

Lessons for Religious Dialogue from a Philosophical Disagreement: Alston and Schellenberg on Religious Commitment

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ABSTRACT

A disagreement between two philosophers, William Alston and J. L. Schellenberg, on the matter of religious commitment serves to exemplify an important difference between religious believers and religious sceptics. The disagreement occurs in the context of a discussion over the plausibility of Alston's doxastic practice approach as applied to religious belief. I argue that a close reading of Alston and Schellenberg shows that they do not, despite what they may think, differ greatly from each other. I conclude by drawing some lessons for interreligious dialogue, particularly that the focus of engagement should not necessarily be to convince but rather to uncover differences in attitude.

KEYWORDS: Alston, William P.; Schellenberg, J. L.; faith; tentative belief; religious commitment; James, William; attitude; intuition; religious epistemology; interreligious dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

While not exactly interreligious dialogue, dialogue between religious believers and religious sceptics (whether the latter be of an atheist, agnostic, or other variety) can help religious believers to understand themselves better. Furthermore, given that religious scepticism can be a conscientious stance with respect to religion and the consequence of thought and reflection, it is only correct that sceptical views should be recognised and considered in interreligious discussions.

In this study I wish to examine the exchange of views between William Alston (1921–2009) and J. L. Schellenberg (1959–) which arose out of Alston's response to the epistemological challenge of religious diversity. Although Alston (1997, 288; 1991, 270) believes that there are independent reasons which show that the Christian tradition provides the reliable system of religious beliefs (or what I will refer to as 'religious worldview' for short), Alston is prepared to overlook these reasons for the sake of argument. Alston maintains that even in an 'epistemic parity situation' where there are no external reasons for distinguishing one religious worldview from another, on grounds of truth, a follower of a religious tradition is entitled to believe his worldview is the reliable one. Schellenberg says that Alston

has overlooked the possibility of being more tentative about one's religious beliefs. I will argue that, on close examination, there is in fact little difference between the two philosophers. The aim will be not only to elucidate a philosophical discussion on religious diversity but also to draw wider lessons for interreligious dialogue and for the self-understanding of both believers and sceptics.

I begin this paper by describing the necessary epistemological background for understanding Alston's thought experiment and the justifications he gives for his position on religious commitment. My main source for Alston's views will be his acclaimed *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (1991), the most developed expression of his religious epistemology and the result of fifty years of reflection (xi). I then present Schellenberg's objection to Alston, resolving that the two disputants are not so far apart from each other and I offer some remarks relating this contention to interreligious dialogue.

It may have been possible to present a disagreement between a religious believer and a religious sceptic which did not need as much unravelling as the disagreement presented in this study. Perhaps the analysis of a dispute between a couple of polemicists rather than a couple of philosophers would have been sufficient to draw the same conclusions. While this may be the case, it is my view that in the unravelling there is benefit. The writings of both Alston and Schellenberg have received significant attention among philosophers of religion and it can do no harm to learn lessons from their exchange.[1] Though one might expect polemicists to argue past each other, for example, it is surely eye opening to witness this in sophisticated philosophical debate, serving to reinforce the conclusions of this study.

THE DOXASTIC PRACTICE APPROACH

Alston's dealing with the epistemological challenge of religious diversity is due to him seeing it as a major problem for his doxastic practice approach to epistemology as applied to religion. A doxastic practice is a belief forming practice and as humans we are disposed to engage in these practices, or what one might call 'processes', 'mechanisms', or 'habits'. A doxastic practice is not just any concocted method of forming beliefs such as rolling dice to choose between options, rather a doxastic practice has various psychological and sociological features which make abandoning it extremely difficult if not impossible (1991, 250). Our major doxastic practices include sense perception, introspection, memory, rational intuition, and various types of reasoning (1991, 176). On the basis of some type of stimulus a doxastic practice produces a belief, this means the stimulus can be thought of as an input and the belief can be thought of as an output. With the sensory perceptual doxastic practice (SP), for example, the input would be a physical stimulus and the output would be a belief about the physical environment.

