

God and the Ethics of Belief

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Direct Warrant Realism

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DIRECT REALISM AND DIRECT WARRANT REALISM

Direct realism often emerges as a solution to a certain type of problem. Hume and, especially, Berkeley, wielding some of the most powerful arguments of eighteenth-century philosophy, forcefully attacked the notion that there could be good inferences from the occurrence of one's sensations to the existence of external, mind-independent bodies (material objects). Given the success of these attacks, and also given the assumption, made by Berkeley and arguably by Hume as well, that our knowledge of and rational belief in the existence of material objects would depend upon there being such good inferences, a problem arises: we cannot know of or rationally believe in the existence of material objects. Reid's Direct Realism then emerges as the solution to this problem. Reid admits the success of Berkeley's and Hume's attacks against the possibility of successfully grounding our material world beliefs on inferences from our sensations,¹ but claims that our belief in the existence of material objects can be perfectly rationally acceptable, and can amount to knowledge, despite the lack of such inferences. Though he did not use the terminology, it seems to be Reid's position – and it's this position that I will be referring to as his "Direct Realism" here – that certain perceptual beliefs whose content is such that they imply the existence of material objects are *properly basic*: they are rationally held, and if true, can amount to knowledge, without having to be based on any other beliefs, including, most notably, beliefs about one's own sensory experiences.

Direct Realism, so construed, is a thesis about the justification or rational acceptability of certain material object beliefs rather than a denial that we use sensations or images of sensations as representations when we conceive of material objects. Direct Realism, as I will be discussing it here, is opposed to Evidentialism, the thesis that we need to have good inferences from our

sensations in order to rationally believe in the existence of material objects, though the term *Direct Realism* is also often used to describe a denial of Representationalism. Though Anti-Evidentialism and Anti-Representationalism often go together (as in the case of Reid), they are distinct, and it is Anti-Evidentialism that is required in order to solve the Berkeleyan problem just described.²

Inspired by Reid, late twentieth-century Christian philosophers, most notably William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, defended theistic belief by means of a form of Theological Direct Realism.³ As in the case of Reid, this Direct Realism emerges as a response to an Evidentialist challenge⁴ – this time the challenge that theistic beliefs are irrational because there is not sufficient evidence for them. And again, the challenge is met by denying the need for any such good evidence or inferences. Following Reid, but being more explicit about the matter, a key claim of this movement in religious epistemology is that certain theistic beliefs are properly basic.

In what follows, I will explore, and to an extent defend, in the case of sense perception, a view we will call "Direct Warrant Realism" (DWR), according to which the most basic material object beliefs are *not* properly basic.

Direct warrant, we will say, is warrant that a belief enjoys independently of the support it receives from others of one's beliefs. So, according to Direct Realism, on which our perceptual beliefs are properly basic, these beliefs have sufficient direct warrant to render them rationally acceptable – and also to make them count as knowledge, though I will in what follows now put such points only in terms of rationality.

On DWR, by contrast, the beliefs in question enjoy some direct warrant, but not enough to render them rationally acceptable. These "partially warranted" beliefs are then found to form a coherent picture of the physical world in which regularities are discovered and in which prediction is made possible, and this coherence enables the partially warranted perceptual beliefs to mutually support each other to the extent that most of them become rationally acceptable.

DWR, then, eschews the properly basic beliefs of Direct Realism. But it nevertheless delivers many of the advantages of Direct Realism. In particular, as we will see in the section The Argument by Elimination: Escaping Evidentialist Arguments, DWR provides an escape from the Evidentialist arguments that largely motivate Direct Realism. Direct Realists, in particular, then, should take DWR very seriously. I will argue in what follows that the main arguments that have been given for Direct Realism do not really favor Direct Realism over DWR, and will observe, along the way, some of the considerations that might make one prefer DWR over Direct Realism.

The next three sections will be a structural defense of DWR: I will defend the structural option in epistemology – which, following Laurence Bonjour, we will call “Weak Foundationalism” – of which DWR is an instance. Having defended Weak Foundationalism as a structural option, we will then investigate, in the three sections that follow, the main reasons one might have for being a Direct Realist to see if they provide any reason for preferring Direct Realism over DWR. I will argue that they do not. In the last section, we will investigate what becomes of a certain claim of parity between sense experience and religious experience if we take a DWR, rather than a Direct Realist, approach to the former.

WEAK FOUNDATIONALISM

According to “foundationalism,” as we will here use the term, there are certain privileged beliefs – the properly basic beliefs – that can be rationally held even if they are not based on others of one’s beliefs. These properly basic beliefs do not depend for their justification upon the justification of any other beliefs. All other beliefs are rational only if they are (directly or indirectly) properly based on these properly basic beliefs. Direct Realism fits nicely into a foundationalist scheme: It is what results if you accept foundationalism, and hold that some perceptual beliefs about material objects are among the foundational, properly basic beliefs. DWR, by contrast, is not a foundationalist view, for according to DWR, there are rationally held beliefs that are neither properly basic nor are they based on properly basic beliefs. For recall that, according to DWR, simple perceptual beliefs are not properly basic but come to be rationally held in virtue of support they receive from other perceptual beliefs, which are not properly basic either. But neither is DWR a Coherentist view, for although the coherence of perceptual beliefs with one another plays a key role in DWR, it is, as we are about to see, a radically different role than it plays in Coherence theories.

DWR is a version of what Susan Haack has called “Foundherentism,”⁵ and what Laurence Bonjour (whose terminology we will follow here) has called “Weak Foundationalism” – where, we must remember, Weak Foundationalism is an alternative to, and not a form of, foundationalism, at least as we are here using the terms.⁶ According to Bonjour’s description, Weak Foundationalism is the view on which “basic beliefs possess only a very low degree of epistemic justification on their own, a degree insufficient by itself . . . to satisfy the adequate-justification condition for knowledge. . . . Such beliefs are only ‘initially credible,’ rather than fully justified” (p. 28). We should modify Bonjour’s description a bit here: Weak Foundationalism need not demand

that the amount of direct warrant perceptual beliefs be “very low”; all that’s required is that this warrant be insufficient for knowledge or for rationally held belief. The Weak Foundationalist then attempts to:

augment the justification of both basic and nonbasic beliefs by appealing to the concept of coherence. Very roughly, if a suitably large, suitably coherent system can be built, containing a reasonably high proportion of one’s initially credible basic beliefs together with nonbasic beliefs, then it is claimed, the justification of all the beliefs in the system, basic and nonbasic, may be increased to the point of being adequate for knowledge, where achieving high enough degree of coherence may necessitate the rejection of some of one’s basic beliefs. (pp. 28–9)

Is Weak Foundationalism a coherent structural option? In the following two sections, we’ll briefly address that question. I will defend this structural option from its rivals on either side of it – from foundationalism and from Coherentism.

