

Phil. 270: 4/21/20: Readings 19-21: Reformed Epistemology

Intro to “Reformed Epistemology”

-a little history: P, *God and Other Minds*, 1967; P&A papers of the late 70s/early 80s; *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, 1983; all culminating in their big books: A, *Perceiving God*, 1991; P, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 2000

-central claim: the acceptability of theistic belief does not depend on there being any good arguments for God’s existence

-role of religious experience, the comparison with sense perception, and “M-beliefs”: Alston 655.6, Plantinga 46.8-48.1

-compare: Reid’s response to Berkeley’s epistemological argument against belief in matter. Reid used parity considerations to battle what Plantinga calls “modern CF.” The Reformed epistemologists—especially Alston—explicitly took Reid as their model, and respond to their opponents with attacks based on parity considerations.

Plantinga’s attack on CF

-(from last time): foundationalism vs. Classical foundationalism. Foundationalism holds that some beliefs are rationally held despite not being based on any other beliefs. These are “properly basic.” All other rationally held beliefs are rational because they are, directly or indirectly, based on the properly basic beliefs. Plantinga *accepts* this. What he opposes is CF, a form of foundationalism that, by his lights, is far too picky about which beliefs can be properly basic.

-characterization of CF: 44.2: “self-evident” seems to be limited to metaphysically necessary truths; “incorrigible” beliefs seem limited to truths about one’s own present states of consciousness; and things “evident to the senses” is limited to one’s simple perceptual beliefs

-1st attack (in longer piece Plantinga refers to; he doesn’t mention this attack here): too picky

-2nd attack: “self-referentially incoherent”, mentioned at p. 44.4, explained at 49.7.

The evidentialist objection to theistic belief: P, p. 41.0

-Plantinga suspects the evidentialist objection to theistic belief is generally rooted in some form of CF (44.2), which he takes himself to have refuted (see above).

Plantinga’s “alvinizing”* claim: belief in God is (can be? is for many?) properly basic (42.6)

The God-entailing beliefs Plantinga really thinks are properly basic: 46-7 (compare with Alston’s “M-beliefs,” A, 655.6). How they’re grounded: in experience, it seems.

The Great Pumpkin Objection: presented at 48.2-.4; response at 48.5-51.1

-Plantinga’s particularism (50.6) [compare with generalism & “reflective equilibrium”], & the impasse he suggests we’ll reach (50.7).

-how we might make progress in the face of disagreement

-We should distinguish the charge that Plantinga is committed to accepting the proper basicity of GP beliefs (which is what P seems to be responding to at 50.8-51.1) with the (perhaps tougher) charge that GP-ites could use Plantinga’s defensive strategy as well as Plantinga can. (see [not assigned reading; just for the interested] my “Voodoo Epistemology,” <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~kd47/voodoo.htm>)

*From The Philosophical Lexicon [<http://www.philosophicallexicon.com>]:

alvinize, v. To stimulate protracted discussion by making a bizarre claim. "His contention that natural evil is due to Satanic agency alvinized his listeners."

Alston's thesis and his parity argument for it

-Our Alston reading opens with:

I want to explore and defend the idea that the experience, or, as I shall say, the *perception* of God plays an epistemic role with respect to beliefs about God importantly analogous to that played by sense perception with respect to beliefs about the physical world.

But in what ways analogous? Alston seems interested in knowledge and justification:

The possibility I wish to explore is that what a person takes to be an experience of God can provide him/her with knowledge (justified beliefs) about what God is doing, or how God is "situated" vis-à-vis that subject at that moment.

-That just says "explore"—but one supposes this still falls under the scope of the earlier "defend."

-and in Alston's closing paragraph we get this:

These similarities lead me to the conclusion that if, as it seems we must concede, a belief is *prima facie* justified by virtue of emerging from one of the universal basic practices, we should also concede the same status to the products of RE.

-“the same status” – This sounds like a fairly strong conclusion, based on parity considerations.

-basic structure of the argument: how similarities and potentially relevant differences are treated

-But a little more worrying: Also hard to understand what exactly Alston is claiming at 656.6

(sentence beginning with “But though...”) about the extent to which he is not relying on construing sense perception in “direct realist” terms. (If my argument against Alston is right, his case rests very heavily indeed on such a construal.)

-The similarities on which such a parity arg. is based are listed at 664.8 (starting with “It too...”, going to the end of the paragraph).

-missing (& important to Reid): naturalness

-Important here: Alston believes that neither RE nor SP can be shown, in a non-epistemically-circular way, to be reliable (he argues elsewhere that this is so of SP). You have to allow epistemically circular arguments to “show” SP to be reliable, and once you allow those, then RE, at least in some forms, may be capable of similarly being similarly “shown” to be reliable.

-Differences are then argued to be irrelevant, or at least not very important, to the epistemic status of the relevant beliefs

-Some important difference between RE & SP (659.2), and Alston's response (659.3-.9)

-Difference I focus on: positive coherence. Related to differences 659.2 & RE's “regularities” at 661.7

-Alston plays the “expectations game”: 659.3-.9 (again) & 662.5: RE's lack of SP's features gives no reason to think it unreliable, because we have reason not to expect RE to have these features.

-An alternative perspective: But what if you need these features to become p.f. justified in the first place?

-DWR & the parity argument

-Some thoughts about the rationality of theistic belief in light of pluralism about epistemic justification. (For some thoughts about how irrationality might arise here, esp. sections 4-6 of my “Delusions of Knowledge” paper may be helpful: draft at:

https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/campuspress.yale.edu/dist/c/1227/files/2015/12/Delusions-of-Knowledge-concerning-God-corrected-w-pub_info-1z5qs6h.pdf)