According to Alston, in the absence of reasons which suggest the contrary, it is reasonable to engage in a doxastic practice and suppose that the beliefs it yields are reliable if it is socially established. Socially established doxastic practices are reasonably engaged in because there must be a reason for a practice to be widely accepted for generations. Indeed, the reason is, according to Alston, that the

practice must be putting its practitioners in cognitive contact with reality. If people have always found that induction (for example) yields reliable beliefs, then the reason must be that it is a reliable practice. (Alston 1991, 170)

Alston says that it is particularly reasonable to engage in a doxastic practice if it exhibits what Alston calls 'significant self-support'. Self-support is the support which a doxastic practice has which is nonetheless epistemically circular. An example is the necessity of memory for conducting our affairs, but this is only because we remember past occasions where it has helped us. For instance, I *remember* that bread is nutritious but this is only because I can *remember* always having eaten bread with no adverse effects.

Somewhat controversially, Alston says that the process of forming beliefs based on mystical experiences, or mystical perceptions, can be rational too. But Alston recognises no one mystical perceptual doxastic practice (MP) but rather a variety of such practices, each corresponding to a given religious tradition. Given Alston's contention that the different religious traditions conflict it follows that MPs associated with the various traditions also conflict with each other. So, wouldn't the diversity of conflicting beliefs which arise out of the diversity of mystical experiences suggest that mystical perception is, rather, an altogether unreliable source of beliefs? Wouldn't it be wiser not to suggest that MPs are rational doxastic practices in the first place? Alston recognises this as a central problem of his doxastic practice approach as applied to mystical experience.

THE WORST CASE SCENARIO

Having presented the background to Alston's reflections on religious diversity we can now turn to discussing his solution to the challenge, albeit in more general terms and without constant reference to doxastic practices. For Alston, incompatibility among MPs is an instantiation of incompatibility among religious traditions. Alston makes this especially clear in a slightly earlier presentation of his views in which he speaks of 'M-beliefs', short for 'manifestation beliefs', in other words, beliefs which are formed using a MP.

It might appear that the problem posed by religious pluralism for my thesis is much more restricted than the problem posed for total systems of religious belief. For M-beliefs constitute only one segment of the beliefs of a religion, and not the most prominent at that. [...] Nevertheless, in attempting to deal with the problem as it impinges on the empirical support of M-beliefs we will be led into the larger problem [...] in defending, or assessing the general *practice* of basing M-beliefs on experience, we have to defend or assess the general system of belief in the community. Hence it is impossible to isolate the epistemology of M-beliefs from the epistemology of that wider system. And so anything that threatens the epistemic status of the latter will ipso facto threaten the epistemic status of the former. (Alston 1988, 439)

As a believer in the central tenets of Christianity, Alston (1997, 288; 1991, 270) believes that there are independent reasons which show that the Christian tradition provides the reliable religious worldview. However, Alston is prepared to

overlook these reasons in order to conduct a thought experiment. Alston terms his thought experiment the 'worst case scenario'. The worst case scenario is when no significant external reasons exist to identify the one reliable religious worldview from the various religious worldviews.

Alston maintains that it is reasonable for a religious believer to believe in the reliability of his religious worldview even if it is supposed that it cannot be supported with positive non-internal reasons. Alston does admit though that without independent support the reasonableness of believing in the exclusive reliability of one's own religious worldview is 'significantly weakened' (1991, 270). Alston says (1991, 275) that in the domain of religion degrees of reasonableness are not quantifiable[2] but Alston believes that the reduction in the reasonableness of religious belief due to religious diversity is not enough to make religious belief unreasonable or irrational. If we cannot even think of an appropriate non-circular proof for the reliability of a particular religious worldview, says Alston (1991, 272), then there is no reason why we should take the absence of such a proof to nullify the reasonableness of supposing the religious worldview to be reliable. Without a common ground to resolve epistemic conflict then epistemic conflict between intellectual peers is less damaging to the reasonableness of religious belief. Given that there is no way in which to solve the conflict then the reasonable thing for a religious believer to do is to continue to believe in the reliability of his religious worldview. Alston's (1991, 275) concluding remark in his evaluation of the reasonableness of religious belief given the worst case scenario is that 'incompatible propositions can each be justified for different people if what they have to go on is suitably different.'

