

RATIONALITY AND THEISTIC BELIEF, by Mark S. McLeod. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993. Pp. xiv and 260. \$37.50 (cloth).

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Many Christians say that, on occasion, God manifests Himself to them as doing something, e.g. guiding, forgiving, or strengthening them, or being something, e.g. wise, powerful or loving. They often describe their experiences in much the way we ordinarily describe our perception of nearby physical objects. They don't infer that God best explains their experience, nor do they indicate that they are merely indirectly aware of Him, say, through the words of a friend or by viewing a majestic mountain. Rather, they take it that they directly perceive Him, that God directly appears thus-and-so. Their description of their experiences leads one to wonder whether such (putative) perception of God can justify such beliefs about Him (call them "M-beliefs") in the way in which we ordinarily think that (putative) perception of physical objects in normal circumstances can justify hum-drum perceptual beliefs. William Alston has recently argued that this is indeed the case. Suppose he's right. One might go on to claim that M-beliefs are *as strongly* justified as perceptual beliefs. Call this latter claim *the parity thesis*.

With the early Alston, let's say that S's belief that x is F is justified (in the "weak normative" sense, J_{NW}) on the basis of (putative) direct awareness of x as F if, and only if, S does not have sufficient reason to believe that S's belief that x is F was unreliably produced. Then, one version of the parity thesis is this:

PT. We have no better reason to believe that S's M-beliefs are unreliably formed than we have to believe that S's hum-drum perceptual beliefs are unreliably formed.

Alston thinks about belief formation in terms of a "doxastic practice", a family of ways of going from grounds, experiential and doxastic, to beliefs with a certain content. Questions of individuation aside, suppose there is a practice of going from sensory experience to hum-drum perceptual beliefs, i.e., a practice of objectifying sensory experience in terms of discrete, persisting objects occupying a three-dimensional space, call it SP. And let's say there is a practice of moving from what many Christians take to be direct awareness of God to beliefs about Him, i.e., a practice of objectifying such experiences in distinctively Christian terms, call it CP. Thus, whether PT is true is, in Alston's terms, a question of whether we have better reason to believe CP is unreliable than we have to believe SP is unreliable.

In *Rationality and Theistic Belief*, Mark McLeod aims, in large part, to argue that any version of the parity thesis attributable to Alston is false since each one fails to recognize the role of background beliefs in the formation and justification of M-beliefs. Applied to PT, McLeod's "background belief challenge" is this: We can identify x by way of directly experiencing it if, and only if, there is some property P such that x has P, P cannot be had by any being other than x, and P can be part of the "phenomenological content" of our experience. Now, for any property P such that the Christian God has P, either P can be had by some being other than Him or P cannot be part of the phenomenological content

of our experience. So, we cannot identify the Christian God by way of directly experiencing Him. To do that we must use distinctively Christian *beliefs* (not just concepts) to read into our experience that it is as an experience of the Christian God. We can, however, identify physical objects by way of directly experiencing them. Take Suzie's house for example. While it has many properties that other things have, what makes it unique is that those properties have a specific spatiotemporal location. Suzie's house has the unique property of being a pink, shuttered,... bungalow *at Fourth and Main*. Of course, "that I am in one neighborhood rather than another, on one street rather than another, is given directly in experience;" it is part of the phenomenological content of my experience. That's because the "spatial information that picks out where I am vis-a-vis the local geography (this neighborhood or that street)" "is part of the conceptual scheme I bring to the experience. I objectify the experience as Suzie's house - the pink, shuttered bungalow at Fourth and Main". I don't use beliefs about my local whereabouts to read into my experience that it is an experience of a pink, shuttered,... bungalow *at Fourth and Main*. Thus, we can identify a physical object by way of directly experiencing it, without using background beliefs in the way background beliefs are used to identify God as the object of religious experience. This difference between CP and SP - the fact that *forming* M-beliefs, but not hum-drum perceptual beliefs, involves at least a noninferential role for background beliefs - is reason to believe PT false. Here's why. First, complexity. A belief whose formation involves a noninferential role for background beliefs is more likely to be false since there are more complicated intellectual moves in its formation, "there's more room for slip-ups or mistakes". Second, arbitrariness. Distinctively Christian background beliefs enable one to identify what they are experiencing as the Christian God rather than some other god. Without them, one's experience has no more content than "a (more or less) vague sense of a reality beyond the merely physical or even the merely (humanly) personal". Thus, if those who form M-beliefs are to avoid arbitrarily reading Christian theology into their experience, their distinctively Christian background beliefs need justification. As such, we have reason to believe that CP is less trustworthy than SP.

