argument. In both cases, we will rationally refuse to believe their conclusions.

How does this apply to the CPA? Let's review the CPA applied to one of the alien practices examples:

(1) My beliefs about what (contingently) exists are that only physical objects exist, and these beliefs result from engaging in an Aristotelian perceptual practice.
(2) There are several cross-temporally self-consistent and mutually competing practices for forming beliefs about what exists.
(3) I have symmetrical reasons to believe that each of the practices is reliable.
(4) Assuming there is a single matter of fact about what exists, all but one of the mutually competing practices for forming beliefs about what exists are unreliable. (from 2, 3)
(5) Therefore, my Aristotelian practice is probably unreliable about what exists. (from 1, 4).

The inference to (5) from (1) and (4) is self-defeating for normal people. Our belief in (5) is rational only if our belief in (2) is rational, since (5) is inferred partly from (4), which is inferred partly from (2). How would we arrive at a rational belief in (2), though? We would detect the existence of competing practices in part by engaging in our Aristotelian practice. So, our belief in (2) is rational only if it is rational of us to engage in our Aristotelian practice. If we rationally believe (5), though, then it is irrational of us to engage in our Aristotelian practice (or to retain beliefs which depend on engaging in this practice), as per the UDP. Hence, if we rationally believe (5), our belief in (2) is irrational. If our belief in (2) is irrational, then our belief in (5) is irrational. Thus, we cannot rationally believe (5) on the basis of this token of the CPA. The argument is self-defeating. Hence, we should not believe (5) on the basis of the argument above.

For human beings, rational belief in (2) usually requires the use of our perceptual, memory, and reasoning practices.[32] In order to form a rational belief in the existence of alien perceptual practices, an agent would have *perceptually* encountered aliens and seen their behaviors, and using his present perceptions and *memories* of their behaviors, he would *infer* that they engage in a competing practice.[33] One simply cannot look at a group of creatures and see that they engage in a competing practice. This discovery takes some effort and inference, especially when the practice involved is quite foreign to the investigator. But, if we believe (5) along with the UDP, it is irrational to engage in the practices we require to detect the existence of competitors. So, this token of the CPA is self-defeating for us, and CPA does not entail that it is irrational of human beings to engage in their perceptual practice in the alien practices case since we will rationally refuse to believe (5).[34] We conclude that the CPA is acceptable as it stands. Alston is incorrect about the consequences of the CPA because he fails to consider epistemic self-defeat. Hence, we can accept the CPA without embracing the counterintuitive results in alien practices cases. Given the plausibility of the CPA, this proposal is the best of those explored here.

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This account allows the CPA to defeat the rationality of engaging in some practices for which we have no external check. Consider religious experience. There are several competing religious experience practices. Suppose we have symmetrical reasons to believe of each practice that it is reliable.[35] We do not need to engage in any of the religious practices to know that there are competing practices; even the nonreligious know that there are mutually competing religious practices. We know this by engaging in our sensory, memory, and reasoning practices. The belief that each religious practice is probably unreliable does not defeat the rationality of engaging in the practices we use to form a rational belief in (2). The CPA is not self-defeating when applied to a specific religious practice, since we do not need to engage in that religious practice to form the rational belief that there are competing religious practices.[36] There is an asymmetry between perceptual and religious practices for human beings, and one that is important to the CPA.

Section V – Merely Possible Competing Practices and the CPA

There is another objection that we should consider before accepting the CPA. Alston (1991, 274) claims that we must reject the CPA in the form defended here because *merely possible* competing practices give rise to the same problem. As far as we know, Whiteheadian practices are merely possible at present (no actual person forms beliefs by engaging in the Whiteheadian practice). But, if we have no non-circular reason to think that our Aristotelian practice is reliable while the possible Whiteheadian practice is not, shouldn't the CPA apply here as well? If so, global skepticism is entailed. Hence, Alston claims we must reject the CPA when it applies to practices for which no non-circular check is available.

Our proposed solution to Alston's first objection to the CPA depends on exploiting facts about how a subject arrives in beliefs about the existence of *actual* competing practices. No solution in terms of self-defeat is available if *merely possible* competing practices defeat the rationality of engaging in an actual perceptual practice since we do not need to rely on our perceptual, etc. practices to form beliefs about what is merely possible. A version of the CPA that depends on merely possible competitors is a recipe for global skepticism.[37] Should we then reject the CPA after all?