WEAK FOUNDATIONALISM AND FOUNDATIONALISM

According to most versions of foundationalism, warrant is transmitted among beliefs in a linear fashion: one or more beliefs that are all already fully justified form the basis for a new belief, which then, if all goes well, becomes fully justified, and is then available to base still further beliefs on. According to DWR, warrant is not always transmitted in this way. A group of beliefs, none of which is fully justified independently of the support it receives from the others, transmit warrant among themselves, and many of the beliefs in the group become fully justified as a result. A foundationalist may object to this mutual exchange of warrant among perceptual beliefs. But beliefs often do mutually support one another, as even such a staunch foundationalist as Alvin Plantinga recognizes here:

The supports relation, clearly enough, is not asymmetrical. Special relativity provides evidential support for muon decay phenomena, and muon decay phenomena also provide evidential support for relativity theory. A person could sensibly accept relativity theory on the evidential basis of muon decay phenomena, but it is also true that a person could sensibly accept muon decay phenomena on the basis of relativity. For one who is convinced of the Axiom of Choice, that axiom could serve as her evidence for the Hausdorff Maximal Principal; for the former entails the latter. But someone else already convinced of the latter could properly use it as his evidence for the former; for the latter entails the former.⁷

But, Plantinga insists, even though two beliefs may in fact mutually support each other, the rational person will not both believe the first on the basis

of the second and the second on the basis of the first, nor, more generally, will there properly be any circles of beliefs based on one another – it cannot properly occur that one belief is based on another, which in turn is based on another, . . . , which is based on the original belief:

But even if the supports relation is not asymmetrical, the basis relation, in a proper noetic structure, *is* asymmetrical. If my belief that A is accepted on the evidential basis of my belief that B, then my belief that B must not be based on my belief that A. More exactly, suppose N is a proper noetic structure. Then if the belief that A (in N) is based upon $B_1 \dots B_n$, none of the B_i will be based upon A. If my belief that life arose in antediluvian tide pools is based on, among others, my belief that the probability that life would arise in a given tide pool in a hundred-year period (under the conditions that then obtained) is $1/n$, then (if my noetic structure is proper) my belief that that probability is $1/n$ will not be based on the proposition that life arose in this way, and there were n tidepool/100 year pairs available. (p. 74)

Now, it is certainly true that if A is believed *solely* on the basis of B, then B had better not be believed on the basis of A, and that there cannot be any circles in the *believed solely on the basis* of relation. If that were Plantinga's point, he would be right. But according to DWR, perceptual beliefs do not receive all of their warrant from other beliefs; each belief starts out with a certain amount of direct warrant. In such a case, why could not the mutual support among the beliefs render them rationally acceptable, even though they are not rationally acceptable independent of this mutual support?

Consider a very simple system, consisting of just two beliefs, belief A and belief B. Suppose A and B each has a good deal of direct warrant for the subject in question, but that the amount of direct warrant each enjoys for her falls just short of what's needed for them to be sufficiently warranted. It's difficult to see how Plantinga could reject that such a situation, as so far described, could arise. Given that he, as a good foundationalist, believes in direct warrant, and given his views about how direct warrant is generated (and also on any plausible view about how direct warrant might be generated), I think he pretty well has to admit that beliefs can enjoy direct warrant just shy of the amount needed for knowledge. *Admit* might even be the wrong word; I suspect he'd happily accept this much.

But now suppose further that A and B are mutually supporting beliefs – a possibility that, as we've seen, Plantinga recognizes. Now suppose that our subject considers her two beliefs *together*, noticing that A supports B and that B supports A. Shouldn't she then feel more confident about both beliefs, and rationally so? And wouldn't each then transmit some warrant to the other? After all, each enjoys significant warrant and supports the other, and our

subject has noticed this. When you have a (partially or sufficiently) warranted belief, like A, notice that it supports another belief (B, in this case), and, as a result, increases your level of confidence in that other belief; that seems a clear case in which warrant has transmitted from A to B. But likewise in reverse – from B to A. But then we would seem to have a violation of Plantinga's insistence that “the basis relation, in a proper noetic structure, *is* asymmetrical. If my belief that A is accepted on the evidential basis of my belief that B, then my belief that B must not be based on my belief that A” (p. 74).

However, Plantinga's arguments (see primarily the section entitled “Against Circles,” pp. 74–77) seem suited only to establish the conclusion that the relation of *believes solely on the basis of* is asymmetrical (and noncircular) in a proper noetic structure, and have no power against our example, which, though it includes mutual *partial* basing, violates none of the intuitions Plantinga uses to rule out the propriety of circles. We may suppose that B was already a belief the subject held before it was “brought into contact” with her belief A; the result of that contact was perhaps just an increase in the level of confidence with which B was held. So B is not believed solely on the basis of A. Likewise, A is not believed solely on the basis of B.

Plantinga intuits that “Warrant does not increase just by virtue of warrant transfer.”⁸ Understood correctly, he's right about that. Of course, in an important sense, the warrant of one's whole system of beliefs not only can, but hopefully, often does increase by virtue of warrant transfer (or “warrant transmission,” as I prefer to call it, for a reason given below): when one belief transmits warrant to another, and the second becomes more warranted without the first, thereby becoming less warranted, the warrant of one's whole system of beliefs has increased by virtue of warrant transfer. But what is true here is that the second belief cannot gain more warrant by the transfer than the first belief had to begin with. It's in that sense that warrant does not increase by virtue of warrant transfer. And that doesn't happen in my example. Rather, warrant that is direct to one belief is transmitted to the other, and vice versa, but we needn't, and I don't, suppose that either belief gains more by warrant transmission than the direct warrant that the other belief had to transmit. Indeed, though B is partially based on A and A is partially based on B, *no warrant moves in a circle*: the warrant A transmits to B was direct to A and did not come from B, and the warrant B transmits to A was direct to B and did not come from A. Of course, our subject *might* start getting *overconfident* about her beliefs, treating B as if it were supported by a sufficiently warranted belief, because she loses track of the fact that A (B's partial basis) is sufficiently warranted only because of the support it received from B. If this happens, our subject's noetic structure will be defective. But we

don't have to suppose that any such defect occurs, and I'm supposing that it does not.