Alston (1991, 270–275) appeals to four examples of epistemic conflict in support of his position. Firstly, there is the type of disagreement that occurs between witnesses of a road accident where each witness is adamant that their own account is true. Secondly, there are different methods to forecast the weather: meteorology, the extent of aches in one's joints, and observations of groundhogs. Unless one has an external reason to believe in the reliability of a particular method then he will not be reasonable in believing that the results of his method will be reliable. Alston notes some important differences between these two examples and the epistemic conflict created by religious diversity. For starters the epistemic conflict in the road accident example was only regarding a few beliefs and not an entire doxastic practice. The most important difference though is that we know how to resolve the disputes in the two examples. The reason is that we will judge them from within the same doxastic practice. In the road accident case we would know to disregard, for example, observers suffering from inattention, emotional involvement, or visual disability. In the weather forecasting example we would compare the predictions of the three methods to observations of the weather. In the case of numerous religious worldviews there is, by hypothesis, no neutral ground from which to judge between them. It is for this reason that one cannot judge whether Christianity, for example, is epistemically superior to rivals whereas one can judge whether a particular eye-witness account or method of forecasting is superior to rivals.

Thirdly, moving on to more serious examples, Alston narrates the dispute between psychoanalysts and behaviourists regarding the proper method for the diagnosis and treatment of neurosis and regarding human motivation in general. In

Alston's estimation just because psychoanalysts do not have independent reasons for proving the reliability of their method – and could not even specify such reasons even if their method was reliable – we should not think psychoanalysts unreasonable for forming beliefs about neurosis in the way that they do.

Fourthly, Alston also writes of an imaginary scenario in which a dispute occurs between different types of SPs, all of which are equally socially established with significant self-support in the form of a developed science. In this scenario different people use different conceptual schemes to form beliefs from sense experiences. The different schemes Alston cites correspond to Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Whiteheadian metaphysical systems. So, practitioners of the Aristotelian SP would see discrete objects scattered in space; practitioners of the Cartesian SP would see an indefinitely extended medium that is variably concentrated at different points; and practitioners of the Whiteheadian SP would see momentary events growing out of each other in a continuous process. Alston says that there is no neutral ground to decide which SP is giving a reliable picture of reality. In the absence of any external reasons to decide between the SPs on grounds of truth then it is reasonable to maintain one's own SP. So, if one started with the Aristotelian SP, for example, one should stick to it.

More reasons for Alston's position can be detected. Alston (1991, 273, n.16) says that the religious situation is similar to philosophy where we still find we can hold strong ethical convictions, for example, despite different opinions about, for example, free will, materialism, and knowledge. Quinn & Meeker (2000, 21–22) agree with Alston and note regarding the perennial debate over free will and determination that all major information relevant to the matter is known by both sides in the debate yet disagreement persists. There is no agreed procedure for resolving the dispute yet participants in the debate still feel free to maintain strong opinions.

Alston's view on the underdetermination of scientific theories by evidence is also indicative of his view of what is to be done in matters of belief in the absence of external reasons for a particular religious worldview.

Even in empirical science where predictive efficacy can be factored into the equation it is difficult to show that one competing explanation is superior to all its competitors, not to mention the fact that we usually cannot be sure that we have identified all the (serious) competitors. Standard criteria of explanation like simplicity, economy, scope, systematicity, and explanatory power can be appealed to, but such appeals are far from providing us with effective decision procedures. (Alston 1991, 297)

Even in science, then, we need to use non-truth-linked factors. So, in the case of religion where 'predictive efficacy' (that is, physical/empirical constraints) are not predominant we should not be surprised, suggests Alston, if we have to use non-truth-linked factors to make a decision. Furthermore, it should not be assumed, according to Alston, that religious belief has the same epistemology as other types of belief. Believing on faith is not inappropriate for religious belief, that is, it is reasonable to trust that a particular religious worldview is reliable even if this is not conclusively established because doing so 'is an essential part of the religious package' (1991, 297). This type of faith is holding a belief 'more firmly [...] than the

objective evidence strictly indicates' (1991, 277, n.21).