We think it is incorrect to handle actual and merely possible practices in the same way.[38] The CPA is not to blame here. Instead, it is treating the epistemic significance of actual competing practices as on par with merely possible competing practices. Recall the thermometer case above, where the CPA has considerable intuitive force. Let's alter the example a bit.[39] Cindy has only a single thermometer to use to assess the temperature of the liquid. But, she thinks to herself, "There are many merely possible thermometers that would deliver mutually inconsistent temperature readings in this situation. Since I haven't tested this thermometer, I have no non-circular reason to think that this thermometer is more reliable than merely possible competing thermometers." It would be strange to claim that it is irrational of Cindy to form a belief on the basis of what the actual thermometer says. Yes, there are many merely possible competing thermometers. But this does not intuitively drive us to say that she should rationally refrain from engaging in the actual thermometer practice. Nor should our knowledge of the existence of merely possible competitors lead us to believe that our own practice is probably unreliable.

Intuitively, merely possible practices do not provide much of a reason to doubt the reliability of actual practices. Merely possible practices call to our attention the possibility of error (the actual thermometer *could* be unreliable, after all). This possibility of error is not itself enough to make it irrational to form beliefs on the basis of the actual thermometer, though. Nor should this mere possibility of error lead us to believe that an actual practice is probably unreliable. Mere possibility of error is not the same as a probability of error. Matters are quite different with actual competing practices in conditions where one's reasons for thinking that each of the competing practices is reliable are symmetrical.[40] We suggest that merely possible competing practices are more like

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skeptical hypotheses than serious challenges to the reliability of actual practices, and should be treated accordingly.

Section VI – Conclusion

I have argued that our awareness of the existence of competing practices in conditions in which one has symmetrical reasons to think that each practice is equivalently reliable is an important source of defeaters to the rationality of engaging in those practices. The CPA is clearly plausible in a range of examples. Further, the CPA avoids an important objection once we consider self-defeat. Hence, we should accept the CPA in its initial form. Alien practices counterexamples can be defused without altering the CPA. Further, the CPA can defeat the rationality of engaging in some practices for which we have no non-circular check. More generally, our argument shows that considerations of self-defeat may also insulate an individual's beliefs from defeat by some socially generated defeaters, if these defeaters would cast into doubt the reliability of the practices an individual uses to discover them. Hence, considerations of self-defeat limit the epistemic significance of competing social practices for individuals.[41]

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Notes

1 What we are to suppose is that we have roughly equivalent reasons to believe that each of the mystical religious practices is reliable. So far as I can tell, this is actually true of at least several mystical-religious practices. This is an empirical matter, though, and perhaps some religious practices really do have some sort of advantage over the others. Van Inwagen (1995), for example, argues that the rational acceptability of a religion and correlated religious practices could depend on whether it offers metaphysical advantages. If one religion offers metaphysical advantages when compared competing worldviews (naturalism, other religious views, etc.), e.g., perhaps simplicity or some other theoretical virtue, I would count this as a good non-circular reason to accept that religion.

2 Goldman (2001) explores this important issue as it pertains to a non-expert deciding which experts to trust.

3 The notion of an external, non-circular check will be clarified below.

4 Alston defines doxastic practices in terms of output propositions rather than beliefs. I think it better to define doxastic practices such that they result in beliefs (hence the name "*doxastic* practice"). This notational difference to Alston is of no consequence to the remainder of this paper. Many process-reliabilists understand cognitive processes and methods in roughly the same way, e.g., Goldman (1986). Note that the inputs to a practice could be either doxastic or non-doxastic.

Some might want to claim that a doxastic practice can output degrees of belief. We could amend the above definitions to accommodate such concerns. I do not think it will significantly affect the arguments to come. Because it is much easier to define competition in terms of full belief, I choose to define practices in terms of the "tripartite" analysis of belief. But, we could define competition in terms of different and inconsistent degrees of beliefs in propositions which are the result of engaging in different practices as well, to much the same effect. See, e.g., Christensen (manuscript) for a discussion of disagreement in terms of degrees of belief.

5 This definition accommodates the thought that one might read tarot cards for fun without ever forming beliefs on the basis of their outputs. On present definitions, we would say that the person fails to engage in a tarot card (doxastic) practice, since they do not use tarot cards to form beliefs.

6 First, notice that while logical implications are important to calculating defeat relations, this does not commit us to saying that when a practice outputs a belief, that therefore the practice outputs all of the logical implications of the belief. Second, we can think of a topic as being set by what would count as a good answer to a question. Some questions are very specific: what is Bob's favorite food? Others could be quite general: which general worldview is true? With questions like these, *many* different mutually competing answers can be given. Note that the definition of competition might be plausibly extended to include logical inconsistency between the inductive and explanatory consequences of the beliefs output by competing practices as well.

7 E.g., suppose either p, q, or r is true about topic T, but p, q, and r are mutually inconsistent $((p \rightarrow (\sim q \wedge \sim r)), (q \rightarrow (\sim p \wedge \sim r)),$ and $(r \rightarrow (\sim p \wedge \sim q)))$. Then suppose practice P_1 outputs the belief that p, P_2 outputs the belief that q, and P_3 outputs the belief that r. In this case, P_1–P_3 are mutual competitors about T.