And, of course, if both beliefs were very close to being sufficiently warranted just by virtue of their direct warrant, and each transmitted enough warrant to the other, then it will happen that each becomes sufficiently warranted by the partial mutual basing described above. So we get the result promised above: sufficiently warranted beliefs that are not properly basic, nor are they based upon properly basic beliefs. Here it's important not to be misled by the term Plantinga uses, *warrant transfer*, which to the ears of most of us suggests that the transferrer loses what it transfers to the receiver of the transfer. That's not how it works in warrant transfer among beliefs – which is why I prefer the term *warrant transmission*, because it doesn't carry as strong a suggestion of such a loss. Take a case of simple, one-way inference (the kind of basing foundationalists like): C is sufficiently warranted, you notice it implies D, and infer D from C. D becomes warranted (perhaps sufficiently so) by virtue of warrant transfer/transmission from C, but C's level of warrant is not thereby reduced (and *certainly* is not reduced by as much as D's level of warrant is increased). In our example of partial mutual basing, then, both beliefs will become sufficiently warranted, because they were almost so just by virtue of their direct warrant, and each received enough transmitted warrant from the other to make up the difference without losing the warrant it transmitted to the other.

In our two-belief case, I supposed both beliefs were initially (independently of any warrant transmission) just short of being sufficiently warranted. Notice, however, that this is inessential to the case, especially where you get a large system of beliefs, each of which has direct warrant, and enters into partial-basing relations with many of the others (so that each can receive warrant from several other beliefs). Here, the immediate warrant may fall well short of being sufficient, and yet the beliefs comprising the system may end up being sufficiently warranted, because of the warrant they transmit (without losing) to one another. And there doesn't seem to be anything incoherent in such a structural possibility. At least, I can't see how a foundationalist could have any good reason to reject Weak Foundationalism as a possibility.

WEAK FOUNDATIONALISM AND COHERENTISM

But could a Coherentist successfully attack Weak Foundationalism? From a Coherentist perspective (which he has since abandoned), BonJour writes:

The underlying logic of the weak foundationalist's account has never been made adequately clear. The basic idea is that an initially low degree of justification can

somehow be magnified or amplified by coherence, to a degree adequate for knowledge. But how is this magnification or amplification supposed to work? How can coherence, not itself an independent source of justification on a foundationalist view, justify the rejection of some initially credible beliefs and enhance the justification of others? (p. 29)

Here BonJour points out an important difference in the role coherence plays in Coherentism and the role it plays in Weak Foundationalism. According to Coherentism, coherence is the ultimate source of warrant or justification – it is what has been called a principle of warrant *generation*. But, as BonJour points out, coherence is not such an ultimate source of warrant on a foundationalist view; on the Weak Foundationalist view, coherence is what we may call a principle of warrant *transmission*. And in the quotation indented above, BonJour seems to be baffled as to how coherence, construed as a method of warrant transmission, rather than as a vehicle of warrant generation (as itself an independent source of justification), could possibly work.

But at least to my thinking, it is easier, and not harder, to understand how coherence can facilitate warrant transmission than how it can account for warrant generation. The notion of (positive) coherence at play – a matter of the beliefs in question fitting in well with another or positively “dovetailing” with one another, rather than just failing to conflict – seems to be very close to, if it doesn't simply amount to, their mutually supporting one another.⁹ And it seems that it is precisely when each of the cohering beliefs has something going for it independently of their relations of mutual support that this coherence will be of help in justifying the beliefs in question. Looked at the other way, it becomes harder, and not easier, to see what good the relations of mutual support among a group of beliefs can do if the beliefs in question do not have anything going for them already, independently of this mutual support.

This is closely related to some of the standard attacks on Coherentism. One objection, as BonJour puts it, is that:

no matter how high the standard of coherence is set, it seems clear that there will be many, probably infinitely many, systems of beliefs which will satisfy it and between which such a coherence theory will be unable to choose in an epistemically nonarbitrary way. (And *any* consistent empirical belief which is not internally incoherent will be a member of some of these systems.) (p. 25)

Another closely related objection that BonJour considers is that Coherentism:

seems to deprive empirical knowledge of any *input* from or contact with the nonconceptual world, making it extremely unlikely that it will accurately describe that world. (p. 25)

The idea behind these objections is that coherence, by itself, just doesn't seem to be enough to secure rational acceptability for our empirical beliefs. Our empirical beliefs have to be sensitive to the sensory input we are receiving in order for them to be epistemically acceptable. Thus, one's system of empirical beliefs, no matter how coherent, will not be rationally acceptable if it is not sensitive to sensory input. As far as coherence dictates, any of the infinitely many systems of beliefs of which Bonjour writes in the first of the above two quotations will be equally acceptable. But not only are these systems not equally acceptable, some of them – those that are not at all in tune with the subject's sensory input – don't seem to be acceptable at all.¹⁰

The foundationalist view, Direct Realism, has the potential to avoid these problems by building into its account of when a perceptual belief can be properly basic some requirement to the effect that the belief be appropriately sensitive to one's sensory input. But the Weak Foundationalist view, DWR, can also avoid Coherentism's problem here, in much the same way. For on DWR, the direct warrant that perceptual beliefs enjoy is essential to their becoming rationally acceptable. Of course, working out an acceptable account of how either Direct Realism or DWR can require that basic perceptual beliefs be "appropriately sensitive" to sensory input in order to enjoy the direct warrant that either theory assigns to them in good cases is not an easy task. But at least there seems to be hope for requiring such sensitivity on such views.

Thus, as Bonjour seems to recognize (p. 29), this Weak Foundationalist view has the ability to avoid Coherentism's problems by building into its account of when perceptual beliefs have significant direct warrant the same kind of condition that Direct Realism uses for when those beliefs can be properly basic. But DWR avoids these problems, then, precisely by treating coherence as facilitating warrant transmission, where warrant can only be transmitted if it first gets generated in some other way, rather than as itself underwriting warrant generation. It becomes puzzling then why Bonjour finds it more problematic to suppose that coherence facilitates warrant transmission. As far as I can see, that is the less problematic of the two options.

