Anderson Philosophy of Religion

Winter 2013 PHIL 112/212G

SOME CRITICISMS OF ALSTON’S *PERCEIVING GOD. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*

**ANALOGY BETWEEN MP AND SP.** Alston only argues that it is *possible* that such attributes as “perfect goodness” and the like might be *conveyed* by experiential qualities in MP. However, we have absolutely no conception of what such qualitative features might be like. They are supposed to be “experiential”. This suggestion just doesn’t convey anything to (some of) us. It is abstractly possible, but literally inconceivable – for most of us. Suppose someone claimed to be able to smell colors. We would be justified in being skeptical (Of course this is just an analogy). Even that would be easier to accept than the MP cases. This is not obviously a case of “Imperialism”. Here the analogy just doesn’t seem to have any content.

**STRIKING CASES OF MP ARE SECOND-HAND FOR MOST OF US.** MP for most of us is second-hand. We are the blind listening to the allegedly sighted man. We can imagine confirmation, but it is even weaker than the prima facie justification for MP, already admitted to be weaker than for SP. (Alston does address this concern).

**THE INTERACTION BETWEEN SUBJECT AND OBJECT IN MP.** The interaction between God and the mystic would be miraculous. God is timeless and yet would be interacting with an entity (the person) in time. Certainly an omnipotent being could manage it, but we have evidence elsewhere only of interaction between events in the same light-cone (except possibly for cases of “spooky” quantum entanglement). So whatever misgivings we have about testimony as to miracles would carry over here.

**DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.** In Chapter 7 Alston addresses what is almost certainly the most serious difficulty for his position. If one is raised in a certain tradition, say CMP, it may not be irrational to continue with that stock of beliefs. But if you notice that people tend to adopt the religious beliefs of their parents or their society, then you may well wonder if you have just had the bad luck to be born into a “mistaken doxastic practice.” Alston’s discussion mitigates the difficulty to a certain extent, but the conclusion is still that the problem of religious diversity seriously lowers the justification that can be derived from the doxastic practice alone.

There is an analogous problem of “political diversity”, but the conclusion perhaps should be that you must critically examine the options. Perhaps the same holds for religious belief. It is far from obvious that all religions are equally reasonable (or, for that matter, equally unreasonable).