8 This "no defeat" condition also applies to all plausible theories of justification, warrant, and knowledge, so our discussion can be extended to these concepts as well.

9 We will briefly explore another kind of circular argument below.

10 The argument can still be correctly applied in cases where we know that most competing practices must be inaccurate on an occasion about a topic. But, defeaters in terms of unreliability have a much wider reach than do defeaters about inaccuracy about topic on a specific occasion. Many of the arguments below could be restated in terms of inaccuracy, though, with little alteration to the central argument of this paper.

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[11] The qualifier "solely" is added for ease of exegesis. Several different practices, of course, could output the belief that *p*. The fact that the rationality of engaging in one of these practices is defeated would not entail that it is irrational to believe that *p* (on the basis of the other practices). Let us focus on beliefs that are the product of a single practice to avoid these complications.

[12] Perhaps this should be put in terms of having a doxastic attitude about the reliability of a practice rather than belief. But, this CPA is most interesting in cases when one has positive reasons to believe that a practice is reliable. Thanks to Michael Bishop for pressing for clarification here. In any event, it is the symmetry of the reasons, not the doxastic attitude held, that is important here.

[13] The qualifier "seems" here is intentional. I will argue that sometimes the inference of (5) from (1) and (4) will fail because the agent notices it would be a self-defeating inference.

[14] One argument for the UDP is that its denial entails strongly counterintuitive consequences. If one denies the UDP, one tacitly accepts that a person could (1) rationally believe that a practice is probably unreliable about a topic, yet (2) form a rational belief about the same topic by engaging in the suspect practice in full knowledge of (1). This is implausible.

[15] Alston (1991, 270-1) offers a similar kind of example by focusing on conflicting witnesses. As noted earlier, Goldman (2001) raises similar issues about trying to determine which of several competing experts to believe.

[16] More carefully, we can say that the practices are distinct on the basis that practice T_1 takes as inputs only beliefs or sensory states about what the first thermometer says, etc.

[17] So, if the first thermometer outputs that the liquid is ten degrees when initially immersed in the liquid, on future occasions (say, five minutes from now) when I use the thermometer, it outputs that the liquid known to be of constant temperature liquid is ten degrees again. This thermometer is now self-consistent and also consistent with other knowledge (the liquid is of constant temperature).

[18] Loosely speaking, an argument or inference is epistemically circular if and only if, necessarily, if a person has a rational belief in the conclusion of the argument (on the basis of the argument), then the conclusion of the argument is true. See, e.g., Alston (1993, 15). This is not quite correct, as I argue in "When is an Argument Epistemically Circular?" (manuscript), but close enough for present purposes. Note that the sort of epistemic circularity at issue here is not the sort considered by Cling (2002). Cling points out that some logically circular arguments can improve our epistemic state. This is correct, but the sort of epistemic circularity of concern here is not a special form of logical circularity. Inductive proofs of the reliability of induction are a paradigm case of the sort of epistemic circularity at issue. But, such arguments are not logically circular (the conclusion does not appear as one of the premises).

[19] See Bergmann (forthcoming). Bergmann distinguishes between epistemically circular arguments in questioned and unquestioned contexts. Bergmann wants to allow that an epistemically circular argument can produce rational beliefs in unquestioned contexts. This response will be of no help here, though, since it is plausible that a person's awareness of the existence of competing practices forces the person into a questioned context. Also see Cohen (2002) and Vogel (2000) for discussion of problematic "bootstrapping," a poorly defined but interesting notion that seems to pick out epistemically circular arguments that do not intuitively provide rational beliefs in their conclusions.

[20] If the reader doubts this is the case, then this does not undermine the arguments of this paper. This assumption is needed in order to state Alston's objection, though. If the assumption is incorrect, then so too is Alston's objection to the CPA. Since my point here is to articulate and defend the CPA, this only supports the argument of this paper.

[21] If this strikes the reader as difficult to conceive (perhaps because of concerns about conceptual incommensurability, or appeals to simplicity, etc.), again this only serves to undermine Alston's objection to the CPA.

[22] In this case, it is especially clear that the practices compete through time rather than solely at an instant. Aristotelian and Whiteheadian practices are consistently in competition with one another

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through time, and hence at least one of the practices must be unreliable (not simply inaccurate on a particular occasion).

[23] Nor would it be irrational of the Whiteheadian to continue engaging in their Whiteheadian practice, etc.

[24] Alston employs this theory to defend the rationality of engaging in a mystical-religious practice, even if one is aware of the existence of competing religious practices and has no non-circular reason to prefer one practice to another.