I conclude that coherence is best construed as a principle of warrant transmission, and that therefore, Weak Foundationalism can withstand a general structural attack from Coherentism.

Having defended Weak Foundationalism as a coherent structural option, I should add that foundationalism seems a sound structural possibility as well. As I've noted, DWR isn't a foundationalist view, because it recognizes a class of rationally held beliefs – perceptual beliefs about material objects – that are neither properly basic nor based on properly basic beliefs. However, it is open to the DWR theorist (though not required of him or her) to hold that other

beliefs – perhaps beliefs in self-evident necessary truths and/or beliefs about one's own sensory experiences – are properly basic, and that portions of our bodies of beliefs have a foundationalist structure.

THE ARGUMENT FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL IMMEDIACY AND THE DEMANDS OF COMMON SENSE

If DWR is structurally sound (if Weak Foundationalism is a coherent structural option), how might one choose between Direct Realism and DWR? In the next several sections, we will look at the main arguments given in support of Direct Realism to see if we can find in those arguments reason to prefer Direct Realism over DWR, starting with the argument that seems to me to have the most potential for providing such a reason.

The best reasons I know of for preferring Direct Realism over DWR are tied to a simple psychological observation about how we in fact form perceptual beliefs. We seem to form perceptual beliefs in a psychologically *immediate* way: we don't consciously *infer* them from other beliefs, and our coming to hold these beliefs doesn't seem to follow our consciously noticing how well they fit in with other beliefs. Rather, whether it's due to innate or to learned dispositions, we seem set up to just form the relevant beliefs upon the occasions of having appropriate patterns of sensory experiences – without having to entertain any thoughts about the relation of the belief we're forming to others of our beliefs. This psychological observation then combines with a piece of common sense – namely, that our perceptual beliefs are typically rational – to militate in favor of Direct Realism. As Robert M. Adams puts the point (which he goes on to dispute), Direct Realism:

seems initially plausible to common sense. If I perceive an object under favorable conditions – holding it in my hand, for example, and at the same time viewing it in good light – what need have I for reasoning or inference? Don't I just know directly that the object is there?¹¹

Because these beliefs that are formed in a psychologically immediate way seem nevertheless to be rational, they do not seem to depend for their rationality on any support they might receive from other beliefs. This type of argument can be given by Direct Realists against various skeptical or Evidentialist rivals, but could also be marshaled against DWR. To accept DWR is to accept that perceptual beliefs are partially based on one another – they transmit warrant one to another that is essential to their being rationally held – though they are formed, and often maintained, in a way that involves no conscious thought about their relations to one another.

But I *still* find DWR to be a very attractive account of the warrant of perceptual beliefs. This is largely because I think it's wrong to require that a belief be formed due to a conscious noticing of its relations of support to other beliefs in order for those other beliefs to transmit warrant to it. Perhaps, though we take no notice of a perceptual belief's relations of "coherence" (relations of mutual support) to other perceptual beliefs as the belief in question is formed and maintained, we are appropriately *sensitive* to its coherence with these other beliefs, where such sensitivity consists in such facts as that we wouldn't hold or continue to hold the belief in question, or at least wouldn't continue to hold it to the degree that we do, were it not for its coherence with our other beliefs. One could be in that way sensitive to the coherence of one's beliefs even where one gives no conscious thought to the relations in question, and yet it seems to me that warrant might very well be transmitted among beliefs in virtue of the believer's sensitivity to the evidential relations that hold among them, even where she gives no conscious thought to those relations.

This is based on very general thoughts about the conditions under which beliefs transmit warrant to one another. Foundationalists, too, should make such a move, I think. The general advice I would give is: Don't require for warrant transmission a conscious noticing on the believer's part of the relations among the beliefs involved in the transmission. The foundationalist, then, should not require that an inference be consciously performed in order for one belief to transmit warrant to another. Consciously performed inferences, after all, seem fairly rare, whereas beliefs whose rationality depends on support from other beliefs at least seem fairly common. On the other hand, it doesn't seem sufficient for warrant transfer that one belief a subject holds, as a matter of quasi-logical fact, happens to support another, if the subject is oblivious to this quasi-logical fact. There must be some appropriate psychological relation between the beliefs in question for such warrant transfer to take place, it seems. But according to the advice I am here issuing, it is enough that the believer be sensitive in his or her holding of the second belief to its evidential relations to the first belief – that he or she wouldn't hold the second belief, or wouldn't hold it as firmly, if it weren't supported by the first. Following such advice is necessary, I think, to avoid an overly idealistic and overly intellectualized picture of cognitive processing.

So, although common sense seems to demand that we usually don't have to infer our perceptual beliefs from other beliefs or consciously base our perceptual beliefs on other beliefs in order for them to be justified, or even notice any relations of support between a given perceptual belief and other beliefs, DWR can live up to this demand.

Does common sense demand anything more? Do any commonsense intuitions tell against DWR? I think the relevant test of intuitions for deciding between Direct Realism and DWR concern our reactions to situations in which our perceptual beliefs do not form a very coherent picture of the physical world – where the positive coherence we are so accustomed to is lacking, but there also is no real incoherence among our perceptual beliefs. So suppose that, for all our lives, we only had sense experiences very sporadically, maybe only a couple of times a day for about two seconds at a time (the rest of the time, we fill the time by thinking about pure mathematics, and wondering what our next sensory experience will be like). And suppose that these sense experiences produced in us (perhaps through innate dispositions) perceptual beliefs to the effect that we were perceiving material objects in various ways. Would these beliefs be rationally acceptable? My own inclination is to say no, and this may explain why I am a Direct Warrant Realist rather than a Direct Realist. But this "intuition" I have about this bizarre little thought experiment amounts to little more than my sense that relations of positive coherence among our perceptual beliefs are essential to their rational acceptability, and we are imagining a situation too far removed from our actual experience for our intuitions about the situation to be worth very much. And *any* imagined situation in which our beliefs about the physical world form neither a very positively coherent, nor a positively incoherent, view of the world will be too far removed from usual experience for us to be able to trust our intuitions about it. Certainly, there aren't any *commonsense* intuitions about such cases. Thus, I don't think that DWR goes against common sense – though I also think it isn't demanded by common sense. But we still have to see whether any of the other arguments for Direct Realism can give us a good reason for accepting Direct Realism over DWR.