What should we make of McLeod's background belief challenge to PT? There are several mistakes and oversights. Here are five.

1. For starters, Alston *never ever* affirmed *any* version of the parity thesis. He explicitly denies it in *Perceiving God*, and even in his earlier writings he never says or implies that the *degree* of justification that attends M-beliefs (or the degree of rationality that attends engagement in CP) is just as strong as the degree of justification that attends hum-drum perceptual beliefs (or the degree of rationality that attends engagement in SP). At most, Alston implies that there is a common *structure* of justification, or that the same *sort* of justification enjoyed by hum-drum perceptual beliefs is enjoyed by M-beliefs under certain conditions, or that we have no good reason to deny either of these things.

2. *How much* less justified are M-beliefs than hum-drum perceptual beliefs? McLeod doesn't say. For all he argues, the fact that M-belief formation involves a noninferential role for background beliefs is, in itself, epistemically negligible, resulting in, say, the difference between being justified in believing that I am eating bran flakes now and being justified in believing that I ate bran flakes a few minutes ago. One is left puzzled: where's the punch behind the "challenge"?

3. Suppose that M-belief formation involves a noninferential role for background beliefs but perceptual belief formation does not. And suppose that, all else being equal, this fact suffices to show PT false. *Is all else equal?* McLeod doesn't say. For all he argues, there may be respects in which perceptual beliefs are justificatorily inferior to M-beliefs (reasons to think SP is unreliable that do not apply to CP); if there are, then, for all McLeod argues, PT is true.

4. Suppose the background beliefs I use to form M-beliefs are maximally J_{NW} for me: I haven't the slightest bit of reason to think they are unreliably produced. Why, then, aren't my M-beliefs at least as J_{NW} as my perceptual beliefs, even though my M-beliefs depend on background beliefs for their generation and justification and perceptual beliefs do not? McLeod says the *sheer* fact that background beliefs are involved in their formation renders M-beliefs less reliably produced than perceptual beliefs. Here his points about complexity and arbitrariness enter. What should we make of them?

The point about complexity assumes that if x is a more complex cognitive process than y, then x is likely to be less reliable and trustworthy than y. McLeod thinks this is obvious. But it isn't.

Let's think about the matter briefly. Suppose I'm in the Kingdome watching Ken Griffey, Jr. play baseball. I'm directly aware of him slamming a home run, catching a fly ball, etc. Now compare this with another case. Suppose I'm watching a live broadcast of the game on NBC. I'm aware of him hitting a home run in virtue of being aware of the television. My belief that Griffey just hit a home run is the product of a more complex process in the case of indirect rather than direct awareness. Is that *sufficient* reason to suppose that it is more likely that my belief is false in the indirect case as opposed to the direct case? I can't tell. The additional complexity looks epistemically negligible. Of course, we can think of cases in which complexity does affect reliability, e.g., long versus short division. But note that in such cases experience has taught us that it is more likely that we will make a mistake using the more complex process. These reflections reveal two questions relevant to discerning whether, in any particular pair of cases, we have reason to think that the more complex cognitive process is likely to be less reliable than the simpler. How much more complex is x than y? Do we have a comparative record of success and failure? If x is only marginally more complex than y, then, lacking reason to be suspicious, we should not infer that x is more likely to be unreliable. On the other hand, if we have no reason at all to think that the additional complexity of some particular process x makes it less reliable than y, then we should not suppose otherwise. Perhaps experimental psychology has something to say about complexity and reliability.

What about the arbitrariness point? It does nothing to show that CP is less reliable than SP. The use of Christian background beliefs in the formation of M-beliefs is objectionably arbitrary only if those background beliefs are unjustified, and McLeod gives us no reason to think they are unjustified.

The situation here is this: McLeod relies heavily on the premise that due to the role of background beliefs in their formation, M-beliefs are not as strongly justified as perceptual beliefs. Both of his arguments for it are underdeveloped.

5. McLeod says that forming M-beliefs must involve at least a noninferential role for Christian background beliefs. Unless one's experience is informed by Christian theology, the content of one's experience cannot be, phenomenologically speaking, distinctively

Christian. No doubt, Christian theology can, and sometimes does, play this role. But why suppose it *must*? Because "there is nothing in the phenomenological aspect of the experience alone that entitles the perceiver to claim that it is an experience of [the Christian] God" rather than some other god. And that's because we are able to identify x by way of directly experiencing it if, and only if, there is some property P such that x has P , P cannot be had by any being other than x , and P can be part of the "phenomenological content" of our experience (call this *McLeod's principle of perceptual identification*); but God has no such property since "the mere appearance of god-like features always leaves one with doubts, or possible grounds for doubt, as to the identity of the object of experience". Thus, the content of one's experience can be distinctively Christian only if one uses distinctively Christian beliefs to interpret one's religious experience.