[25] This is simply to repeat the assumption made above when setting the stage for Alston's objection that we do not have non-circular reasons for believing that our basic practices are reliable.

[26] Assuming they are equally self-supporting (as per the symmetrical reasons assumption), etc. Alston adds other conditions as well, e.g., social entrenchment.

[27] Note that the failure of the CPA to provide a defeater does not settle the issue of whether a belief produced by engaging in one of the competing divination practices is rational. Perhaps the belief fails some other rationality condition, or is defeated in some way other than the CPA.

[28] As a reminder, the UDP states that if a person rationally believes that their belief that *p* is probably the result of engaging in an unreliable practice, it is irrational of the person to continue to believe that *p*.

[29] The notion of availability here is unclear. I leave it to others who wish to defend this solution to the problem to specify the relevant conception. My objections to this view do not turn on this issue.

[30] Thanks to Jonathan Vogel for pressing for clarification of a previous statement of SDA. Note that some arguments contain extra "junk" premises or inferences which could be deleted without preventing the argument from producing a rational belief in its conclusion. In these cases a formulation more complex than SDA is needed. But, SDA is an appropriate test of whether a token of the CPA is self-defeating, since it does not contain "junk" premises or inferences. Note that I state this as a sufficient condition because there are other ways for an argument to be self-defeating, e.g., if one premise defeats the justification of another premise of an argument.

See Sober (1981, 71) for a similar sufficient condition for being a self-defeating argument. There he writes, "This argument is *self-defeating*: if the conclusion is true, then the argument is no good since it makes use of an invalid rule of inference." Our condition is more general in that it allows that some arguments may be self-defeating because of their premises, not only their inferences. Note that our formulation highlights the role of rational belief and epistemic perspective in a way that Sober does not, and in a way the present author thinks is essential. We understand self-defeat not solely as a logical property of arguments, or of arguments types, but rather as involving rational belief revision and addition on argument tokens from within an epistemic standpoint. As is sometimes noted, arguments are at best an abstract formulation of epistemic life, and the relationship of arguments to first-person epistemology is uneasy. Attempts to characterize epistemic self-defeat solely in terms of logical form seem bound to fail if we totally ignore the role of epistemic perspective. Thus we think we can sidestep Fox's (1986) criticisms of Sober on self-defeat by bringing in considerations of epistemic perspective.

[31] A self-defeating argument could be one of several reasons that a person has for believing a proposition, in which case it might be rational of the person to believe the conclusion of the self-defeating argument (but not on the basis of that argument). We will focus on cases when the person has only a self-defeating argument to accept a conclusion, and notices this is the case.

[32] There may be people who claim to detect competing practices psychically or in some other way. Matters are more difficult in such cases. But, for present purposes, we can focus on relatively average human beings.

[33] A person might also learn about such things in books, or through testimony, etc. In these cases, we should note the need to use our senses, memories, and make inferences to form beliefs on the basis of what we see and hear. So, an analogous argument that the CPA can be self-defeating would then apply.

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[34] Since our memory and reasoning practices are also implicated in the detection of competing practices, these practices are also shielded from some tokens of the CPA. Note that one consequences of this view is that from the perspective of a Whiteheadian, the Whiteheadian perceptual practice is similarly protected from defeat.

[35] This assumption might or might not actually be true. I do not have space to defend the claim that this assumption is true here, although I think it is. But, it is good enough for present purposes to make this assumption to demonstrate an important consequence of my treatment of the CPA.

[36] Of course, if one's only reason for believing that there are competing religious practices is because, e.g., Jesus visits and tells you so, then this instance of the CPA would become self-defeating. As a contingent matter, things are simply not like this for most human beings, though. Most of us have strong reasons that do not depend on engaging in a religious practice to believe that there is a host of competing religious experience practices.

[37] Perhaps with the exception of the practices we use to form the relevant modal beliefs. Considerations of self-defeat, as sketched above, might shield such practices from defeat even if we allow possible practices to count as a suitable basis for the CPA. This is hardly much comfort, though.

[38] See Christensen (manuscript) for a similar treatment of actual vs. possible disagreement. Note that Christensen is responding to a slightly different version of the argument, one due to Kelly (2005).

[39] Thanks to Cory Juhl for suggesting this example.

[40] It might be objected that the distinction between actual and merely possible practices has little epistemic import because we can make a possible practice actual by simply engaging in it. Hence, we can easily generate actual competitors from merely possible practices after all, and the CPA should apply. But, we think that this ignores complications about when it is rational to begin engaging in a new practice. One cannot place a cardboard box on one's head (with the requisite tin-foil antenna), engage in a box practice, and form rational beliefs about gremlins. We advocate a view according to which actual competitors are epistemically relevant to actual practices, and possible competing practices are relevant to other possible practices.

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