THE ARGUMENT BY ELIMINATION: ESCAPING EVIDENTIALIST ARGUMENTS

In the introduction to what is perhaps the most prominent expression of Direct Realism in twentieth-century philosophy, *Perception and the Physical World*,¹² David Armstrong claims that "there is a triad of 'theories of perception' which compete for the allegiance of philosophers: Direct Realism, Representationalism, and Phenomenalism" (p. 7). His method of establishing Direct Realism is by arguing against its competitors, and then answering objections to Direct Realism. In chapters 5 and 6, Armstrong attempts a "Refutation of Phenomenalism," but we need not go into that for the purpose of deciding between Direct Realism and DWR, because both views, being realist theories

of perception, would agree in rejecting phenomenalism. What's important to our comparative purposes is Armstrong's "Refutation of the Representative Theory of Perception" in chapter 3. What exactly is being refuted here?

Armstrong's main argument against the Representative theory is that "we have no reason to believe in the existence of the physical objects postulated by the Representative theory" (see pp. 29–30). He writes:

Now it is clear that an upholder of the Representative theory of perception will have to say that the perceiving of a physical object or event is *mediate* perception based on the *immediate* perception or awareness of a sense-impression. But then the question arises what warrant we have for believing in the existence of these mediate objects of perception.

Making heavy use of arguments from Berkeley and Hume, Armstrong concludes that there are no good inferences from our sense impressions to the existence of physical objects:

Now, if the Representative theory of perception is correct, we have no evidence at all for passing from the immediate perception of sense-impressions to the mediate perception of physical objects. The hypothesis that sense-impressions are caused by physical objects can never be suggested by immediate perception, nor can it be confirmed. This means that we have no good reasons for believing in the existence of physical objects. (p. 29)

As I already noted in the first section, Reid, the most prominent Direct Realist of the eighteenth-century, is also very fond of Berkeley's and Hume's arguments against there being any good inferences from the existence of our sensations to the existence of material objects (see the Reid quotation in footnote 1 of this paper). And Reid is inclined to think antirealist views of bodies or perception to be absurd; that certain principles or premises lead to such an antirealist view is considered by Reid to be a conclusive reason for rejecting those premises. Thus, although Reid does not use the term *Direct Realist* to describe himself, I think the argument by elimination is, to a great extent, behind Reid's Direct Realism. Indeed, this argument by elimination may deserve the title of the "master argument" for Direct Realism.

What this master argument amounts to, at least once the options of phenomenalism – and skepticism – are eliminated on some other grounds, is that Direct Realism provides an escape from the Evidentialist argument pressed most forcefully by Berkeley. We need not get involved in the dispute over whether there indeed are any good inferences of the type denied by Berkeley, Hume, Reid, and Armstrong.¹³ The Direct Warrent Realist can simply grant the Direct Realist that there are none.

But DWR, like Direct Realism, obviates the need for the type of grounding in our sensations that we are now granting is impossible. The argument by elimination depends on construing the "Representational theory" as requiring that our sensation beliefs provide good evidence for our beliefs about physical objects (realistically conceived). But if the view that is being rejected or refuted when "Representative" (or perhaps "Evidential") Realism is attacked does require this, the Direct Warrent Realist can join in the attack. DWR, like Direct Realism, does not require that there be any such good inferences. According to DWR, perceptual beliefs about physical objects receive their direct warrant independently of any arguments from sensations to physical objects. They then receive further warrant, enough to secure rational acceptability, from support they receive *from each other* (as well as perhaps from other, higher-level physical object beliefs). Thus, perceptual beliefs do not depend for their justification upon sensation beliefs or inferences from sensation beliefs, according to DWR. On DWR, perceptual beliefs do depend on their relations of mutual support to one another to be rational, and this is not required by Direct Realism. But the arguments Direct Realists lean on in attacking Evidentialist Realists have no tendency to show that such mutual support does not exist.

If the attack against "Representationalism" (or what is perhaps better called "Evidentialist Realism") works, then the field of theories of perception is indeed significantly cut down, and the remaining theories do seem to be more probable because of the reduction of viable competing views, but *both* DWR and Direct Realism are left standing. And there is nothing involved in the argument by elimination that I can see that would favor one of them over the other. If realist theories of perception are put on a "Direct" – "Evidential" continuum, DWR is at least close enough to the Direct Realist end of the scale that it avoids falling prey to the standard attack on Evidential theories.

PARITY ARGUMENTS AND REIDIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Reid faced opponents who accepted certain beliefs as properly basic, but who would not accept any material object beliefs as such. One of Reid's most provocative arguments is a *parity* argument directed at such an opponent: Reid argues that his opponent displays arbitrary partiality in accepting those other beliefs, but not his perceptual beliefs about material objects, as properly basic.¹⁴ This argument was grounded in a general approach to epistemology, which Reid defended vigorously, on which one rationally trusts all of one's natural belief-forming mechanisms, or faculties, unless and until one has good reasons for thinking them unreliable (or for thinking that some particular beliefs resulting from a faculty are false).

The twentieth-century Reformed Epistemologists picked up on this Reidian approach to epistemology and, explicitly in the case of Alston, issued parity arguments of their own for the proper basicity of some theistic beliefs. Continuing our project of examining the grounds for Direct Realism to see if they provide reasons for preferring Direct Realism over DWR, we will in this section examine whether there is anything in these arguments that gives an edge to Direct Realism. Then, in the following section, we will look at what happens to parity arguments for the rationality of religious beliefs if perceptual beliefs are given a DWR, rather than a Direct Realist, treatment.

According to Reid's account of the perceptual process, human beings are, prior to any experience, set up in such a way that they will have certain "original perceptions" upon the occasions of having certain sensations. Thus, a particular type of tactile sensation, or particular patterns of tactile sensations, produce in a human being both the concept of hardness and the belief in the existence of a hard material object. Reid also recognizes a class of "acquired perceptions," in which certain sensations indicate the presence of a material object with certain qualities because we have learned by experience that the sensation is usually accompanied by the presence of such an object. Thus, a certain kind of visual sensation causes one to believe that there is a hard material object present because one has learned by experience of the connection between this type of visual sensation and the presence of hard objects. But in the case of original perceptions, we do not have to experience any constant conjunction before the sensation can produce the concept and belief; it produces them simply because that's the way we're wired.