Alston does not explicitly acknowledge James as an influence but it is clear that he has offered a Jamesian defence of religious belief. In his 1896 address, 'The Will to Believe', the celebrated American thinker, William James (1842–1910) can be understood to be drawing our attention to the fact that it is ultimately personal inclination and pre-disposition that decides whether we regard a hypothesis to be plausible or not. Moreover, it is proper, according to James, that this should be so. James notes that the epistemic agent exhibits *attitude* at the most fundamental level that he could do so, that is, when he decides whether to maximise the number of true beliefs he acquires or minimise the number of false beliefs he acquires. James (1919, 29) concludes that 'we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will'. As Schlecht (1997) clarifies, James' key statement is an exaggeration. James does not support an irresponsible attitude to the evidence but rather he supports the right for the individual to decide the best course of belief for himself in momentous situations where the relevant evidence is inconclusive just as, it would seem, Alston does.

WHY NOT TENTATIVE BELIEF?

Schellenberg (1994, 158) points out that where it is not possible to draw decisive conclusions tentative belief is possible. Tentative belief is the acceptance of a proposition as if it were true while not actually believing or attesting that it is in fact true.[3] Tentative belief can also be described as the *assumption* that a proposition is true. The difference regarding believing a proposition and believing in a proposition tentatively is not manifested in any deed or reasoning, rather the difference is only cognitive in that a person senses a difference in his psyche. If ever a difference were apparent between belief and tentative belief then it could only be due to anomalies like insincerity of resolution to assume a proposition. Such insincerity of resolution is also found in matters of belief which is why it is peculiarly said of some that they do not act in accordance with their beliefs.

According to Schellenberg (1994, 158), tentative belief in the guise of hypothesis is often used to guide scientific investigation and to thereby arrive at a more certain position.[4] One may, according to Schellenberg, accept that a proposition is true without believing in it and on the assumption that the proposition is true one could perhaps discover evidence for it. In accordance with Schellenberg's line of thought a disputant in a philosophical debate – whether over religion, free will, or otherwise – should only believe that his own view is true if he can disprove the truth of competing incompatible beliefs. A believer without disproof of incompatible beliefs (that are also initially credible) could instead think he has a reasonable opinion but not that it is definitely true. Schellenberg says,

Alston's argument [...] neglects the distinction between belief and acceptance: even where it is irrational to *believe* it may yet be possible to rationally *accept* the proposition(s) in question – to act on the *assumption* that it is true (while not believing), in order to see what may result from doing so. (One of the results might of course be the discovery of evidence sufficient for belief.) This attitude is indeed common among scientists and

recognition of it is surely sufficient to show that the choice here is not, as Alston suggests, between conceding the rationality of belief in this situation and denying that [a hypothesis] ought to be pursued at all. (Schellenberg 1994, 159)

More recently, Schellenberg has put this point to Alston in a different way. Schellenberg (2007, 179–180) criticises Alston for not having a role for faith in his defence of religious belief: it is an ‘unspoken assumption of Alston’s *Perceiving God* [...] that belief is the only positive religious response to religious experience’. Schellenberg (2007, 180) contrasts faith to belief by describing it as ‘beliefless’. Schellenberg also says:

faith that a proposition is true [...] involves a purely voluntary attitude and mental assent toward that proposition, undertaken in circumstances where one views the state of affairs to which it refers as good and desirable but in which one lacks evidence causally sufficient for belief of the proposition.[5] (Schellenberg 2007, 7)

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TWO DISPUTANTS

Schellenberg’s reading of Alston is incomplete, not least because, as we have seen, Alston does recognise that faith plays a role in religious belief. To support my contention about Schellenberg’s reading of Alston we can examine a statement which sheds light on Alston’s epistemology. In the statement, which will follow, Alston speaks of the sensory perceptual doxastic practice (SP) but only by way of example. The following statement is applicable to the case of religious worldviews in the worst case scenario because Alston believes that there are no external reasons for believing in the truth of SP based beliefs either. Alston says:

In judging SP to be rational I am thereby committing myself to the rationality of judging SP to be reliable. Note the carefully qualified character of this claim. I did not say that in judging SP to be rational I was thereby *judging* it to be rational to suppose SP to be reliable, much less that I was thereby *judging* that SP is reliable. One can make the former judgement without making the latter; much less are the judgements identical. (Alston 1991, 178)

What Alston is indicating in this passage can be explained as follows. The proposition ‘It is reasonable to be a religious believer’ means a religious believer can (a) commit himself to the reasonableness of judging his religious worldview to be reliable; does not mean a religious believer can (b) judge it to be reasonable to suppose his religious worldview to be reliable; and does not mean a religious believer can (c) judge that his religious worldview is reliable. The reasonableness of SP is not *evidence* for its reliability nor is the reasonableness of a religious worldview *evidence* for its reliability (see Alston 1991, 179).

For doxastic practices commitment and reliability are closely related. Alston (1991, 178) recognises that this is not a deductive relationship such as entailment (whereby commitment and reliability entail each other) neither is it an inductive

relationship such as likelihood (whereby commitment makes reliability probable). Alston does maintain though that the reasonableness of judging a doxastic practice to be reliable arises from a commitment to a doxastic practice, a commitment which is both forced by and made reasonable by the press of life. Commitment to a doxastic practice demands judgement of its reliability. It is a feature of doxastic practices that some beliefs are just not questioned. This is what Alston (1991, 164) calls the 'distinctive presuppositions' of doxastic practices. Similarly, in the case of a religious believer it is reasonable for him to be committed to the reliability of his religious worldview and for him to believe in the reliability of his religious worldview. With doxastic practices commitment is maintained unless it is overridden by defeaters. The same would be the case with commitment to religious beliefs – although in the worst case scenario, by hypothesis, there are no defeaters unless the fact of religious diversity itself is considered a defeater.

HALF FULL VS. HALF EMPTY: OPPOSING ATTITUDES TO RELIGIOUS BELIEF

I have presented the background necessary for understanding Schellenberg's tentative belief challenge to Alston and I have clarified Alston's stance on his doxastic practice approach to the defence of religious belief. Given that Alston advocates commitment to reliability and Schellenberg advocates assumption of reliability I cannot help but notice the similarity of these two positions.

On first appearances Schellenberg seems to be suggesting an approach to a religious hypothesis that Alston (and James) has overlooked, namely, a tentative approach. However, on closer examination Schellenberg's position seems to be not so different to Alston's. In a case study, Alston (1991, chap. 9) presents a picture of a religious enquirer who steadily gains more conviction of the reliability of her religious worldview through her commitment. It is this moderate conviction which is similar, at least for me, to Schellenberg's tentative belief.

Tentative religious belief suggests an agnostic and perhaps critical religious outlook whereas Alston's commitment to reliability involves a more positive frame of mind which nonetheless takes into consideration doubt and criticism. It is as if Alston is saying that the religious believer in the worst case scenario should put his doubts to the back of his mind because in the worst case scenario they cannot be resolved anyway; in the worst case scenario there are no reasons which will ever determine abandonment of one's particular religious belief to be required for the reasonable believer. This is similar to the reply of many philosophers to the sceptic: 'better to believe in something rather than nothing because you cannot have the type of belief you are looking for anyway' (cf. James 1919, esp. 18 & 26). If there is no hope of being convinced on external grounds of the reliability of a religious worldview, as is the case in the worst case scenario, then there is no point in believing tentatively if a believer feels forced to decide the truth of a matter. There is no point of insisting on epistemic standards; in a forced situation one must believe the best belief available.

It is my contention that, figuratively speaking, Schellenberg sees the glass of water as half empty whereas Alston sees the same glass of water as half full. Both

writers see the same glass of water, yet Schellenberg is negative toward it whereas Alston is positive toward it. So, Schellenberg sees inconclusive proof for religious belief in the worst case scenario and takes an agnostic attitude. Alston sees inconclusive proof for religious belief in the worst case scenario but commits to a believing attitude. Alston, like Schellenberg, is not thinking of any religious beliefs in the worst case scenario as highly probable or certain but perhaps Alston commits to his religious beliefs because they are the best available to him and he feels forced to decide about them. Alston is advocating the type of commitment a runner would have to the belief that he will win his race. Such positive belief has performance improving affects yet the runner's commitment to believing that he will win does not entail the belief that he will win and – no doubt – the runner in his heart of hearts knows this. Potentially both Schellenberg and Alston could assign the same low probability to the reliability of Christian beliefs but only Alston would take a positive attitude towards them.