At least three lines of response come to mind.

Response 1. We must distinguish two matters: what the phenomenological content of one's (putative) experience of God is and what the epistemic status of one's M-belief is. Phenomenological description is not epistemology. Even if nothing in the phenomenological content of the experience entitles one's M-belief or relieves one of all doubt, that content may still be, phenomenologically speaking, of the Christian God. So it does not follow that distinctively Christian background beliefs must be used in order for the phenomenological content to be of the Christian God. McLeod's argument is a non-sequitur. (Note: I have not here challenged McLeod's principle of perceptual identification.)

Response 2. Let us continue to suppose with McLeod that we can identify the Christian God by way of direct awareness if, and only if, He has some uniquely instantiable property which can appear in the phenomenological content of our experience. Why should we suppose that being God the Father or being Christ isn't one of them? The property of being God the Father - *that* person - cannot be had by anyone else. McLeod will insist that one cannot be sure that the non-phenomenal object of the experience was in fact what one takes it to be. But, again: this worry is completely irrelevant to the question of whether the phenomenological content of one's experience can be, e.g., *of Christ* without one's Christian background beliefs being used to form that content.

In short, then, we might accept McLeod's principle of perceptual identification, say that part of the phenomenological content of distinctively Christian experience is that it is, irreducibly, *of God the Father* or *of Christ*, and note that being God the Father or being Christ are properties uniquely instantiable.

Response 3. Since the position sketched in Response 2 is false, McLeod's principle of perceptual identification is false, at least if we can identify *any* individual by way of experience. Suppose, for conditional proof, that I can identify Suzie's house by way of experience. Now suppose, for reductio, that McLeod's principle is true, hence that I can identify Suzie's house by way of experience only if Suzie's house has some uniquely instantiable property P that can appear in the phenomenological content of my experience. Every property that Suzie's house has is such that either (i) it is possible that some other object have it or (ii) it cannot appear in the phenomenological content of my experience. So, I cannot identify Suzie's house by way of experience, which contradicts

our initial supposition. Thus, if I can identify Suzie's house by way of experience, then McLeod's principle is false.

What should we make of the premise that every property that Suzie's house has is such that either (i) it is possible that some other object have it or (ii) it cannot appear in the phenomenological content of my experience? McLeod asserts that spatio-temporal location can be part of the phenomenological content of experience. Well, suppose it can. Still, there is a possible world in which there is a house that is qualitatively, but not numerically, identical with Suzie's house and that occupies all and only the spatio-temporal points that Suzie's house in fact occupies. So, contrary to what McLeod says, it *is* possible that some other object has the property of being a pink, shuttered,...bungalow at Fourth and Main. Might some other uniquely instantiable property of Suzie's house possibly appear in the phenomenological content of experience? Friends of Response 2 will say "yes". I know of no other plausible candidate.

Here's another argument. The sort of properties that can appear in the phenomenological content of experience are qualitative properties. But the sort of properties which it is not possible for some other object to have are non-qualitative, say, a haecceity. So, every property of an object, and hence Suzie's house, is such that either (i) it is possible that some other object have it or (ii) it cannot appear in the phenomenological content of my experience.

I fear I may leave the impression that McLeod only writes about (putative) parity theses attributable to Alston. This is not the case. McLeod applies the background belief challenge to (putative) parity theses attributable to Plantinga, unsuccessfully, I think. Also against Plantinga "the Universality Challenge" is developed, which hangs on the (false) claim that S's belief that p is properly basic only if the nontheistic experience that generates it is such that, if a fully rational person T had S's experience, T would believe that p. (One can be fully rational yet defective in other ways that prevent one from believing p.) Finally, McLeod develops in an interesting but frequently unclear fashion what he calls "the new parity" thesis (which isn't new): beliefs about God are just as rational as beliefs about human persons. In the end, I can't see why the new parity thesis is any better off than others, e.g. PT.

The view that background beliefs play a significant epistemic role in the formation of M-beliefs but not hum-drum perceptual beliefs is worthy of reflection and research. And the view that the epistemology of M-beliefs is more fruitfully compared to the epistemology of beliefs about other human persons than nonhuman physical objects is promising. I hope someone will soon do a good job of defending them.¹

¹ For helpful comments on earlier drafts I am grateful to Frances Howard-Snyder.