But even if it is granted that there are such original perceptions, a skeptic with regard to the existence of material objects might ask how we know that the beliefs formed in cases of original perceptions are true. Reid responded to the immaterialism of Berkeley and Hume with a parity argument. Reid groups Berkeley and Hume together with many other philosophers in what Reid calls the "ideal system" of philosophy. (I am not concerned here with the accuracy of Reid's treatment of his predecessors.) The distinctive mark of an "ideal" philosopher is that, so far as contingent truths go, he will accept the existence of "our thoughts, our sensations, and every thing of which we are conscious," and what can be proven on the basis of these mental items by deductive reasoning, but will not accept the existence of anything else.¹⁵ Thus, the ideal philosopher would not accept the belief in material objects, even if this belief were granted to be the result of a Reidian original perception. Reid's response is to argue that the ideal philosopher's belief in the existence of his sensations is on no better ground than is Reid's original perception belief: We cannot give any reason for accepting beliefs of either kind. We are set up in

such a way that upon having a sensation, we believe in its existence, and our constitution is also such that upon having certain sensations, we believe in the existence of material objects having certain qualities. To, as Reid puts it in one place,¹⁶ "pay homage" to one belief while rejecting the other because it is unfounded is to be guilty of arbitrary partiality.

In a similar way, in a parity argument we will examine in the next section, William P. Alston has argued that certain beliefs that entail the existence of God are on equal footing with perceptual beliefs and should therefore be accepted as rational. Reid's response to the "ideal" immaterialist is similar to Alston's response to the person who would accept perceptual beliefs as being rationally acceptable while refusing to grant the same status to the theistic beliefs in question. Both Reid and Alston find specific things accepted by their opponent and argue that in order to avoid arbitrary partiality, their opponent must also accept some other beliefs as rational.

These specific parity arguments are grounded in a "general perspective on epistemology" that Alston claims to share with Reid (1983, p. 119), and which provides for a general parity argument against any opponent who is not a complete skeptic. Reid admits that he has "nothing to say" against what he calls a "thorough and consistent skeptic" — that is, a skeptic who will not accept any belief until the belief-forming faculty by which it is formed is shown to be reliable.¹⁷ Such a skeptic is invulnerable to attack because *nothing* can be proven or shown until *some* belief is accepted. So a thorough skeptic (if he is thorough and consistent) will end up not accepting *anything* (not even that Reid should not believe things), and it will be "impossible by argument to beat him out of this stronghold." Such a skeptic must "be left to enjoy his skepticism."¹⁸

But besides the thorough skeptic, there is the "semiskeptical" who chooses some of the sources of his beliefs to be acceptable before they are verified. All other sources must be verified by these favored sources. (Reid's "ideal" philosopher is a type of semiskeptical.) Such a semiskeptical, then, on the level of beliefs, will accept the beliefs that result from the favored faculties as properly basic, but the beliefs that result from the other faculties are not acceptable until the reliability of the faculties in question has been shown by means of the favored faculties. Reid's main complaint against the semiskeptical is that his choice of favored faculties is completely arbitrary. It seems arbitrary to Reid to pick out certain ultimate sources of belief to accept without having a reason for picking them over the other sources. And no reason can be given for anything until some source of belief is accepted. As Reid sees things, we have a choice among three options: (1) beginning with an attitude of trust toward all our faculties; (2) beginning with an attitude of distrust toward all

our faculties; or (3) beginning by picking out certain faculties to be accepted as reliable in a completely arbitrary fashion. To escape complete arbitrariness and thorough skepticism, Reid thinks we must begin with an attitude of trust toward all our faculties.¹⁹

Alston cites Reid and follows Reid's argument fairly closely. He writes that we will never get anywhere if we require of all sources of beliefs that there be a noncircular argument for their reliability before it is rationally acceptable to trust them. Alston calls a belief-forming practice J_{ns} (justified in the strong normative sense) if and only if "one has adequate reasons for supposing it to be reliable." On the other hand, a practice is J_{nw} (justified in the weak normative sense) if and only if "one does not have adequate reasons for regarding it as unreliable" (1983, p. 116). If we require all practices to be J_{ns} in order to be rationally acceptable, if we treat them as guilty until proven innocent, then none of our belief-forming practices and none of our beliefs will be rationally acceptable. Alston concludes:

Thus, if we are to have any chance of acquiring knowledge, we must simply go along with our natural reactions of trust with respect to at least some basic sources of belief, provided we lack sufficient reason for regarding them as unreliable. In the above terms, we must be content with being J_{nw} . And if some, why not all? Of course we could, if we chose, accept some sources without any positive basis, such as intuition and reasoning, and then require that other candidates be certified by the former, that is, require J_{ns} for these latter. . . . But, as Reid points out, this is to be guilty of arbitrary partiality. (1983, p. 119)

Thus, Alston concludes that we should "simply go along with our natural reactions of trust" to all, and not only to some, of our "basic sources of belief," at least until we encounter reasons for withdrawing that trust. We may face vexing questions about the extension of our "basic sources of belief," especially, as we'll discuss briefly in the section, when we consider Alston's proposal to include practices of the formation of religious beliefs. But assuming that sense perception, by which we form perceptual beliefs about material objects, is among our "basic sources of belief," Alston's proposal here is that it, along with the rest of our basic sources of belief, be granted the status of innocent until proven guilty. And that would seem to imply that the perceptual beliefs that issue from this practice should be accepted as properly basic.

This result would be incompatible with DWR, because according to DWR, the direct warrant that a perceptual belief can have in virtue of being the result of a firmly entrenched J_{nw} practice (or in virtue of anything else) is not sufficient for rational acceptability. But the interesting thing is that, although the Direct Warrant Realist cannot accept Alston's Reidian conclusion, he

or she can accept most of the argument that leads to the conclusion. Perhaps the conclusion that Alston draws is too strong for the argument he gives. The Direct Warrant Realist can agree that we cannot require that practices be J_{ns} for them to be rationally acceptable. The result of this, however, need not be that we must accept the beliefs emerging from all firmly entrenched J_{nw} practices as rationally acceptable. The most it could show is that all such practices (and their beliefs) derive *some* warrant from the fact that they are appropriately "basic" practices of ours. It is just not true that we must accept the output of all our basic J_{nw} practices as rationally acceptable if we are to have any hope of attaining knowledge while avoiding arbitrary partiality. There is no partiality involved in assigning a certain amount of direct warrant to the beliefs formed by *all* of these practices. And we are not giving up all hope of attaining knowledge if the amount of warrant so assigned is less than the amount needed for rational acceptability, for some of these beliefs may support each other to the extent that they are rationally acceptable. So I do not see anything in the general parity argument that favors Direct Realism over DWR. As with the argument by elimination, my purpose is not to assess the overall merits of the argument. This general parity argument, in particular, seems to need a lot more work before it can be convincing. (For instance, the question of which epistemic practices receive initial warrant just in case they are J_{nw} needs to be more fully addressed.) My purpose has been simply to show that there is nothing in these arguments to favor Direct Realism over DWR.