CONCLUSION

To be sure, some of the matters touched on in this study are dealt with by both Alston and Schellenberg in greater detail elsewhere. In 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith' Alston (1996) presents an in-depth discussion on belief and acceptance. Schellenberg, too, has discussed these matters in-depth, especially in his *Prolegomenon* (2005). However, analysis of the direct exchange between both philosophers serves to show that they argue past each other with regard to the appropriateness of religious commitment. The significance of this analysis stems from the esteem with which both philosophers are held in terms of them defending, respectively, Christian and sceptical positions. But this analysis is also significant for what it tells us about differing dispositions, or attitudes, toward religious commitment.

It does not seem that Alston and Schellenberg fail to communicate with each other in the sense identified by Goodman (2007). Goodman suggests that for disputants to fail to communicate, that is, to talk past each other, is for them to fail to properly set parameters for debate. Rather, it seems that Alston and Schellenberg fail to fully appreciate one another's position. It is for this type of reason, no doubt, that of the nine principles of dialogue discerned by King (2011, 106), the first describes a commitment to listening. According to King, the dominant approach to dialogue in the past was to make oneself heard, that is, to have the other hear oneself. However, constructive dialogue requires the desire to hear what one's dialogue partner has to say. A commitment to listening corresponds to the humility and empathy spoken of by Cornille (2013) in her proposal of five conditions for constructive dialogue. Humility allows one to affirm the possibility for improving one's own tradition by learning from those of other traditions and empathy allows one to remain open minded when encountering religious teachings and practices other than one's own.[6]

But while the brief exchange reminds of the importance of certain dialogue principles, I suspect that the failure for Schellenberg to appreciate Alston's position is not due to any obvious breaches of dialogue etiquette. Rather, the difference is an irreconcilable difference, that is, a difference not rooted in logic but rooted in

attitude. Consequently, it is my view that dialogue between Christians and religious sceptics and, indeed, religious dialogue generally, should not necessarily seek agreement but should rather seek to uncover irreconcilable differences in attitude in the pursuit of greater mutual understanding. I suggest that it is basic attitudes which are especially worth uncovering for they lie at the root of more superficial differences. In other words, when all is said and done, differences in attitude will remain and, if uncovered, they will provide insight into the differing fundamental dispositions and intuitions of various religious believers.

NOTES

- 1 As an example of this attention, one can note that both Alston and Schellenberg have had special issues of various journals dedicated to their thought. For symposiums on Alston 1991 see *Religious Studies*, volume 30, issue 2; the *Journal of Philosophical Research*, volume 20; and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, volume 54, issue 4. For symposiums on Schellenberg's (2009; 2007; 2005) trilogy of books see *Religious Studies*, volume 49, issue 2 and *Philo*, volume 14, issue 1.
- 2 Bayesians will disagree with the claim that the likelihood of a belief cannot be quantified.
- 3 The belief/acceptance distinction in epistemology originated with L. Jonathan Cohen (1992). Alston commented on this distinction after publication of *Perceiving God*. See Alston 2007; 1996.
- 4 An example of what Schellenberg alludes to is the assumption that changes in energy occur in discrete amounts (quanta). If it were not for this assumption to account for the emission of black-body radiation from hot bodies then we would perhaps never have believed that energy is indeed emitted in quanta and perhaps not have replaced classical mechanics and Maxwell's electromagnetic theory with quantum mechanics.
- 5 To be more specific, this is Schellenberg's description of what he terms 'propositional' faith, which is distinct from 'operational' faith. Operational faith is when one acts on propositional faith in a religious way of life.
- 6 For a more detailed discussion of the dialogue principles proposed by Cornille, particularly in terms of how they relate to Christian teachings, see Cornille 2008.

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