Even if the Reidian epistemologist is right in claiming that we must assign some beliefs some amount of warrant simply because they are the result of a firmly entrenched J_{nw} practice, this does not mean that we must conclude that the beliefs resulting from all firmly entrenched J_{nw} practices are rationally acceptable unless there is some reason for thinking them false. We are not faced with an either/or choice of a global policy of innocent until proven guilty or guilty until proven innocent. At most, the Reidian epistemologist has shown that certain of our epistemic practices have *something* going for them prior to our being able to have any reason for thinking them to be reliable. And this the Direct Warrant Realist can accept.

ALSTON'S PARITY ARGUMENT

As I've noted, William P. Alston has argued, in several places,²⁰ that certain beliefs that entail the existence of God are on equal footing with perceptual beliefs. The beliefs in question are what Alston calls "M-beliefs" (for *manifestation*); they are beliefs a person gains through Christian experience

“about what God is doing, or how God is ‘situated’ vis-à-vis that subject at that moment” (1986, p. 655). M-beliefs are supposed to be “the ‘perceptual beliefs’ of the theological sphere” (1986, p. 655). An example of an M-belief that Alston gives is *God is strengthening me*. Alston advances parity considerations to argue that it is “just as rational to take Christian experience to provide prima facie justification for M-beliefs as it is to take sense experience to provide prima facie justification for perceptual beliefs” (1983, p. 120).

In (1983), Alston at places seems to draw the conclusion that being J_{nw} is sufficient for the rational acceptability of *any* epistemic practice. He writes that “if we take it that being J_{nw} in engaging in [Sense Perception] is enough to make it reasonable for us to do so,” then we should “generalize this to *all* epistemic practices” (p. 119). However, one might wonder about assigning an innocent-until-proven-guilty status to some conceivable epistemic practices – and the passage we looked at in the previous section does hint at assigning such a status to all of our “basic sources of belief.” But what is meant by *basic* here? More generally, how shall we draw the line between those ways of forming beliefs that need only be J_{nw} to be rationally acceptable and those that don’t receive this presumption?

In his later (1986), Alston lists several features shared by what he there abbreviates “RE” (for “Religious Experience,” the practice by which M-beliefs are formed) and “SP” (for “Sense Perception,” the practice by which perceptual beliefs are formed about the material world on the basis of sense experience):

A religious experiential doxastic practice like RE seems to me to be on all fours with SP and other universal practices. It too involves a distinctive range of inputs, a range of belief contents, and functions that map features of the former onto contents of the latter. It is socially established within a certain community. It involves higher-level procedures of correction and modification of its first-level beliefs. Though it *may* be acquired in a deliberate and self-conscious fashion, it is more typically acquired in a practical, prereflective form. Though it is obviously evitable in a way that SP, e.g., is not, for many of its practitioners it is just about as firmly entrenched. (p. 664)

I will need a simple way of referring to all of the similarities Alston mentions above, so henceforth, I will use *firmly entrenched* to describe a practice that has these features. In (1986), Alston seems to base his specific parity argument on the claims that RE, like SP, is J_{nw} and, in this sense, firmly entrenched. But one may wonder whether that’s the right place to draw the line. Reid, Alston’s inspiration, often appeals to the *naturalness* of sense perception, and that our “original perceptions” are the workings of “original principles of our constitution.” Such appeals to naturalness issue quickly from Reid when he

responds to “semiskeptics” by means of parity considerations, as, for instance, in this passage:

The sceptic asks me, Why do you believe the existence of the external object which you perceive? This belief, Sir, is none of my manufacture; it came from the mint of Nature; it bears her image and superscription; and, if it is not right, the fault is not mine: I even took it upon trust, and without suspicion. Reason, says the sceptic, is the only judge of truth, and you ought to throw off every opinion and every belief that is not grounded on reason. Why, Sir, should I believe the faculty of reason more than that of perception; they came both out of the same shop, and were made by the same artist; and if he puts one piece of false ware into my hands, what should hinder him from putting another?²¹

Alston’s RE may not be, in the appropriate way, natural enough for Reid – which may perhaps explain why Reid himself wasn’t a “Reidian” about religious beliefs.

But, having acknowledged the difficulties here, which I won’t attempt to sort out, let us assume that Alston’s RE is an appropriate recipient of the same initial status as SP. For I think that, if we take a DWR approach to the rationality of perceptual beliefs, which we have been given no reason not to do, this ruins Alston’s parity argument.

One of the key moves in Alston’s parity argument is to admit that the perceptual beliefs that result from our engaging in SP display stronger relations of positive coherence (“we discover regularities” in the physical world by means of perception to a greater extent than we discover regularities in God’s behavior by means of religious experience), but to argue that this does not ruin the parity argument.²² Briefly, according to Alston’s argument, this is because, given God’s “wholly other” nature and other facts, we *shouldn’t expect* to discover regularities in God’s behavior to the extent that we discover regularities in the physical world by means of perception – we shouldn’t expect Christian beliefs to display as much coherence as do perceptual beliefs. And thus, that Christian beliefs don’t cohere to the extent that perceptual beliefs do provides no reason to think “Christian Practice” unreliable. From Alston’s perspective, a lack of positive coherence is relevant to the extent that one would expect positive coherence to be displayed, and thus to the extent that the lack provides reason for thinking the practice in question is not reliable.²³ But from the perspective of DWR, the coherence displayed by perceptual beliefs is crucial to their having sufficient warrant in the first place. Thus, if M-beliefs don’t display the same level of coherence as the beliefs of sense perception, they may well not be warranted to the extent that perceptual beliefs are. From this perspective, if the entity or entities that an epistemic practice (allegedly) puts

one in touch with is such that one wouldn't expect the beliefs that result to display much in the way of positive coherence, this will make us suspect that it may be harder for the beliefs resulting from such a practice to be warranted. And that seems the more rational attitude to take.

So, the prospects for a successful Alston-like parity argument are quite dim from the perspective of DWR, and seem to require that we instead take a stringent Direct Realist approach to the epistemology of sense perception, which we've seen no reason to do.

I should hasten to add, however, that a lack of parity with perceptual beliefs in the epistemic status of M-beliefs does not show that these theistic beliefs are unwarranted or even that they're not sufficiently warranted, especially if one, like me, thinks of perceptual beliefs as being *super-warranted* – as being warranted to an extent that far exceeds what's needed for knowledge.²⁴

But it does mean that parity arguments like those tried by Alston in the 1980s won't work. To many, including many theists who, while presumably thinking theistic beliefs are rational, may nonetheless find implausible the suggestion that they are rationally on a par with our perceptual beliefs about the external world, this may be a selling point, rather than a drawback, for DWR.²⁵

NOTES

1. For example, Reid writes, "I think it is evident, that we cannot, by reasoning from our sensations, collect the existence of bodies at all, far less any of their qualities. This hath been proved by unanswerable arguments by the Bishop of Cloyne, and by the author of the *Treatise of Human Nature*." *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, chapter 5, section 3, p. 61 of D. R. Brookes, ed. Critical Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); p. 44 of R. Beanblossom and K. Lehrer, eds., Thomas Reid, *Inquiry and Essays* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983).
2. Berkeley also raises problems for belief in matter from his representationalism, and Reid again responds with a form of direct realism, this time claiming that our thought of material objects is conceptually direct, in addition to being evidentially direct. I address Reid's response to this second Berkeleyan problem in my "Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism," *Philosophical Review* 98 (July 1989): 314–38.
3. This movement in religious epistemology is commonly referred to as "Reformed Epistemology" or as "that Alston-Plantinga-Wolterstorff stuff." Key papers by Alston, Plantinga, and Wolterstorff appeared in Plantinga and Wolterstorff, eds., *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). Most recently, the movement has culminated in two books: Alston's *Perceiving God* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
4. On this, see especially pp. 5–7 of Wolterstorff's editor's introduction to *Faith and Rationality*.

5. Though Haack developed the view as well in earlier works, see especially Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).
6. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 28–9. According to Bonjour, "Weak foundationalism is a version of foundationalism" (p. 28), but that is because Bonjour is using the term "foundationalism" in such a way that a view qualifies as foundationalist so long as some beliefs have some warrant or justification that does not come from their coherence with other beliefs.
7. Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73–4.
8. This is Plantinga's foundationalist thesis VII, at p. 76.
9. Here is Bonjour on the notion of coherence: "What, then, is coherence? Intuitively, coherence is a matter of how well a body of beliefs 'hangs together': how well its component beliefs fit together, agree or dovetail with each other, so as to produce an organized, tightly structured system of beliefs, rather than either a helter-skelter collection or a set of conflicting subsystems. It is reasonably clear that this 'hanging together' depends on the various sorts of inferential, evidential, and explanatory relations which obtain among the various members of a system of beliefs, and especially on the more holistic and systematic of these" (p. 93). For further characterization, see the rest of section 5.3 (pp. 93–101) of Bonjour, though, as Bonjour admits, there is a lot of work left to be done on characterizing this important notion.
10. In the following passage, Bonjour characterizes the relations of the cohering beliefs as one of mutual support: "According to the envisaged coherence theory, the relation between the various particular beliefs is correctly to be conceived, not as one of linear dependence, but rather as one of mutual or reciprocal support" (91).
11. In *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Bonjour tries to meet these objections by supplying a "recognizably coherentist" account of observation (p. 110). However, as most have judged, this attempt did not succeed. Bonjour has since abandoned Coherentism.
12. Robert M. Adams, "Berkeley and Epistemology," in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, ed. E. Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1987): 143–61; p. 153.
13. David M. Armstrong, *Perception and the Physical World*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961).
14. For a helpful survey of the arguments on the issue of whether there are any such good inferences to the existence of material objects – a survey that reaches a largely negative conclusion that probably would please Berkeley, Hume, Reid, and Armstrong – see William P. Alston's *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).
15. On this, see especially the section entitled "The Skeptic's Injunction is Arbitrarily Discriminatory" (pp. 197–206) of Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
16. *Inquiry*, chapter 7; Brookes p. 210 = L&B p. 112.
17. *Inquiry*, chapter 5, section 7; Brookes p. 71 = L&B p. 57.
18. *Inquiry*, chapter 5, section 7; Brookes p. 71 = L&B p. 57.

18. Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, Essay 6, chapter 5; p. 480 of D. R. Brookes, ed. Critical Edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) = L&B, p. 276.
19. For further discussion of this argument of Reid's, see Alston, "Thomas Reid on Epistemic Principles," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 435–52 and DeRose, "Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism."
20. See Alston, "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," *Nous* 16 (1982): 3–12; "Christian Experience and Christian Belief," *Faith and Rationality*, (1983): 103–134; and "Perceiving God," *Journal of Philosophy* 83, (1986): 655–65. This argument was a very prominent part of Alston's religious epistemology in the 1980s, but not in his very recent work. Still, it's worth trying to assess it.
21. *Inquiry*, chapter 6, section 20; Brookes, 168–9.
22. See "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," especially pp. 8–12.
23. In the terminology of his 1982 piece, whether a lack of positive coherence has the result that the practice fails to be J_{nw} , where that stands for "justified in the weak, normative sense" – i.e., there's not adequate reason to think the practice is unreliable. (J_{ns} , justified in the strong, normative sense, means for Alston that there is adequate reason to think the practice in question is reliable.)
24. To avoid issues extraneous to our current concerns, I here suppress my contextualist views about knowledge (or, more precisely, about knowledge attributions). Taking these contextualist views into account, I'd describe super-warranted beliefs as beliefs that are warranted to an extent that far exceeds what's needed to satisfy the standards for knowledge that are set by most ordinary contexts.
25. Of course, it may not be a *strong* selling point if one sees other ways of escaping Alston's parity argument.